

'Nobody Dead, God Willing.'

Covenant House Takes Its Mission Into a New Home

By BILL KENT

PEERING from behind the wheel of a dirty blue 1989 Chevrolet van, the Rev. Steven Sinari of Covenant House said he could use a break.

He paused to honk the van's horn at a teen-age boy standing on a corner on Atlantic Avenue. The boy nodded but quickly looked away.

"That's about the 10th time I've seen him," Father Sinari said. "He's into the harder drugs, which means he could have AIDS, and he's got no fixed address, which is what you would call homeless, and he's in the kind of mood where he doesn't want to trust anybody, much less a priest. So I say hello to him, and lately he's begun to acknowledge me, just a little. Every day I go out in this van — and I go out every day — I don't know if I'll see him again, or if I'll find him beaten up under the Boardwalk, or if somebody will find him frozen to death."

"I'm lucky because, since I started this, I haven't found anyone dead," he added. "A few were close to it. But nobody dead. God willing."

He took one hand off the steering wheel to cross himself.

Father Sinari said he had no idea

how many young people had passed from the street to his van and, possibly, to a better future. The Atlantic City Covenant House is the larger of two New Jersey chapters of the non-profit organization founded in Manhattan by the Rev. Bruce Ritter. (The other chapter is in Newark.)

Father Sinari, alone or with Covenant House volunteers, made contact with 1,523 teenagers on the Atlantic City streets from July 1995 to June 1996. Of that number, 212 participated in various Covenant House programs. The offices at 3529 Pacific Avenue and 2811 Atlantic Avenue provide everything from a meal, a shower and a bed to a drug counseling, job training and job placement. On Friday, Covenant House will open a \$2.8 million shelter and counseling facility at 929-933 Atlantic Avenue.

Father Sinari has no office and no specific title within the Covenant House organization. He shuns public attention because of misgivings about "the sin of pride." But Mary MacDonald, one of 40 full-time Covenant House employees, said: "As far as we're concerned, Father Steve is Covenant House. He's the source. He's the spirit. Nothing would be here without him."

Describing his work, Father Sinari

said, "I spend all day begging and getting yelled at." He added: "I get yelled at all the time by kids who have a lot of anger in them, and I just try to let that roll off my back. A kid deserves to be angry when he's been tortured or molested by his parents since he was a baby."

Father Sinari, 47, a Philadelphia-born Eastern Orthodox Priest who is married and has two teen-age sons, helped found the Atlantic City's Covenant House in 1989 by answering a classified advertisement.

"I went to New York, and they wanted to know my qualifications," he said. "I told them I'd run away from home as a teen-ager and lived in cardboard boxes in the Philadelphia subways for a year. I got the job."

Shortly after Father Sinari came to Atlantic City, a scandal involving accusations of sexual abuse at the Manhattan Covenant House led to a severe reduction in donations. Choosing to spend money on food and clothing for his runaways instead of rent, Father Sinari was evicted from the Atlantic Avenue storefront he had been using as a shelter.

"I went to every religious organization in this city — many of them own lots of unused buildings, — and begged for a room, a place just so the kids could sleep with a roof over their heads," he said. "And they just refused."

For much of March, April and June 1990, he housed 19 runaways in his van and in makeshift shelters under the Boardwalk. He obtained food from the casino kitchens and started a sand sculpture program to elicit donations from passers-by.

The fortunes of Atlantic City's Covenant House rebounded with those of the New York headquarters. By July 1990, Father Sinari had rented a storefront at 2811 Atlantic Avenue and could soon house runaways in a boarding house. Plans for a larger facility were made in 1993, and after a \$1 million Federal Urban Development Grant, \$1.8 million more in donations arrived.

"Happy ending," he said. "I've waved at another youth. I have faith that there are mostly happy endings in this life," he said. "I just can't think about the kind of things we have to go through to get to them."



Laura Pedrick for The New York Times

Under the Boardwalk no more: the Rev. Steven Sinari, in cap, with some of the teen-agers he is working to help through Covenant House.