

House aids 300 youths each month

by Katya Simpson
for the Tundra Times

Each month more than 300 homeless and runaway youths come to stay at the Covenant House in downtown Anchorage.

It is a place where young people can go if they do not have a safe home to return to or to find protection and help from the dangers of street life.

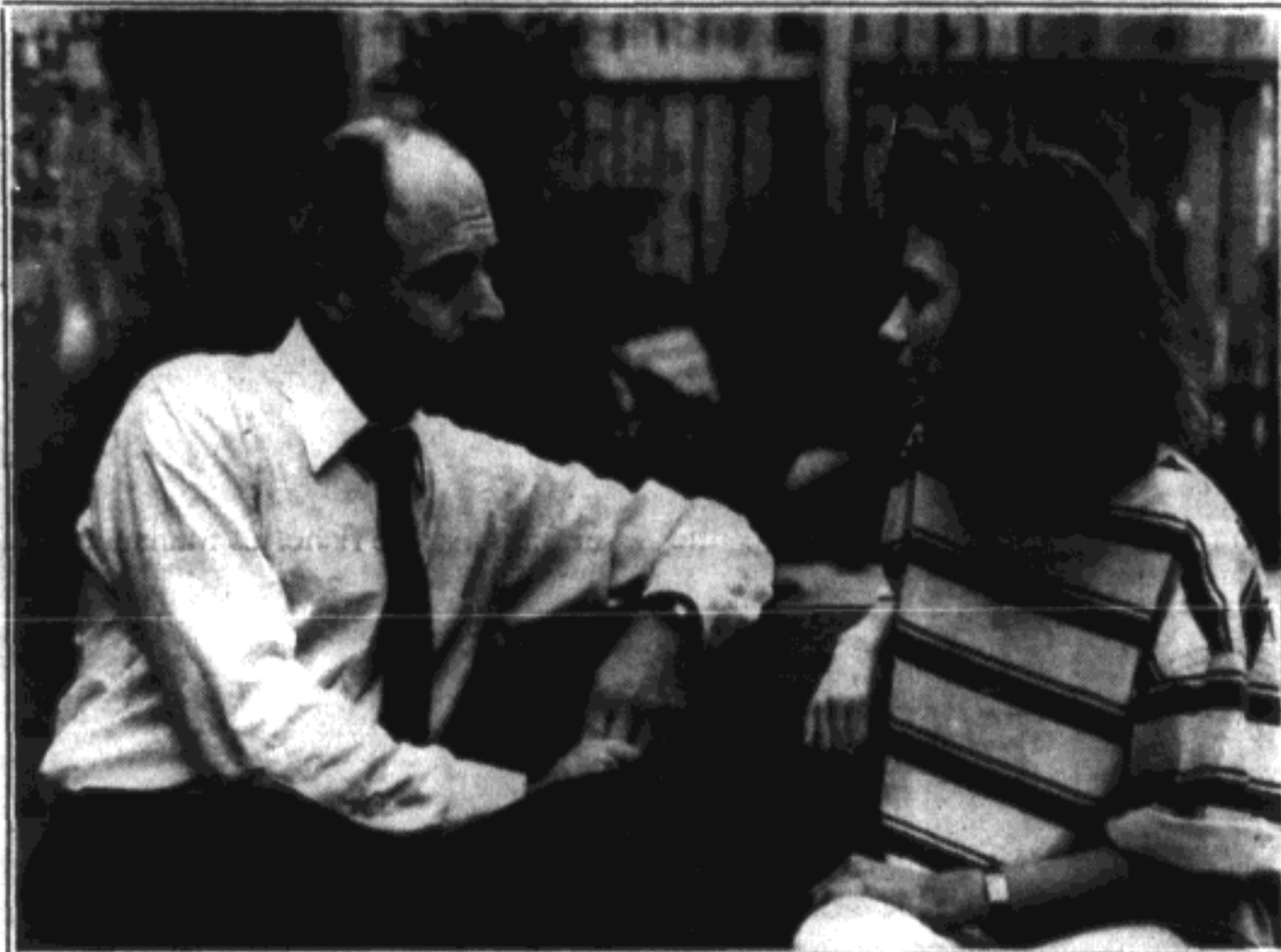
"We are here to offer assistance for kids to build what they think they need," Fred Ali, executive director of the Covenant House stated. Here kids are first provided with nutritious meals, showers, clothing and health care. Then, if they choose to stay for more than one night, there are counselors to help them.

"We are here to help the kids to get employed, to set up bank accounts to save money, to find safe living situations," Ali said.

He explained that Covenant House has workshops once a week specializing in areas where counselors feel kids need help, including a job assistance workshop to help youths with basic skills including how to fill out an application and what to wear to a job interview, a substance abuse awareness



Covenant House, which opened in October, each month draws more than 300 homeless and runaway youths.



Fred Ali, posing with a model, is the executive director of the facility.

workshop, a workshop on human sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases and sessions on anger management.

Jane Barnes, director of Program Services at Covenant House, said about 95 percent of the runaways and street children who come to Covenant House come from families of substance abuse or abuse alcohol themselves.

She said many of the children feel unsafe at home or are unsure of how parents will treat them, so they leave, tired of the emotional abuse.

When asked about the Native population at the house, Ali said Alaska Natives make up about a third of the young people. He said the majority come from Anchorage, as well as from Bethel and the Bristol Bay area.

Less than 1 percent are from villages. Ali said he hopes other regions develop facilities of their own, so the staff doesn't encourage youth from villages.

Ignatius Andrews is a Native who has been working at the house as a youth specialist since it opened in October 1988.

He talks individually with the youth to help them develop basic skills for jobs or talk about problems they may be having. He says he has learned how "to communicate with their style" so that they learn to trust him and open up to him.

Andrews said a problem for many of those from Native villages is not

having a job or anything to do in their village once they graduate from high school.

He said many turn to drinking or may come to Anchorage to get out of the villages. The kids become "caught between two worlds," where they are unable to adjust to a life in Anchorage. They haven't developed the skills for independence or self-reliance.

Andrews said many of the youths

are easily pressured by peer groups and may take drugs for the first time.

He said he especially understands how young Alaska Natives feel because he grew up in a village where he was taught to chop wood and hunt, not live in an urban environment.

Five of the 37 staff are Native. Ali said they were making a special effort to attract more Native staff.

He added that the hope is to develop a longer term residential program to help older youths who don't have skills to live independently in group-home living situations. There they could live for nine to 15 months, and it would be situated near the University of Alaska Anchorage so they could be involved with a vocational training program.

"I will guess most of these kids will be Alaska Natives, simply because they fit the profile," he said.

The Covenant House philosophy is based on giving a consistent supportive personal love to the youths who come in crisis to them.

"We are also here to confront them and aid them in making choices about the future," said Julia Thorsness, community relations manager for Covenant House. "We respect the kids and they respect us in return, and that is what keeps the Covenant House in such good condition."

Those at the facility are expected to

keep it clean, and they do. Thorsness says she helps teens with both emotional problems and with developing social skills to enable them to get a job and have the resources to live independently.

The house is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week to accept any youth who seeks assistance as long as he or she doesn't carry drugs, alcohol or weapons.

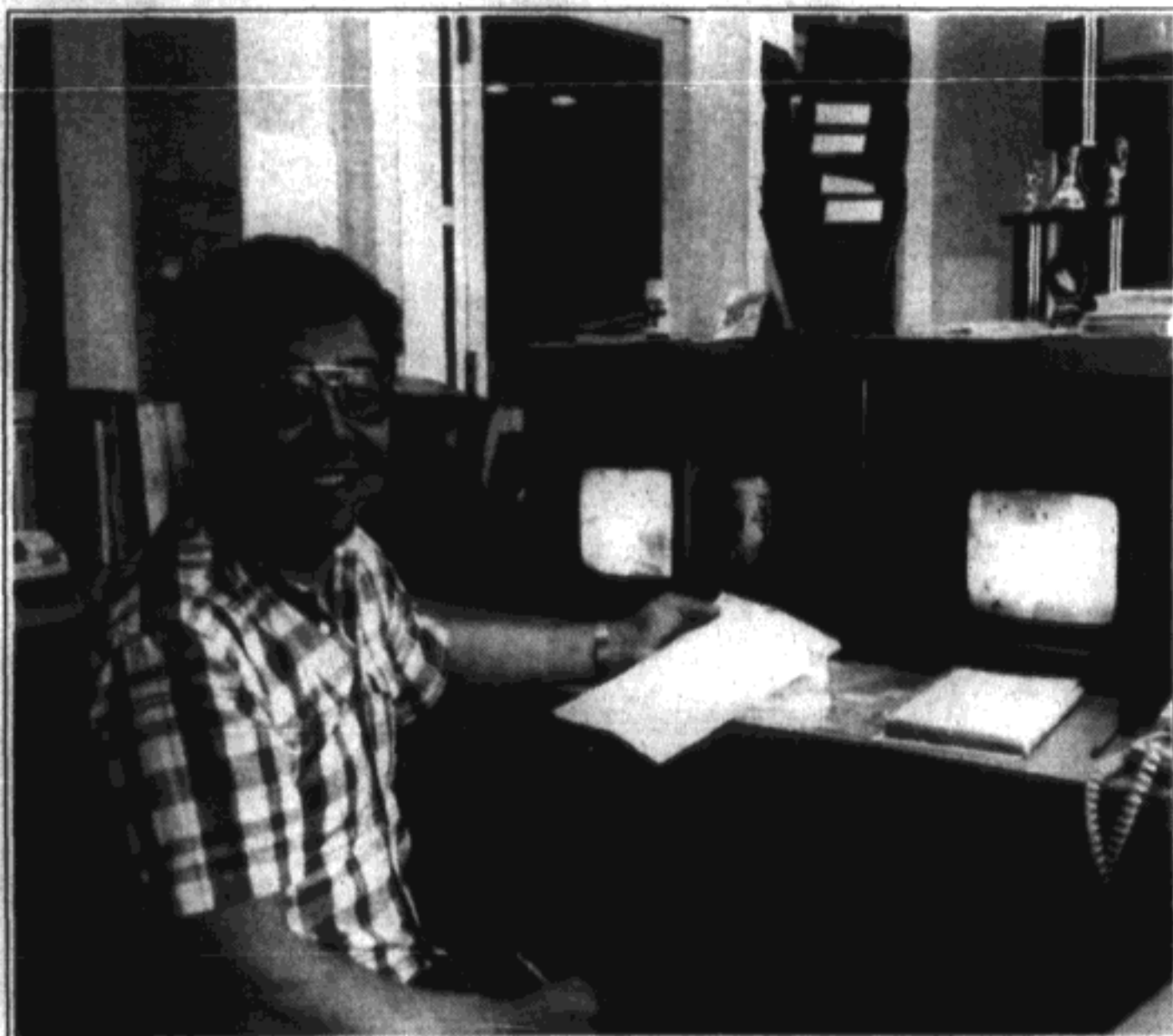
Most of those there are generally between the ages of 13-21. They are allowed to stay for a maximum of 45 days although most stay for about 10 days, Ali said. Some may just stay for a night or two.

Young people hear about the house through schools or acquaintances or through the "van outreach" program directed by John Orr, which reaches kids on the streets all over Anchorage.

The workers provide them with hot meals and support and let them know there is a place for them to stay at the Covenant House.

The Covenant House is completely funded by private donations, individual donations making up about 80 percent of the funding and about another 7 percent from corporate gifts.

National Health Laboratories provides all the lab work and equipment for checking blood for the kids. They also donate syringes and provide a "tremendous service," Ali said.



Ignatius Andrews, youth specialist, says he helps youths develop basic skills.

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—Julia Thorsness