

Mrs. R. Has Aided Many Girls at Hospitality House

By MADELYN SHULMAN
Staff Writer

Janet, at 15, is on her way to becoming a delinquent. Already she has been in trouble with the law—shoplifting, drinking, smoking. Her parents are distraught.

In their village, in the old days, children weren't exposed to the influences they face today. They are at loss to control the girl, afraid she will get into serious trouble.

Her parents themselves find the white man's culture taking its toll. There are no jobs. The old ways are disappearing. Alcoholism is causing rifts within the family.

What can be done?

If she is lucky, Janet may spend some time at Hospitality House, a unique home in Fairbanks which takes girls with problems and attempts to create a person who is a lot closer to becoming an adult, better equipped to face the frightening conflicts of being caught between two cultures.

Hospitality House is the creation of Mrs. Mable Rasmussen (known as Mrs. R. to the girls). She came to Fairbanks from Superior, Wisconsin twenty years ago and she and her husband Harry found girls lost in the streets.

"Whatever she says, and she'll object, the fact that this whole house exists is a testimony to the dedication and persistence of that woman and of her great love for the girls," said one of her staff members.

"They've tried for 10 years to get the same thing in Anchorage and have failed because they had no one with her drive and determination. She loves those girls and they know it. She'll object to saying that, but it's true. No matter how much staff you have or how talented they are, you can't replace that."

At its beginnings, in 1957, Hospitality House was an attempt to rehabilitate the many girls who wandered the streets of Fairbanks, unable to find roots or jobs. Today, it is a home for younger girls. Its present residents are high school and junior high school students, ages 13 to 18. They are girls who often have severe emotional problems, children who need a place to go to recover from the stresses of their families, be strengthened to face the conflicts in their lives.

During the past year, Hospitality House has expanded into a new wing, a light, airy, two floor wing of its older building on Airport Way. This allows it to house many community activities, serves for office space, houses a music room for the 15 to 18 girls "in residence." The girls live in the old building—a two story log residence which was a former American Legion Hall.

Run by the Presbyterian Church, Hospitality House came into being in 1957, shaped by the work and urging of Harry and Mable Rasmussen.

Mrs. Rasmussen found her retirement in Alaska postponed by the many needs of the Indian and Eskimo girls and families lost in the city. She has a unique grasp of the problems "her girls" face in adapting their lives.

Contrary to some people's ideas, Hospitality House is not a home for unwed mothers or for severely delinquent girls. They handle, rather, girls with "special needs." Most of their girls need short term help. After a few months or a year they are ready, as a rule, to return to their families or go to foster homes.

"The Native family has very



FINISHING HOME—Mrs. Mable Rasmussen, who founded Hospitality House in 1957, still oversees the operation of this "finishing home" for rural

girls. She speaks to her secretary here in their shiny new offices.

Photos by MADELYN SHULMAN

close attachments," explained Mrs. R as she talked about her girls. "This works in the village, but not here in the city. The girls need a sense of personal identity, so they're a real person."

Many of her girls are torn by family conflicts, demands made by many relatives which require decisions.

"They have to learn to make their own decisions. Often, they get pulled in every direction." Almost overwhelmingly, the girls at Hospitality House are Eskimo, Indian, half-blood, drawn from cities and villages all over Alaska. They are recommended by the Welfare Department, the Division of Corrections, parents and families.

"Many of the girls are battling to find a sense of pride in their heritage, while accepting what they want from the white man's culture."

"We try to bring out pride in their own race and the ability to see and accept themselves as they are."

"We try to teach them that the white man's culture has something to offer, but not to drop their own culture—to be proud of their own heritage."

Although the home is run by the Presbyterian Church, the girls who live there come from many religions and are encouraged to attend their own churches, and participate in church activities.

"Along with a child's religion is his family," explains Mrs. R. "Break that down and you have nothing."

Residents of Hospitality House attend local schools, join church groups, participate in community activities, invite their friends, hold parties and go to them.

The problems confronting Native girls in Alaska are not unique, explains Mrs. R. In the States the same transition problems might be found among young people coming from rural areas to the big city.

"Our political set up and way of life is changing. It's hard on kids."

Other children face the same problems of the teen-age years—rebellion, the false sophistication they put on like a cloak to shut out all help and feelings.

A girl sent to Hospitality House may be the victim of problems which disrupt her family. In these cases, she is accept-

ed temporarily while another agency works with her family to make it possible for the parents to deal with their child.

"The family is the most important thing," Mrs. Rasmussen believes. She praises the Welfare Department workers who often help rehabilitate a family caught in the problems of culture conflict. Sometimes, with a difficult child out of the situation, it is easier to solve some problems. Many parents feel helpless in the face of a child who seems impossibly delinquent, difficult to control. This puts great stress on an already difficult situation.

Life in Hospitality House, with 15 girls and their various problems, is always hectic. Occasionally a girl will run away, the teenager's frequent effort to escape his problems.

Girls bring to their counselors, house mothers and staff members their conflicts between themselves and their families.

They bring them their problems in school, conflicts with other people. The House employs a staff of five or six besides the Rasmussens, including a social worker. At least two staff members are on duty around the clock.

Besides the staff, volunteer workers provide many services. Work teams come from many communities in the lower 48 each summer, sponsored by their local churches. One summer, they refurbished the garage and parking facilities of the house.

Local volunteers offer services for home improvement—building bookcases, cabinets, other needed improvements. They tutor, work with the girls, give music and other lessons. Other groups donate equipment, clothing, and help.

One day, Hospitality House had three girls home on suspension from school—for playing truant some days before. On any day, the officials at one of the schools their girls attend may call with a problem.

Besides its residents, Hospitality House is the scene of many and varies community activities. In some cases, original community activities have been taken over by other agencies.

The Fairbanks Native Welfare Center now helps to aid newly arrived Native families. Yet, last year, Hospitality House answered 50 to 75 calls for help—counseling, referral, food, clothing and help in locating places to live.

Its community activities center around helping families—to prevent the vicious cycle of family and child problems. They hold group activities for young couples, nutrition classes, tailoring classes, provide a meeting place for local service groups.

One major resource is the several thousand girls who have passed through Hospitality House in its over 13 years of service. Originally, they trained these girls to be housekeepers, babysitters.

They became the wives and mothers of many Fairbanks families, available to visit a new family and provide friendship and aid.

For many of them, Hospitality House is home. They write home for advice, call for help with many problems. Though they may have spent only a few months, they are "their girls" as long as they need a place to call home.

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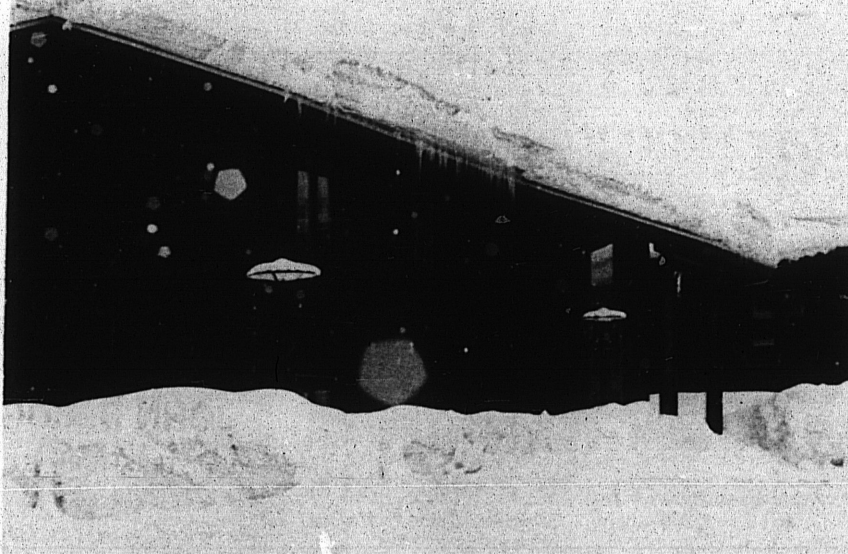
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NEW ADDITION—This handsome clapboard building on Kellum Way in Fairbanks is the new wing of Hospitality House, providing space

for offices and community activities. The log building to the right is now the girls' residence.