

Hillcrest Home--

Typical Home Scene But Different

By JOYCE ZIMMERSCHIED

FAIRBANKS — Christmas lights glowed softly in the large picture window. From the living room drifted sounds of a television and boys talking and playing. A typical scene from an average home — but with a difference. This one is the Hillcrest Home for Boys.

Hillcrest, a non-profit organization run by a corporation of private citizens, deals with delinquent and dependent teen-age boys. Recently, in addition to the house at 1531 Gillam Way, a new living quarters and office space has been added at 1235 19th.

Currently, 12 boys are living in the two houses.

The new house, in addition to four bedrooms, also has a small apartment attached for training in independent living. It provides a transition period for boys who are nearly ready to be out on their own, says program director Monty Slusher.

They learn how to take care of their own place, the responsibilities of paying bills and other aspects of everyday life.

While the house on 19th has individual bedrooms, the one on Gillam Way is arranged more for dormitory-style living. And because the whole program is now set up as an institution, it has to meet higher standards. This in turn provides better results, Slusher said.

Formed in 1965 by a group of concerned citizens, Hillcrest has recently been undergoing changes. Besides the new house, work has been completed on remodeling and bringing facilities up to fire code standards.

Officially re-opened March 1 of this year, Hillcrest is governed by a board of directors. The board hires the director who, in turn, hires other staff members.

While about 500 individuals regularly contribute money, time and supplies to keep Hillcrest going, other sources also exist. The annual United Good Neighbor Campaign and state aid on a per-boy basis also helps.

But it is the corporation members, who join by contributing whatever they can afford in terms of cash or equipment, who probably do the most.

Everything from ping-pong balls to two snowmobiles have been donated so far, and the need for other things remains constant, according to Slusher.

Most boys at Hillcrest are placed either by the Division of Corrections or the Division of Family and Children Services. About 90 per cent are Natives, ranging in age from 14 to 18. Five of those now here are from Point Barrow, two from Kotzebue and one from Healy. Several come from the Fairbanks area.

While no set time is mandatory for a boy to stay — times have covered everything from three days to eight months — Slusher said they are interested in boys who will be there three or more months so they can be a part of the group living process.

The process is a democratic one, with everyone having something to say about what happens and why. This is better, he says, than a purely family situation, which places too much strain on everyone concerned.

Group sessions combine house government, education and a type of therapy. But counseling is kept both individual and informal.

"A boy can take me aside right here, or I can talk to him while we're driving in the car. It can be anywhere," Slusher

said.

"We give the boys a lot of freedom, but they have to bear the burden of what they do when they're free," Slusher explained.

He added, "Rules and laws come from society rather than being something that is being just forced upon them."

Independence is a big strong point at the home. The boys are encouraged to take part in community affairs, find jobs and do whatever else will help them to make it on their own. They can leave any time after their 18th birthday.

Besides Slusher, there is a paid staff of five, a New Careers government worker, a secretary and a full time housekeeper. In addition, a varying number of college students and servicemen from Project Transition act as live-in advisors and assistants.

Slusher, who has been involved in social work at various levels since 1964, was at one time district representative for the Kotzebue public welfare programs.

The job involved considerable travel, especially in the bush areas.

"It was quite helpful. I got to know the cultural background and social scene they came out of," he says.

Because of this, he feels that he can better understand the boys and their problems.

What brings a boy here can be anything from petty theft to drug abuse, with a certain amount coming from broken or disturbed homes. And while the director and the staff do their best to create a good life for them, some problems remain.

One of the worst, and particularly around holidays such as Christmas, is pure homesickness. The village boys especially feel the lack, as they are farthest from their homes. If the bush regions are interested, Slusher said, papers and letters from home would be welcomed.

"Also, if we could get decorative items in the area of Native arts and crafts, even Native foods," it would help, he said.

People in the home would appreciate others making contact and passing on news in either direction, he said.

"Second avenue is more than just a place for these boys to hang out and get into trouble. It's a walking letter," he said, commenting on them running into people that they know from home.

The Hillcrest staff has a number of irons in the fire in regard to future projects. The home owns 160 acres near the Musk Ox Farm which is used for camping, snow machine trails and so forth.

They would like to expand this, as well as offer counseling and recreational outlet for neighborhood young people. A juvenile delinquency preventive program would keep them "out of places like ours and with their family," he said.

Fairbanks residents of all ages and classes get involved in helping too. A Main Junior High School class sponsored a bake sale Thursday to raise money for a wall tapestry. A local woman donated \$900 over the last year. And people contribute other things too.

"During Christmas week, people that want to take boys out or help them in any way would be appreciated. This type of interest will help alleviate some problems," Slusher suggested.

Running a project such as Hillcrest is not a 40-hour week

for anybody. And anything that can happen probably will. But for the boys who need help, it is one of the best things going in this area.