

# Two lives changed by love

Priest and street-wise 12-year-old trade solitude for companionship

By Helen T. Gray  
Religion Editor

The two of them had about as much of a chance of making it as a snowball in an incense burner, the Rev. Jerry Wegenek figured last summer when the street-wise kid named Sammy pushed his way into his life.

It started with the cookies, which Father Wegenek often gave the children in the Midtown Kansas City neighborhood around St. James Church. Sammy, characterized by a nun as about one step away from a juvenile home, found out about the cookies when he was making his rounds about town.

And that, Father Wegenek believed, was about as far as it ought to go, until Sammy started pestering him by ringing the rectory doorbell. "Sometimes I'd be busy," said Father Wegenek, whose parish has 430 families, "and I'd say, 'Oh, it's that kid again.'"

School was out for the summer. And so was Sammy.

The nun, Sister Elizabeth Kiler, was working with Sammy, who is hyperactive and has a reading disability, at the Children's Place. She had developed a special summer study program for him, but he needed a place to live close to the Montessori school.

She asked Father Wegenek to care for Sammy, who told the priest that he feared going to an orphanage.

Father Wegenek reluctantly agreed, and Sammy's parents, who are divorced, gave him custodial care of the boy.

The priest put it to Sammy bluntly: The rectory wasn't a reformatory, and if Sammy wandered off, he was on his own.

Father Wegenek, 44, said he was worried that Sammy would interfere with his work. Sammy, 12, said he also was bothered: "I thought that if we ever became close and we'd become friends, I worried that I'd have to leave."

They were a couple of loners then, Father Wegenek conceded, but they have found another dimension of love through each other.

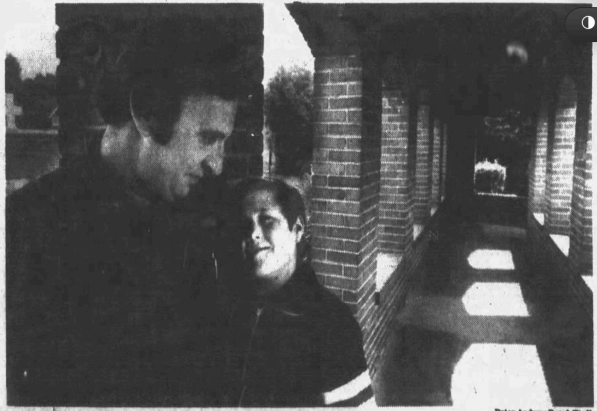
"There is a danger that you can turn in on yourself, especially as you turn older," Father Wegenek said. "But Sammy has made me more open. . . . It has been a joy."

Sammy said Father Wegenek has given him almost everything he's wanted: a bike, a bird, a dog. "But the most important thing," Sammy said, "is he loves me."

And Sammy believes that he has given something back.

See LOVE, Page A-4, Col. 1

Thursday  
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The Rev. Jerry Wegenek and Sammy share their lives at St. James parish.

Peter Andrew Busch/Staff

## LOVE

Continued from Page A-1

to the priest. "Now he's not lonely anymore," he said. "He has someone by his side."

Father Wegenek refers to the blond, blue-eyed Sammy as his assistant. Sammy answers the door, accompanies the priest when he takes Communion to the sick and cleans his office.

"Yeah, and I straighten the papers on his desk, and then he can't find them," Sammy said with a dimpled smile from his seat in Father Wegenek's study.

"No, you don't," Father Wegenek replied. "You do a good job."

The two have gone on swimming and fishing trips, and they have visited the Ozarks and Florida. Some of their favorite times, they said, are quiet talks on the rectory porch.

"Sammy has really livened up the place," said Carol Berry, Father Wegenek's secretary and a mother of four who also helps to look after Sammy.

"Sammy has gotten a lot of love," she said. "Father has gotten a lot of love back. And he's learned a lot, too, like how to get mud off of jeans."

Dr. Barbara Buchanan, a specialist in child and adolescent psychiatry, said Sammy has "just thrived" in his new surroundings. "He's a totally different child," said Dr. Buchanan, who has worked with Sammy for about a year since he was referred by the school. "He's happier and getting along better."

"He pays attention to his grooming. He tells jokes and smiles, and he never did that before. He's a lot more relaxed and sure of himself."

Under ideal conditions, Father Wegenek said, Sammy's family may be able to resolve their differences and care for the boy again. If not, he said, he would seek legal custody of the boy and not press to adopt him, a move he said Sammy might view as permanently severing the ties with his parents.

Parishioners have been extremely

supportive of Sammy, Father Wegenek said. One family has set up a fund for Sammy's schooling and clothing. But the boy's reading disability means he might have to go to a specialized school, which could be expensive, Father Wegenek said. He said he is seeking an education loan.

Their adjustment hasn't always been easy, Father Wegenek said. At first Sammy was given only a few responsibilities: keeping his room clean, taking out the trash, taking care of his pets and getting home on time.

And then there was Sammy's aversion to bathing. Sammy sometimes let the shower run, Father Wegenek recalled, but miraculously, the soap and towel managed to stay dry.

And because of instances like those, he said, "I see in a different light the whole idea of God being a forgiving father."

Sammy puts it more simply: "I love him, and he loves me. I'm like his son."

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