

David Lawson

## The Canarsie Youth Center

*Much of this issue is necessarily occupied with the field of special education as seen in clear weather from the heights of the academic balloon, and mapped accordingly. It seemed appropriate therefore to include a glimpse among the crowds at ground level of an institution operating with modest funds and modest success, and under the legacy of its past, in one of the notable urban deserts of our time. The vignettes Lawson offers us of a day-to-day reality that struggles, but that works, may remind us that many special schools are invaluable as havens of humanity, and should give pause to those for whom mainstreaming into the nearest high school is the new panacea.*

The Canarsie Youth Center is located in a reconverted warehouse on a bleak stretch of Rockaway Avenue in Brooklyn. Prior to August, 1971, when its present Director, April Vandetta, took over the reins of administration as a "Senior Addiction Specialist," its program was modelled after Synanon, a narcotics treatment system in California run by ex-addicts.<sup>1</sup> Only recently out of college, Ms. Vandetta then accepted this responsibility at a time when the local drug program was at its zenith. According to her, there were thirty-four drug programs in Brooklyn at that time, whereas today there are only six. Critical of the "therapeutic community" approach of Synanon, which she saw as rigid and punitive, and which involved behaviour-modification techniques, Ms. Vandetta began to institute a more humanistic program in which youthful participants were regarded as free, estimable individuals and as members of a large, warm family. Thus the behavioural model with its emphasis on reward and punishment was "overthrown" in favour of a system which tended to see children in terms of their health. Such a new emphasis was made possible by making the Center one for "psychologically addicted" persons rather than for "physically addicted" ones requiring de-toxification in hospitals or residential centers.

So in 1971, when the Center's administration changed hands, the student clientele ceased being used as workers who were called upon to do menial tasks,

and became, in effect, what they were supposed to be — young human beings in a special education program designed to assist them with special problems. The offices of the original warehouse — really a big barn — then began to function as offices for the Director and counsellors. To the rear of the structure there was an enormous space, and at this point parents and others in the community began to construct enclosed areas with doors, creating classrooms, and leaving considerable space in the central area which could be used for various community activities. The incoming clientele were referrals from guidance counsellors of the regular public school system, from mental health clinics, and occasionally from the courts or by word of mouth. Though some referrals have come from outside the district, most have been from Canarsie. No advertising has ever been undertaken to gain new recruits. As a rule, referrals have been spurred by manifestations of adjustment problems, involving truancy and minor drug offences. Whereas the program had originally been for “hard-core” drug users, the newer attenders were capable of being assimilated into a less authoritarian system where discipline, though used, was at least rational.

### **A program dependent on drug taking!**

In organizing the academic pattern of the Center, a decision was reached to employ “tracks” consisting of children of different ages rather than of age-level groupings. Academic classes, held for three hours each day, are based on reading levels established by a special examination; there are, at most, thirteen children in each “track.” The only other examination used as a regular part of the Center’s procedures is the subjective Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, a research instrument which uses one hundred self-descriptive statements whereby the subject portrays his own picture of himself. Here, for example, statements such as “I am an honest person” or “I am a nobody” are checked off on a five-point scale ranging from “completely true” to “completely false.”

The results of such self-concept testing, while undoubtedly helpful to the academic teachers, are of particular value to the Center’s four counsellors, who engage in home visitations when necessary in addition to perhaps fifteen individual counselling sessions of one hour per week, at a prescribed time. Counsellors also engage in group therapy sessions with the children, who are encouraged to assist each other. Write-ups are done every three months on each counsellor’s case load. At least some clients are “ambulatory” — persons other than the regular daily attenders. Taking “ambulatory” and daily attenders all in all — the Center is funded for 64 day and 20 “ambulatory” clients — there is considerable variation in the respective backgrounds of experience in testing and therapy. Counsellors also run workshops in areas such as cooking, nutrition, drama, videotaping, writing, woodwork, ceramics, typewriting, silk-screening, yoga, movement therapy, music, chess, checkers, health care, and child care.

One social worker attached to the staff is responsible for handling, in addition to other duties, such medical problems as have a bearing on the Center. An

Assistant Director — once in the program as a client — becomes Acting Director in the absence of the Director, and is otherwise engaged in running group activities and in scheduling programs. Parent group meetings are held weekly, with family counselling done by special appointment. The siblings of clients at the Center may be invited to such parent meetings. In its approach, the staff aims to be comprehensive, seeing its involvement as one with entire families, and with emotional, intellectual, social, medical, and vocational dimensions. (An elderly lady from the community is present during the school day as a volunteer worker. A black couple from the American South act as caretakers of the building.)

Of the three teachers in the Center, two have been assigned by the New York City Board of Education, and the third is actually a member of the Canarsie Youth Center staff. While the Board of Education teachers work until three o'clock each afternoon, the Center staff teacher works until five o'clock, and is concerned with group activities as well as academics. The academic program typically contains such areas of study as English, mathematics, and social studies. A six hour test may be taken which, if passed, can yield a High School Equivalency Diploma.

Judging from several of my information sources, the Center has in recent years been working under the shadow of the reduction or possible complete withdrawal of operating funds. Funding is done a year at a time, which presents a problem in that it takes a full month to prepare a funding application. A certificate on the wall of the reception area reads:

Canarsie A.W.A.R.E. (the community group supporting the program). 1205 Rockaway Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. Pursuant to provisions of Mental Hygiene Law 8138 is granted Certificate of Approval to operate a day care program for 56 persons and an outpatient program for 19 persons. March 1st, 1977 to February 28th, 1978. For New York State Office of Drug Abuse Services, Albany, New York.

Thus approved with certification, and since funding comes from this and not some other source, the Center constantly needs to verify that its children use drugs. But in point of fact, truancy referrals may not necessarily be using drugs, and most of the programs which have been funded from the State Office of Drug Abuse Services have been for "hard-core" drug users. Even so, the actual emotional problems associated with truancy may also be those causing drug problems. Hence there has been some discussion of the possibility of seeking an alternative source of funding in the Mental Health Program, though the latter would probably entail more bureaucratic entanglements. As matters stand, the tide of inflation has not met with increases in the budgets funded. Quite frequently, the Center's books and files are examined by officials both from New York City and from Albany.

## Canarsie people

When young people at this drug rehabilitation center do social studies, it seems more than likely that they will learn how, in 1626, Peter Minuit, Director-General and Colonial Governor of New Netherlands, paid twenty-four dollars to the Canarsie Indians for Manhattan Island, an area not actually owned by these Indians. This was one hundred and fifty years before the “Battle of Brooklyn,” when General George Washington with 9,000 troops was routed by Sir Admiral Lord Richard Howe, who had a larger army of British regulars and professional Hessians at his command. This defeat of the Americans occurred one month after the American Revolution. It was not until 1830 that “Jim the Wild Man,” the last of the Canarsie Indians, died. Four years later Brooklyn became a city, still later a Borough of New York City. Today, Canarsie is an area of somewhat more than three hundred square city blocks with Avenue D to the north, Jamaica Bay to the south, Fresh Creek Basin to the east and Paerdegat Basin to the west.<sup>2</sup>

The Center operates in a social matrix of diverse ethnic groups. Originally inhabited by the Dutch, who built their first Dutch Reformed Church in 1654, Canarsie received large numbers of German immigrants in the 1870s, who soon moved to build German Evangelical Reformed and Lutheran Churches. By the 1880s there was a significant Italian population, resulting in the first Roman Catholic Church, and Canarsie’s first Jewish population began to grow rapidly in the 1920s, calling for the construction of three synagogues.<sup>3</sup> Far more recently, a community of (largely Protestant) blacks has been housed in new building projects in the area, with the result that some of the long-time residents inevitably feel they are being pushed south and east with their backs to the waters of Fresh Creek Basin and Jamaica Bay. While blacks reside in apartments, whites tend to dwell in two-family houses. Only eight years ago, Canarsie’s second high school, South Shore, was opened to accommodate over 6,000 students. The Canarsie Youth Center now receives numbers of its clientele from that large and hence relatively impersonal institution.

I encountered and interviewed a variety of individuals at the Center, some teachers, counsellors or researchers, some children. Joan, a Research Assistant from the neighbouring Borough of Queens, had for seven months been collecting information from students’ files in an attempt to establish patterns in connection with follow-up studies. Unfortunately, her funds had just been cut off, but she was able to state with some confidence that there were “concrete gains — as much as could be hoped for with these kids —” and that, after children left the Center and returned to the regular school system, the truancy pattern underwent an improvement. (The average client remains at the Center for a period of between one and two years.)

Helen, one of the three classroom teachers, had been at the Center for one

month, and had trained in a similar youth program, "Sera," in the South Bronx. Having worked in a regular high school's special education program, she was convinced that having an approach such as that at the Canarsie Youth Center was "infinitely preferable" to having special education done in the regular system. Once a standard elementary school teacher, she turned to special education on becoming disenchanted with the school system. In order to really understand the new-style program, she had lived at "Sera" for ten days. Having always taught at the fourth grade level, she now had children of all ages in her "tracks," which seemed the better system. She conjectured the children had been "hanging out on the streets for years" before coming to her new classroom.

Eliot, a counsellor, has lived in Canarsie since he was ten years old, and unlike Helen was once a client in the program. He has taught at the Center for one year, and is now interested in the possibility of entering the graduate program in special education at McGill, being a graduate of the State University of New York in Plattsburgh. In the early afternoon hour, I observed him conducting a "quiz program" with students scoring points which were placed in boxes on the blackboard. His patience and quiet reserve during the prolonged hubbub were admirable.

### **The special kids**

Lori, a girl of about sixteen, had been at the Center for three months. She "likes it" because it is "like a family," and everybody "sticks together." Lori was at South Shore High School but "didn't like it because nobody cared." She had one more year to go for her High School Equivalency, then hoped to go to college where she would study to be a singer. "Yes, I'm a soprano." Pat, fifteen, was born in Canarsie and has two sisters, lives with them and her mother on weekends, but with her aunt during the week. Her father ran off when she was ten. She wants to be a beautician.

Neil, born in Queens, lived until he was three in New Jersey — where his parents were divorced — then in Howard Beach for a year, then in Ozone Park, then in Florida. For the past seven years he has lived in Canarsie. "In former schools," he says, "no-one cared about you. This is a place where everyone cares about one another." His goal is to become a marine biologist, a helicopter pilot engaging in marine rescue, or, failing these, a mortician. "I worked as a delivery boy and my boss' brother-in-law is a mortician."

Director April Vandetta says: "The kids here have a bizarre sense of commonality — they are all 'nuts' and they all belong here."

As might be expected in a phenotypical student group brought together by truancy and/or drugs, there is some contrast in terms of creative capability. In 1975, in cooperation with various organizations and businesses in the community, including the Italian Civil Rights League and the La Polla Funeral Home,

the Center published *Still Life*, a literary magazine with accompanying photographs. Robert Simon, Editor-in-Chief, says in his introduction:

Individually, each separate contribution is a statement of someone's experience, a document of an emotional here-and-now, transferred by ink or typewriter or camera onto the printed page. Collectively, this is a statement of the Canarsie Youth Center. We are a living, breathing organism — with eyes and mind and heart. We function as an "alternative school," offering a highly individualized and innovative educational program as well as therapy and counselling to adolescents who have "difficulties" at home or in school.

*Still Life* contains fourteen written contributions — mostly poems — four photographs, and five illustrations. The poetry is quite matter-of-fact, largely authentically urban, and perhaps best represented by Liz, aged 15:

#### Time

A moment past and lost,  
a minute forgotten.  
A second to come,  
a second to go.  
An hour drifting by—  
moving aimlessly.  
Tomorrow is another day  
to cry  
to love  
to sleep  
to hate  
to creep away silently  
like all the others.

The photographs, by Michael Spano, all of urban scenes, are rather remarkably good, and one of a bus-load of people is accompanied by a short statement by Lise, aged 14:

Sometimes when I get on a bus I feel that I'm in a cage. People are staring at me and I'm staring back at them. When I look at their faces some look mad and others look bored and uncaring. People get on and off the bus at each stop, and when they get off I know I'll never see their faces again.

The bus photograph displays, in the right foreground, assorted graffiti on the rear of a seat. The "LL" subway running from Union Square in Manhattan to Canarsie, which twice brought me to this district, is bedecked with as staggering an assortment of graffiti — including odd symbols and languages — as I have ever seen. The outsides of these trains have somehow received curious and lively decorations, not graffiti — murals, really, cartoon-like characters sprayed on in various colours of paint from paint-gun spray-cans, the whole effect ranging upwards from just above the train wheels. The same sociological interpretation, that involves what might be called a rage for self-expression in a felt state of anonymity, seems to apply to the graffiti and also, in some sense, to the "murals."

In the Center, a poem by James A. Emanuel affixed to its Director's bulletin board seems to sum up everything:

**The Young Ones, Flip Side**

In tight pants, tight skirts  
Stretched or squeezed,  
Youth hurts.  
Crammed in, bursting out,  
Flesh will sing  
And hide its doubt  
In nervous hips, hopping glance,  
Usurping rouge,  
Provoking stance.

Put off, or put on,  
Youth hurts. And then  
It's gone.

**NOTES**

1. Gerald Edwards, *Reaching Out — The Prevention of Drug Abuse Through Increased Human Interaction*, Innovative Designs for Educational Action, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1972, p. 146. Drug issues *passim*.
2. Neil S. Friedman, "A Bicentennial Review of Canarsie's History," *Canarsie Courier Bicentennial Issue*, Brooklyn, New York, July 1st, 1976, pp. 12-14.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

