

Shelter for young people to honor founder with memorial dinner

By GENE WARNER

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The Rev. Patrick Mendola had a special place in his heart for homeless young people.

For nine years, they were his ministry. Starting modestly in a South Buffalo flat with no real budget, his Franciscan Center provided a home-like refuge for troubled young people.

Fifteen years and 2,000 youths later, the Franciscan Center is thriving, occupying three homes at Seneca Street and Roanoke Parkway and boasting budget of almost \$300,000.

This week, the center will pay tribute to its founder, Father Mendola, who died last May of meningitis at age 47.

A sellout crowd of 130 people are expected to attend the Father Patrick Mendola Memorial Dinner on Thursday. A 21-year-old "alumnus" will be awarded the first scholarship in Father Mendola's name.

"He's the one who was the blood, sweat and tears who built this place," the Rev. Joseph Bayne, the current executive director, said of Father Mendola. "We want to keep his name alive and, even more so, keep his dream alive."

Father Mendola was working as a guidance counselor at St. Francis High School in 1981, when he joined two Franciscan friars from Bishop Timon High School who rented a Cumberland

Avenue flat. Troubled young people could drop in, "rap and get some guidance," Father Bayne said.

There was no budget, no master plan. There was just an attempt to help troubled young people get a fresh start. People from 12 to 23 years old slept on cots in the basement.

As the need for shelter grew, the center outgrew its home and moved to Seneca Street in 1982, with Father Mendola as executive director.

Runaways and homeless youngsters started coming from all over Western New York, and the center eventually found its niche as a voluntary shelter for young people 16 to 20 years old.

With the gift of the house next door on Roanoke Parkway and the purchase of the house on the other side, on Seneca Street, the expanded Franciscan Center now boasts

two facilities: a six-bed runaway-crisis house and a longer-term transitional home with eight beds.

Father Mendola operated under one guiding principle: to see the goodness in troubled young people, no matter what their faults, and then help them find that goodness.

In 1990, Father Mendola left Buffalo, ultimately becoming pastor of a large parish in Jonesboro, Ga.

He contracted meningitis and died last May while in Berkeley, Calif., to receive his master's degree in theology.



Rev. Patrick
Mendola