



**Martin DeAngelis**

## The show's over but she can't go home

It's almost showtime.

The van is out on its rounds, picking up kids at the Atlantic City Rescue Mission, in the Inlet, at projects around town.

After the two dozen kids get dropped off at the building on the Boardwalk, or wander in on their own, they start loading up on popcorn and then filling up the seats in front of the screen.

And then it's showtime for "Little Monsters," this week's Friday night movie at Covenant House. The lights go down, the screen fills up and the room starts spilling laughs, shouts of fear and all the other noises you get when you put two dozen kids together in front of a movie they like.

It doesn't seem to matter that some of these kids' only address is a temporary bed at the Rescue Mission, or that tonight, at least one teenager in the audience doesn't know when the show starts where to go when it's over.

Or maybe it does matter. Maybe when you're 8 or 10 or 12 years old and you don't have a place you call "home" — think of that for a second — or when home is in one of the worst parts of a city that's famous for its bad parts, maybe then you need a few hours of fantasy and laughs and popcorn more than almost anybody else around.

"This movie, they love it," says Giovanni Vazquez, a counselor who's also the entertainment director tonight. "They're gone in there right now. Gone."

Covenant House, which started in New York and expanded to other cities, is in the non-profit business of helping out homeless kids and runaways.

In some cities, a big part of its attraction is a shelter that helps street kids get off the street for awhile. But Atlantic City's branch, which opened at St. James Place and the Boardwalk last year, doesn't have a shelter, so it had to find other ways to reach kids who need its help.

The staff hit on movie night a few weeks ago, and the early reviews are good from both sides of the big TV screen.

The kids get a night at the movies in a town where a movie theater is almost as easy to find as a grizzly bear.

"I like the mysteries," says a big-eyed, slow-talking Luis Lopez, 15, who lives at home and goes to Central Junior High.

And the Covenant House staff gets to know some kids who might need the kind of help it can give — help getting back home, or honest talk about AIDS, or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or even help in school.

"It helps us establish a rapport with the community and the children, so they feel confident that they can come to us," said Renee DeBose, another counselor.

Covenant House is trying to break down the kids into age groups — tonight's crowd goes from about 5 years old to 19 — so the audience can be targeted better both for movie choices and the short, serious talks or films the staff tries to give before showtime most weeks.

Vazquez says that while the basic idea is to go with movies the kids like, there are limits on what Covenant House will show.

"We don't want them to promote things like violence or drugs," he says.

At the end of "Little Monsters," none of the young critics offers any analysis, but there's a loud majority in favor of seeing "Gremlins II" next time.

Then it's time to go, but you can't go home when you don't have one. If your folks are at the Rescue Mission, you at least have a place to sleep, and 10 kids pile back into the van heading there.

The rest play air hockey or stand around talking, waiting for a ride home. And as it gets colder outside, a teenage girl tries to think of where she can go for another night in Atlantic City.

*(DeAngelis' column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.)*