As seen in the December issue of

Good Housekeeping

House of Hope

They are homeless and aimless, troubled teens with dismal prospects. At this haven, they not only find shelter, but also learn to believe in themselves.

by Jonathan Mandell

Antuan Spivey was 14 years old when he first met Father Steve on the streets of Atlantic City. Antuan hadn't run away from home so much as drifted away, caught up with a group of friends who were smoking cigarettes and marijuana and, soon, dealing drugs. At the height of his career, on his best day, working from six in the morning until 12 at night, Antuan made $1,500. He burned up the money quickly, on clothes and girls, but it didn't matter: there always seemed to be plenty more.

His mother and stepfather, who both had good jobs with the city, tried to bring him back, without success. "My family was excellent," Antuan says now, trying to explain. "It was me who messed up."

Father Steve drove his blue van, with the name "Covenant House" stenciled on the side, onto the street where Antuan and some friends were playing basketball, gambling, hanging out, doing business. The priest introduced himself, explained that Covenant House was a shelter for young people under 21, and handed out his card.

Antuan was respectful toward Father Steve. He waited until the priest drove off before throwing away the card.

But Father Steve came back the next day, and the next week, and the next month.

Antuan didn't know what to make of this man. He didn't see many white people in his neighborhood, let alone an orange-bearded Albanian priest with a wife and two kids. (Father Steve is a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which permits its priests to marry.) The boy also wondered if the priest and his colleagues might really be cops. In any case, he didn't see himself as needing any help.

Father Steve got to know Antuan and found him bright and full of potential, "a modern-day Huck Finn." Perhaps the priest felt a special connection. Once, he had been plain Stephen Siniari, teenage runaway. Siniari had wanted to wear his hair long and play in a rock band. His father, a barber, wanted him to cut his hair and go to college. So when he was 17, after another heated argument at the breakfast table, Siniari took off with nothing but his bicycle and the clothes he was wearing. He was homeless for a year, sleeping in the Philadelphia subway, eating the food left on plates by paying customers in cafeterias.

But Siniari turned his life around, and he knew others could too. In 1989, as Father Steve, he applied for a job at the new Atlantic City branch of Covenant House.

For each new visit Father Steve paid Antuan, he brought a new story, a new joke. He always ended the visits by handing out his Covenant House card. "If you ever need anything," he'd say, "just give a call."

To Antuan and the other Atlantic City street kids, that became the biggest joke of all. Over the years, he gave each of them his card dozens of times, almost enough to wallpaper what they called the Underwood Hotel—a dank, sandy space beneath the famous Atlantic City boardwalk, where some of them were forced to live.

Antuan kept taking the card, and kept throwing it out, as he went in and out of juvenile detention centers, moved from one rundown room to another, watched some of his friends get arrested and serve hard time, and attended the funerals of others. Almost everywhere he went, he would see Father Steve, ready with another joke and another card.

Then Antuan turned 18 and started thinking about the life he was leading. On his way to visit his mother one day, a car drove by, and the people inside started firing at him. He was shot at again three weeks later. A month after that, a police car screeched to a halt, and the officer jumped out, both hands on his gun. "Freeze," he said. "Get on the ground." Antuan was searched.

A week later, he picked up a pay phone. He had kept the card the priest had given him at the last funeral. "He was the only person who came to mind," Antuan recalls.

"Father Steve," he said on the phone, "I want to get out of this."

Every story is different," says Sister Mary Rose McGeady, president of Covenant House. "All that the kids share is a loss of family."

Sister Mary Rose has many stories to tell. Headquartered in New York City, Covenant House, a private social-

MORE HELPING HANDS

A number of local groups across the country also reach out to troubled teens. Those listed here are considered among the best by child-welfare experts.

The services they offer include emergency shelter for abused and runaway teens, family counseling and reunification, substance-abuse treatment, and job training and placement. Many also sponsor community-wide drug and alcohol awareness seminars, sexual-abuse support groups, and parenting workshops.

Like Covenant House (P.O. Box 731, Times Square Station, New York, NY 10108), all receive some public funding, but rely on private donations to stay afloat—a good thing to keep in mind during this season of giving.

Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Boston. Founded 1970. Serves 4,000 teens a year. In a mobile medical van, volunteer doctors provide street kids with basic health care and test for sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. An in-house alternative education program helps kids work toward a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and teaches job readiness and training. Donations to: 47 West St., Boston, MA 02111. 617-423-9575.

Central City Hospitality House, San Francisco. Founded 1967. The Youth Program serves 1,500 a year. As part of their therapy, teen clients learn painting and ceramics and sell their work at ArtStart, an agency-run store. They keep 60 percent of the profit; the rest goes to fund the agency. Donations to: 290 Turk St., San Francisco, CA 94102. 415-749-2181.

Denny Place, Seattle. Founded 1991. Serves 500 a year. The only licensed overnight shelter for kids under 17 in Seattle. Donations to: 210 Dexter Ave., North Seattle, WA 98109. 206-328-5693.

Huckleberry House, Columbus, OH. Founded 1970. Serves 900 a year. Emphasizes family support. Staff go into teens' homes to mediate conflicts with parents, help with homework, or get dinner on the table. Donations to: 1421 Hamlet St., Columbus, OH 43201. 614-294-8097.

The Night Ministry, Chicago. Founded 1976. Serves 6,000 a year. A bus goes out six nights a week to provide on-the-spot health care and counseling, as well as treatment and education referrals to homeless and needy teens on the street. Donations to: 1218 West Addison, Chicago, IL 60613. 312-935-8300.

Oasis Center, Nashville. Founded 1970. Serves 4,100 a year in central Tennessee. A peer-educator program trains teens, some of them former clients, to answer the crisis line, lead prevention and education groups, and serve on the agency's board of directors. Donations to: 1221 Sixteenth Ave. South, Nashville, TN 37212. 615-327-4455.

Sasha Bruce Youthwork, Inc., Washington, DC. Founded 1974. Serves some 10,000 a year. One of its six shelters is for homeless teen mothers. Girls attend public school or prepare for their GED, and learn parenting skills while staff members care for their babies. Donations to: 741 Eighth St. SE, Washington, DC 20003. 202-675-9340.

The Whale's Tale, Pittsburgh. Founded 1970. Served 37,000 youths and their families last year. In the Bridge Housing program, former runaways and homeless teens who have achieved certain goals live in a group house under minimum supervision. All hold jobs or go to school and pay rent, which is held in escrow for them until they're ready to live independently. Donations to: 250 Shady Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15206. 412-661-1800.

—Andrea Krantz

teer who worked at the investment firm Bear, Stearns. She went in for an interview and was hired on the spot.

Though she started as a glorified clerk, she soon worked her way up to margin specialist, responsible for reviewing client investment portfolios worth many millions of dollars. Madalyn had become the professional she yearned to be.

After a few years, though, she began to realize that the life she thought she wanted wasn't right for her. She wanted something else—even though she couldn't quite focus on what it was. Everything came together earlier this year, when Covenant House offered her a position in its management-training program.

Now 27, she is the first person who once lived at Covenant House to become a staff member. She is helping set up a Covenant House café, designed to provide residents with real job experience that will make them more employable. To prepare for her new role, Madalyn took a cooking course. There, she says happily, "I learned how to cut an onion the right way"—a way, she explains, that avoids tears.

In Atlantic City, the blue van is on the street once again, traveling past the lavish white buildings along the water with names like Trump Taj Mahal and Caesars Palace, past the decaying wood shacks just a block from the shore. Every half block or so, Father Steve yells out or stops to talk to yet another kid he knows. With him in the van are three teenage women and three crawling, fidgeting, gurgling children.

One woman had dropped by Covenant House the night before because her boyfriend had beaten her up and she had no place to sleep. Another, wearing a bracelet with a broken heart, says that when she turned 18 last March, "my stepfather told my mom, 'Kick her out, or I'll get a divorce.'" She stayed at the boardwalk's Underwood Hotel, which she describes as "nasty." While there, she was raped three times. Also in the van is a woman caring for her 8-year-old brother and for two of her own children, one a year old, the other a tiny, 6-week-old preemie attached to a monitor. The mother is 16. "I've known her since she was 11," Father Steve explains after he has dropped his passengers off at Covenant House and at a local medical clinic. "If I stop and think about what I'm doing, the sickness, the burials, the prostitution, the jail, the diseases, the pregnancies..." He lets out a breath. "I can't stop to think about it."

Three young men poke their heads into the van window.

"What's going on, Father Steve?" one says. It is Antuan Spivey, now 21 and a graduate of the Rights of Passage program.

After phoning Father Steve that day three years ago, Antuan moved into Covenant House. He moved out in frustration once but was eventually coaxed back. His counselors encouraged him to set goals for himself, both short-term—to establish a better relationship with his "blood father," to start a bank account, to come in by the curfew—and long-term—"to get my life together, you know, grow up."

For a year now, he has worked as a security guard on the night shift at one of the casinos, making a tiny fraction of what he did in his previous occupation—and happy to be doing so. A few months after he got the job, he moved out of Covenant House and found his own apartment.

Antuan has done so well that he's become a role model and a guide for the younger residents. Now Father Steve wants him to set a new goal: college.

"I'm getting some ice cream," Father Steve announces from the van. "Hop in." Antuan and his friends Chris and Alex, three young men retired from the streets, climb aboard.

"This'll be on me, Father," Antuan says.

The priest starts to protest.

"This is on me," Antuan repeats. ★

movie theater. Her favorite films were *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and its sequels. "I don't know why I liked scary movies," she says now. "Maybe it's because of what was happening in my life. They were horror movies, but that horror wasn't happening in my life. Maybe I thought, *Somewhere else there's a family in worse condition than mine.*"

For six months, she and several of her younger brothers slept at night in a car parked outside a motel. Because some of her siblings were still in diapers, she would wake up smelling of urine. "I got used to kids at school making fun of me," she says. Michelle began running away when she was 14, because she was being physically and sexually abused, she says, by her stepfather and one of her brothers. Though she sometimes had to sleep on the street, she mostly stayed with different friends from school, who would sneak her into their houses. One night she was discovered by one of the mothers—who also found out why she'd run away. The mother told the police, who knew of nowhere else to bring her but Covenant House.

Michelle stayed for three months. "All I remember is having fun. I was actually able to have friends, and I wasn't in trouble because of it." She also slept easily at night, she says, because she didn't have to worry about someone coming in the middle of the night to molest her. Michelle went back to the shelter when she was 17, a new mother with a 10-month-old son. The father was a married man 11 years her senior. By then, she was drinking heavily and smoking marijuana: "For some reason I got into things I shouldn't have," she says.

Her counselors at Covenant House put her in a 90-day drug-treatment program and arranged for her to get three months of computer training. "They gave me a lot of support. They said, 'You can do it.' They slapped my hand when they thought I could do better."

Michelle, now 25, is married with three children, ages 2 to 8. For the past four years, she's held a steady job as a computer operator and administrative assistant for a waste-management company. Her husband, whom she met five years ago, is on the construction crew of the local street department. Until last June, Michelle was going to college at night. She had to drop out because she could no longer afford it, but she hopes to save up enough to return for the winter semester and become either a nurse or an electrical engineer.

She considers herself a survivor; Covenant House considers her a success in a world where achievement is measured not so much by where you are, but where you've come from—and where you otherwise might be.

There is something magical about Madalyn Vega's story, and so it is fitting that one of her earliest memories sounds like a scene from a fairy tale: Sitting with her younger sister in the backyard of their home in San Sebastian, Puerto Rico, she would mischievously chop off the tails of the little green lizards known as *lagartijas*. "The tail would still wiggle," she recalls with a laugh—and, more astonishing, the lizards would grow new ones. "I knew the tails would grow back, that I wasn't hurting them," she says. But Madalyn couldn't know then that the lizards and their ability to regenerate would become symbolic of her own life.

Her parents divorced when she was 13, and the family moved to Brooklyn, where her mother remarried. There, says Madalyn, her stepfather treated her like a punching bag, beating her four or five days a week, every week for four years. Traumatized, she sank into a period of severe depression.

Finally, one day in 1988, she found herself in her local church, crying tears of frustration and rage that she'd refused to show at home as a matter of pride. It was shortly after her eighteenth birthday, and she couldn't hold them in anymore; she also knew she couldn't live at home another day.

"We can't keep you here," a woman who worked at the church told her. "But there's a place where you can go."

Madalyn spent a few months at the Covenant House in New York City's Times Square. She was then accepted into Rights of Passage, a Covenant House program providing housing, job training, and counseling for young people ages 18 to 21. She lived for more than a year with the other members of the program, working two jobs and taking classes at a community college.

She had a goal. As a child, she had seen the people dressed in suits on the TV news and thought to herself, *That's what I want. I want to be a professional.*

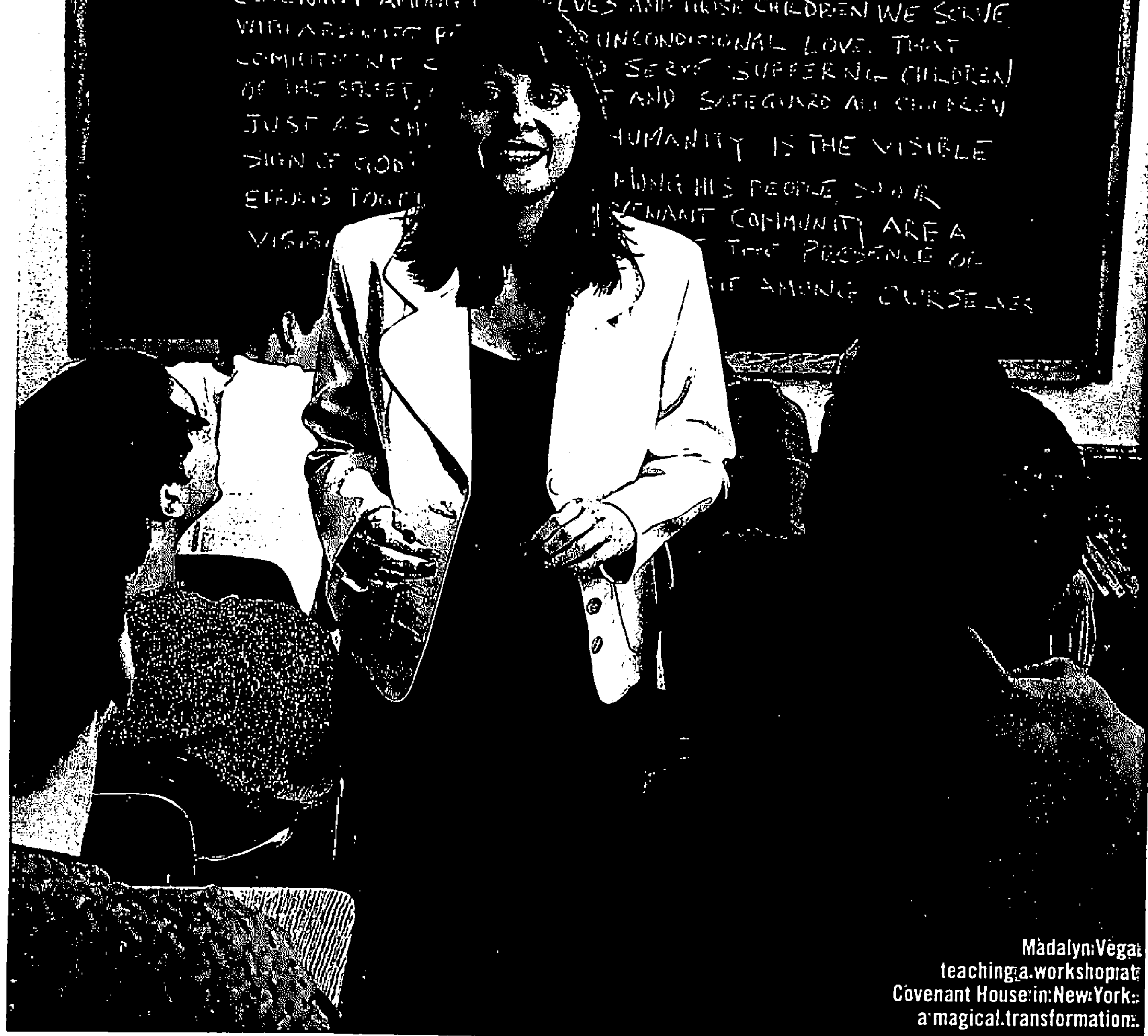
One day, she was called into the office. A Covenant House volunteer, Kathleen Markey Colyer, was looking to sponsor one of the residents at her alma mater, the College of Saint Elizabeth, a competitive four-year college in New Jersey. "What I saw in Madalyn was a winner," Colyer says now. "She was resilient and focused."

Madalyn was ecstatic. But college wasn't easy. The courses were hard, the culture shock huge. "Everybody would always talk about the mall; I didn't know what a mall *was*," she recalls. She told no one about her background and kept her distance. When the pressures seemed overwhelming, she would telephone Covenant House and cry. But there was never any doubt in her mind that she would make it.

Madalyn became the first member of her family, and the first member of the Rights of Passage program, to graduate from college. At a Covenant House fund-raiser, where she was asked to speak, she was approached by a volun-

Antuan Spivey and Father Steve on the beach in Atlantic City: measuring success not by where you are, but where you might have been.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICA LANSNER/BLACK STAR



Madalyn Vega teaching a workshop at Covenant House in New York: a magical transformation.

service agency, now has branches in ten U.S. cities and four foreign countries. Its national hot line, known as the Nine line (800-999-9999), receives thousands of calls a day from troubled kids, whose problems seem to have grown more complex in recent years.

In the past, the conventional image of the runaway was a kid rebelling against parental discipline, someone who needed a few weeks of counseling or a place to chill out, and then a ticket back home. That has changed.

Experts say that more and more children referred to as runaways are really "throwaways" or "lock-outs"–homeless kids whose families don't want them, or shouldn't have them. "Most of the young people out on the streets today feel they have nothing to go back to," says MaryLee Allen, director of the child welfare and mental health division of the Children's Defense Fund. In studies, about half of the young people on the street or in shelters say their families kicked them out, and nearly a third say their parents or stepparents used drugs. In one study, almost two thirds said they were abused by their parents physically or sexually.

"Kids are more hurt, more disturbed," says Sister Mary Rose. At the same time, there is less help for them. "We used to provide only shelter and refer them to a whole array of agencies," she continues. "But more than a hundred youth agencies have shut down in New York alone this year because of a lack of funding. It used to be easy to connect a kid to a good drug-treatment program. Now, we have our own"–as well as counseling and job-training programs.

Still, the agency can help only a small percentage of the kids living on the street. "It's the lucky ones who wind up at Covenant House and places like that," says Allen. "Most do not."

"We see some kids we wouldn't take bets on," says Sister Mary Rose. "But once they begin to believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can do."

Escorted by the police, Michelle Burke first went to the Covenant House in Fort Lauderdale, FL, when she was 14, in 1985. One of nine children, she grew up in a poor family where alcohol was a constant presence. The happiest times she can recall were trips to the local

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICA LANSNER/BLACK STAR