

Boardwalk reverend helps homeless runaways

By John Curran
Associated Press

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — The Rev. Steven Siniari is on his knees, but he is not praying. And he is definitely not in church.

Pushing aside a torn section of chain-link fence, Siniari crawls beneath the Boardwalk, looking for one of the teen-age runaways who live in "the Underwood Motel."

He looks up on a ledge, where the homeless stash what few belongings they have. Nothing. But someone has been here: Siniari looks down and finds a handbag stolen from or lost by an out-of-town gambler.

He next pokes his head beneath one of the Atlantic City Beach Patrol lifeguard stands, another favorite hideout for street people. He

is looking for a girl who was here yesterday; he gave her a toothbrush.

"Peaches? Peaches? You here?" No answer. She is gone, maybe to duck into a casino to get warm, maybe to sell her body along Pacific Avenue for food money.

Siniari, 47, is an Eastern Orthodox priest who works with Covenant House, a home for runaway teens. Though his title is "pastoral minister," it might as well be "street savior."

For seven years, he has cruised the streets of this gambling mecca in a dirty old Covenant House van, looking for homeless people and runaways.

When he finds them, he sits for a couple hours, talks to them, gives them a few dollars. He returns the next day with blankets or another cardboard refrigerator box to improve their accommodations.

"He's jumping fences, he's under the boards, he's into the (abandoned) buildings," says William Southrey, an Atlantic City Rescue Mission official who has known Siniari for years.

"He's got the right heart for this business. He invests all of his energy into it. He's out 'til 2 or 3 at night, rescuing kids, trying to make a way for them."

It's not surprising Siniari knows how runaways think. At 17, he ran away from his north Philadelphia home. He lived in the streets and hung out in luncheonettes, where he'd wait until a diner left a table so he could swoop in and eat the leftovers before the waitress took the plates away.

With 13 casino hotels and more than 30 million visitors annually, the streets of Atlantic City offer plenty of opportunity for artful dodgers.

From July 1995 to June 1996, Covenant House made contact with 1,523 teen-agers on Atlantic City streets, 212 of whom participated in the shelter's programs, including job placement, drug counseling, and life-skills training. Covenant House is about to open a \$2.8 million center with 27 beds, a separate room for mothers with children, a kitchen and dining area, a chapel, and a health clinic.

The first step in approaching teens is building trust. Eventually, Siniari hopes, they will come in from the cold to get a meal, a shower or medical attention.

"I tell them, 'Just call your Mom, tell her you're alive. You don't have to tell her



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The Rev. Steve Siniari stands near an empty lifeguard station in Atlantic City, a prime place for runaway teens to live.

where you are. Sometimes things start to happen that way. She cries out when she hears her mother's voice, or her mother cries when she hears her daughter's voice," Siniari says.

Intervening can be dangerous business. Never knowing when a pimp might be watching, Siniari chooses his words carefully in approaching a teen-ager on the street.

"Hi, I'm Father Steve from Covenant House," he will say, pressing his business card into the youth's palm. "I'm looking for a girl, name of Lisa, she's 15, with long, stringy hair. She's a runaway. From Margate. You seen anybody like that?"

"There is no such person. The story is a lie. I use it to let the youth know about Covenant House without getting him or her in trouble."

with pimps. "They're temporary lies," he says. "They'll be true eventually."

His work begins at dark and ends at 2 a.m. or later. It takes a toll. Siniari's most painful memory is of a 15-year-old who was living under the Boardwalk. He kept visiting, begging her to come in from the cold.

One day he found her curled up, barely moving; the sand beneath her was pink. As he carried her to the van, she begged, "Don't forget my knapsack."

He grabbed the bag and took her to the hospital. A doctor could find nothing wrong with her.

When Siniari told the girl, she said, "Go get my knapsack." Inside was her dead newborn.