

BOYSTOWN: UNBROKEN SILENCE

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KEARNY SOME people say that when Msgr. Robert P. Egan left New Jersey Boystown here, after being its director for 26 years, an era ended. The popular priest, they say, was Boystown.

Father Egan has been silent since that Christmas Eve a year and a half ago, when the word spread through the chapel at Boystown that he was being transferred. The townspeople, who attend mass there, wept in the pews, it was said, and Father Egan, who was celebrating the mass, looked solemn but did not comment.

Although many took to the streets with signs and petitions protesting the transfer, Father Egan said nothing. Former residents of and teachers and volunteers at the home for homeless and troubled boys formed a committee to work for the priest's reinstatement. They telephoned reporters, called news conferences and sent petitions with 10,000 signatures to Pope John Paul II in Rome.

Father Egan, they said, had been removed so that Boystown money - particularly a \$1.3 million bequest - could be made available to other Roman Catholic institutions.

The two principals, Father Egan and Archbishop Peter L. Gerety of the Archdiocese of Newark, kept silent. Father Egan went into seclusion, and Archbishop Gerety was never available when reporters called.

According to Michael McGraw, a spokesman for the archdiocese, Boystown has been placed under the umbrella of Catholic Community Services as part of an overall reorganization of Catholic institutions. He also issued a statement from the archbishop promising that the \$1.3 million would be used exclusively for Boystown.

Although Father Egan still will not break his public silence on the controversy, he agreed to talk about his 26 years at Boystown. "Those years were like a dream," he said from his desk in the rectory of St. Catherine's Church in Glen Rock, where he is now serving as parish priest. "Everyone helped us, and every day seemed like a new miracle. Things happened that seemed like coincidences, and they always worked in our favor."

The 64-year-old priest is a tall, rugged-looking man with chiseled, Lincolnesque features and sad eyes. His gravelly voice bespeaks his Jersey City roots.

Father Egan's tranquil life in the quiet Bergen County community of Glen Rock is a far cry from the rough-and-tumble of Boystown, where he used to play football, baseball and basketball with the boys, and from the frenetic pace of speaking engagements - often as many as five or six evenings a week and a communion breakfast on Sunday - to raise money for expenses and new buildings.

He recalled the day he arrived in Boystown: July 3, 1954. Except for the Georgian frame mansion that still serves as its administration building, the institution was run down, set in 15 acres of mud fields and \$100,000 in debt.

"The magnificence of Boystown was its boys," Father Egan said. "There were 100 of them then, and they came to see me, one at a time throughout the day. They had good handshakes, and I liked that. I saw that we would get along."

Dinner was an extraordinary experience, he said, because the boys, of all races and creeds, blended easily into what they came to regard as their "Boystown family."

"I looked at them that night and almost choked with pride," Father Egan said, "because I saw we had the America that others dream about. We had the dream of democracy in Boystown."

It was the eve of July 4, and there were fireworks in Kearny. Father Egan and the boys went to the display; it seemed such an occasion for celebration that he splurged and bought hot dogs for everyone.

Two weeks later, Father Egan took the boys to the Jersey Shore. A friend had a home in Avon, where the boys changed into their swimsuits, and after their swim the friend took everyone to a restaurant for a turkey dinner.

Looking back, Father Egan thinks the day was prophetic of things to come. "That day, we knew already that things were clicking," he said, "and from that day on the kids never knew what good thing would be done for them next."

For the next 26 years, individuals and organizations from all over the state treated the boys to new adventures and gave generously to fund-raising campaigns. The debt was wiped out, and Boystown became not only self-supporting but also able to provide an ever-expanding number of services.

That first year, Boystown's 50-member Drum and Bugle Corps took part in a Columbus Day parade in Newark. The boys wore hand-me-down uniforms from other bands and shoes - mostly sneakers - that did not match their outfits. But they had "lots of spirit," Father Egan recalled.

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Two of the smallest boys proudly carried a big banner that read, "New Jersey Boystown," and the priest walked beside them. Next came the color guard, followed by the drummers and buglers.

About a month later, Father Egan received a letter from a lawyer in West Palm Beach, Fla., who wanted to know the corporate title of the institution. Several years later, the lawyer wrote again to say that a wealthy client who had just died had watched the Columbus Day parade and was so moved by the sight of the spunky little Boystown band that he changed his will and left the haven \$55,000.

The money arrived as Boystown was opening its first building campaign. Soon, the Boystown Ladies Guild was formed - Father Egan called them his "angels" - and a program got under way: bingo, card parties, fashion shows, a mink-stole raffle that yielded \$35,000 and rummage sales.

Guild members raised money not only for new red, white and blue uniforms and new instruments for the Drum and Bugle Corps, but also to build a garage for the bus that took the priest, the boys and their mascot - a St. Bernard named Bruno - to parades all over the state.

"People were learning that there was a Boystown," Father Egan said. "We raised money all over the state, and the boys were proud. They knew something was happening, and they were part of it."

In the late 1950's, the evening membership department of the Federated Women's Clubs of New Jersey chose Boystown as its fundraising project for the year. The women originally wanted to raise money for kitchen equipment, but enthusiasm ran so high that they more than doubled their goal.

They raised \$27,000, enough to provide not only kitchen equipment but also a baseball diamond, a dugout, bleachers and a fence. After that, so many organizations helped in so many ways that Father Egan said he was afraid that, if he mentioned some, he would forget others. He is preparing memoirs that will include everyone.

An outdoor basketball court was built as Kearny Avenue was being repaved. Father Egan asked the workers what they did with the leftover blacktop, and they said they threw it away.

After the priest explained that the playing area was so muddy at Boystown that the boys had to stay indoors after it rained, the workmen came back on their own time and built two macadam courts. Businessmen donated posts and backboards.

A dormitory building that dated to 1892 and has since been demolished looked shabby, Father Egan thought, and a painters' union painted the interior in exchange for a home-cooked meal at Boystown.

Service clubs provided new beds, mattresses, pillows and chairs. One organization even built a swimming pool, and combined efforts by several individuals resulted in a well-equipped carpentry shop.

Meanwhile, Father Egan won \$500 for Boystown on "Strike It Rich," Bess Myerson presided at a fashion show for the haven and Joe Namath invited the boys to Jets' football games and a week-long football camp in Massachusetts. Also, two Mets at the time, Tom Seaver and Cleon Jones, gave the boys two calves, and Father Egan watched his charges ride home in their Jeep with their arms around the animals.

Three buildings were constructed during Father Egan's tenure: a \$400,000 auditorium-gymnasium in 1962, a \$250,000 dining room in 1965 and a \$1.4 million dormitory in 1970. Before any work could start, former Archbishop Thomas H. Boland required that all the money be raised in advance.

The dormitory was made possible by a \$500,000 donation from the late Charles Engelhard, a Newark industrialist for whom the building was named, and who with his wife, Jane, was a frequent guest at Boystown.

The dining room, which was built on a slope, has a fireplace and picture windows that overlook the Passaic River. Beneath it is a field house with lockers and showers and a place for drinking hot chocolate after a sleigh ride or ball game.

The gymnasium was constructed first, Father Egan said, because it provided a place for indoor recreation and gave the Ladies Guild a place for fund-raising activities.

The boys remember Father Egan best for the personal attention he gave them. Joseph Grant of Kearny, an alumnus, said that the priest always gave a party at an ice cream parlor for each boy's birthday. And he saw to it that the boys had money for class rings -they attended Kearny High School -and for prom dates.

After "graduating" from Boystown, Mr. Grant stayed on to run its print shop. However, he resigned in protest, as did a number of other employees, after Father Egan was transferred.

According to Joseph Dabdaub of East Orange, another alumnus, many Boystown graduates return to the haven for a visit because it is the only home they had. And when they did, he recalled, Father Egan was always there to guide and direct them and dip into his pocket if they needed money.

The climax of Father Egan's fund-raising efforts was the \$1.3 million bequest, in 1980, of 18,000 shares of I.B.M. stock from the estate of Bertha Clement of Helmetta.

"The earnings from that are \$15,000 a month," Father Egan said. "That's enough to provide for all of Boystown's needs for as long as I can foresee."

A committee seeking Father Egan's reinstatement alleged that it was the use of the \$1.3 million that caused contention between the priest and Archbishop Gerety. That committee - Mr. Grant and Mr. Dabdaub were among its members - has disbanded at Father Egan's request.

Father Egan asked that the dispute never be mentioned again. It is bad for the church to have a controversy, he said. The new director of Boystown, the Rev. Neil Mahoney, is a younger man who also takes his work seriously. Not one to rough it with the boys on the playing fields, he has his own style, which includes more discipline, he said.

"Time changes things," he asserted. "Many of the boys who knew Father Egan are no longer here. The former staff has either left or been replaced. We have a new Boystown now, and we think it is also a good one."