

# Kids at risk are priest's parishioners

## Ministry tries to lead Brightwood-Martindale youth away from danger

By **BETSY LIGHT**  
STAR STAFF WRITER

As a priest, the Rev. Arthur E. Kelly understands gangs. About the rituals gangs use to initiate their members, he says, "When I compare my own training, it's very similar."

As executive director of the Near-Eastside St. Nicholas Youth Ministry, he understands the sense of order, of belonging to something, that the gangs provide.

"In my training, we went through the same process," he says. "They have to be on probation; they have to be watched; they have to be nurtured. . . ."

"When they (youths) come in (to the center) to talk about it, I love to talk about the initiation, because it's the most exciting thing in their lives. And I try to relate it to how we induct our own members into a new life and how we're inducted into society and how we're inducted into the school of life."

And Father Kelly uses his knowledge of the need to belong to help the youths put their lives in order.

He's spent the past 18 years in Indianapolis trying to lead kids away from danger.

As a member of Chicago's Divine Word Missionary order, the Jamaican native was sent to Indianapolis in 1973 to assist at St. Rita Catholic Church.

He served as associate pastor there for several years, until he clashed with church superiors when he "attempted to reach out to the community." He was dis-

ter hours. He lives in the stark white center — the former Indianapolis Public School 55 — now even sharing his small living quarters with eight teen-age boys.

The 54-year-old Roman Catholic priest sees the center as his ministry and the Near-Eastside neighborhood youths as his congregation.

Even though he says, "We don't promote religion here," he acknowledges the center does deal with "religious and spiritual things." Ultimately, he'd like "to see this as a real religious and spiritual center."

Until he can accomplish that, Father Kelly says, he and St. Nicholas will continue doing what they've been doing.

They will keep moving more kids through the peer-role model program. They will continue to hold dances every Friday night. They will offer computer instruction in one of several rooms in the large building, which needs much repair and which Father Kelly and the kids diligently have been renovating.

They will offer spiritual renewal in the chapel downstairs. And, of

course, they will provide food and shelter — a safe haven — particularly for troubled teens.

Until a few years ago, Father Kelly ran the center on his own. Now he has a staff of four — graduates of St. Nicholas' programs. Money to operate the center has come from individuals and businesses. At present, a federal grant and one from the Lilly Endowment help support activities.

Unfortunately, Father Kelly notes, one of the center's main means of income — weekly bingo games — has been curtailed due to new state regulations. One or two staff members may be laid off because of the income loss, he says.

Father Kelly, of course, wouldn't mind more funding, but he says, "It's not always money that makes things go."

Instead, he wants another kind of contribution.

"I'd like the young people to feel that Father Kelly isn't the only one involved in their lives. . . . I like to see a real cadre of peer-role models from a variety of sources coming in and interacting with the young people."



STAR STAFF PHOTO / KELLY WILKINSON

When the Divine Word Missionary order dismissed him, the Rev. Arthur Kelly set out on his own to help troubled local youths.