

AROOSTOOK Haltway home offers help to boys

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Week of the Young Child is being observed March 31-April 6. Several articles will appear throughout the week to take note of some of the efforts being made to expand services for youngsters. This first article concerns a halfway home for delinquent youngsters.

Can a boy in trouble today become a leader of tomorrow?

A young, intelligent and devoted Catholic priest in Bangor is determined to see that it can happen and after one year of directing the program at St. Michael's Center here, he is getting more optimistic.

The Rev. David P. Cote, an Augusta native and Cony High School graduate, a combination of Gallic charm and Irish persuasion from his ancestry, is director of the center which houses 15 boys between the ages of 8 and 15, all of whom have troubled backgrounds, and-or emotional problems.

The youngsters, none of whom are orphans, are referred to the center, from the court, Youth Aid Bureaus, police, Health and Welfare Department and other agencies, after they have developed anti-social traits and are headed for, or already involved in, what could only be called "trouble."

Although constant ties are maintained with the home and parents, none of the youngsters was able to adjust to "family living." Half of the boys are on probation from the courts, who many times use Saint Michael's as an alternative to the Boys Training Center, several are from foster homes of the Department of Health and Welfare, and some from the Bangor Police youth agency.

"Most of the kids spend between six months and a year here at the center," Cote said, "and we maintain a pretty rigidly structured environment so that the kids have something specific to do

every day and night."

"So far, and I must knock on wood, at the end of this first year," he chuckled, "we can look back with a feeling of success. However, it is still too early to tell what the youngsters will be like when they reach adulthood. So far, none of them has gotten into trouble again, and many are nearly at the point where they can return to their homes with some kind of successful adjustment."

St. Michael's Center actually started out as an orphanage for girls, in 1912. The orphanage was operated by a board of trustees of local people and was run by the Sisters of Mercy since 1958.

In 1972 the Sisters had to withdraw because of shortage of personnel. Later in the year the board took over the former Bangor Tuberculosis Sanitarium on outer Kenduskeag Avenue, changed the operation to the St. Michael's Center for boys, after the girls were placed out in foster homes. It is operated by a 16-man board of directors.

The Bishop of the Portland Diocese of the Catholic Church is president of the board, although the school is non-denominational and handles boys of any religion.

The Bishop talked with Cote, who had an educational background in social work and working with youngsters, and appointed him director in September of 1972.

Cote was graduated from the University of Ottawa, and St. Paul's University before becoming ordained in 1968 in St. Mary's Church in Augusta.

He went to Boston College for a master's degree in social work and then took on a post with the Diocesan Human Relations Services in Caribou until his appointment.

The sprawling, rambling old home has been kept in excellent condition, but, according to Cote, "with 15 teen-agers it is a major task." The center has a capacity for 20.

Father Cote, knowing that it takes a skilled, understanding, compassionate but firm staff, carefully hand-picked his assistants and came up with James Clark of Ellsworth, a long-time career man in social work.



St. Michael's Center

Sitting high on a hill overlooking Bangor, St. Michael's Center houses 15 boys between 8 and 15, all of whom have troubled backgrounds or emotional problems.

and five other full-time child care staff.

The kids can go home one weekend a month, holidays, vacations and for other events, and close liaison is always maintained with parents and the school.

"We can't perform miracles, or even little miracles," Cote explained, "but we can try to help these boys during these critical years."

"The goal of the center, and even that of the youngsters, is a 'place to go to' when they leave and be able to adjust satisfactorily."

"Most kids act badly when they arrive," the young priest continued, "because when they get here they have already been more or less branded as 'bad' kids, so they believe they might as well act bad."

Raymond K. Coniff, assistant director of the State's Division of Probation and Parole, who works closely with the center, said "none of the boys sent there on probation has ever had to have his probation violated, and you have to believe that someone is doing something right up there."

Of the 15 youngsters in the school, three are tutored at the center and 12 of them attend the Bangor

public schools. Most of the boys are from the greater Bangor area, but two are from Aroostook County.

We have had excellent cooperation with the agencies in Bangor such as the YMCA, churches and schools, Youth Aid Bureau, law enforcement agencies, service clubs, and other groups in making this project work, Cote added. Cost of operating the center is between \$90,000 and \$100,000 yearly, he said, with about one-third coming from endowments, another third from the Maine Law Enforcement Planning and Assistance Agency, and the balance from the Department of Mental Health and Corrections, the Department of Health and Welfare, and from small gifts.

"We aren't really hurting when it comes to funding the center," Cote added, "but where the pinch comes is in acquiring athletic equipment, recreation equipment and a fund for allowing the boys to participate in many projects outside the school."

"We sure could use help in these areas," he continued, "as well as renovations, fire safety equipment, remodeling the kitchen and the heating

plant."

One unusual feature of the program is that all of Maine's six juvenile probation officers have spent at least 2½ days living at the center and being with the youngsters on a 24-hour-a-day basis.

Most commented afterward that the experience was "invaluable" in understanding how kids live. "Too many of us adults sometimes forget what it was like to be a growing boy," one commented.

It costs an average of \$625 per month for each boy to be kept at the center, which is one of the first of several planned cooperative efforts between the state and private agencies.

"There is one man in Bangor," Cote said, "who deserves much of the credit for the success of St. Michael's Center, and that is Gary Greene of the Probation and Parole Division Office in Bangor. His sincerity, and that of all the probation and parole people in the area, is one of the main reasons we think we have a successful program."

It also helps to have a guy like the Rev. David Cote on hand. For he is the real source of the vital ingredients needed to make it work; love and understanding.