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In Drug Plagued Area NE Program is Beacon
Minister Brings After School Study Hall to Youths
By: Jane Ashley

A dozen youngsters filled the ground level apartment at Edgewood Terrace in Northeast Washington with the sounds of childhood: laughter, footsteps running from room to room, calls for help with after school chores.

The Rev. Donald E. Robinson tried vainly to answer questions about his tutorial program, but the needs of the children continually distracted him from his visitor's questions.

In the next room, five children worked at two tables. Robert Hill and Danielle Williams were working on math problems assigned to them in their third grade class at Shaed Elementary School. They come to the apartment every afternoon to do their homework.

They and the others come also to be near Robinson, a Unitarian Universalist minister who started this study hall last March as the first step in his Beacon House Community Ministry.

The Edgewood Terrace complex – described by Bernice Tuppince, secretary of the community's Residents and Tenants Association, as a drug market where frequent shootings occur-is the setting for Robinson's program. The minister said his vocation is to provide an opportunity for the children here to get an early childhood education and to "bring kids up to grade level in school."

"You have to bring the program to the people who don't like to leave their community," Robinson said. "It would be difficult to get children to attend a tutoring program even a block from the property. Would you want your child walking two blocks after dark?"

Robinson said the children are not likely to have the quiet space or the help they need in their own homes to do homework assignments. When they are assigned to do field trips, such as a recent group that was told to go into downtown Washington, photograph a building and write a report on it, there is little possibility that they will be able to go, he said.

"Parents don't like to go off property. They run into a lot of negativism when they do. The reception isn't warm for these people." That's where Beacon House steps in.

Robinson has the help of three adults who volunteer their time two days a week. Seven students from Howard University helped out last semester, but he has not been able to reenlist their aid this semester. If Robinson does reenlist the students, he once again will have to take them in his 1974 Dodge Dart, making two trip ups from Edgewood Terrace to their Northwest Washington campus to pick them up, and two trips back to return them.

The ministry is operating on a threadbare budget, which Robinson raises by accepting small contributions from area residents and speaking at suburban churches on Sundays. According to All Souls church, Unitarian, which is where the bookkeeping is done for Beacon House, \$5,250 has been contributed to Robinson's program since it began.

"He's operating so far without any salary," said Molly Freeman, a member of All Souls who is working with Robinson to help organize his ministry's finances. "It's a labor of love on his part.

The thing he's been most successful in doing is establishing neighborhood contacts, and he's gotten free space for the programs."

Currently, he operates his after-school tutoring program in a ground-floor apartment provided by the Edgewood Terrace Tenants and Residents Association. He is trying to find furniture to complete the apartment and to fill a recreation center for teenagers and adults across the courtyard. He is reaching out to suburban congregations to provide tables, chairs, ceiling tiles, and other needed items.

Tuppince, the association's secretary, said Robinson is making a difference in the community. "I have never seen so much glee and joy in these children's eyes. Little kids who hadn't been able to get out to places like the Kennedy Center are so excited to be able to go now. He took them in a rented bus last November, and he paid for that out of his own pocket."

However, his pockets are not very deep. Robinson is living on a \$1,000 monthly pension he receives from the D.C. Government's Youth Services Administration. He took early retirement at age 50 in 1989 after working for the city for 15 years as a social worker "because I had problems with the way government delivers services to the people. For them, it's an eight-hour-a-day job. They just don't reach the people. It's got to be 24 hours. You have to be here, getting to know people and to love them."

Robinson completed his master's degree in divinity at Howard University shortly after leaving his government job, believing that churches are the only agencies that can provide what is needed in the community.

"People need to be connected with the supreme force in the universe, that force that makes us whole," he said, adding that he is not pushing religion at Beacon House. "Other churches come in and evangelize, passing out tracts and trying to get people to immediately focus on God. I think we need to build up to that."

Robinson knows that he cannot accomplish his work alone, and has been accepting invitations to speak at suburban Unitarian churches to enlist help. During a mid-January visit to the Unitarian church of Arlington, he told the story of a man who visited a town that professed to believe in the supreme value of shoes, yet it was a town in which no one wore shoes. "Ah, that is the question," the townspeople said to the man. "Why don't we?"

Robinson apologized during his talk for not being articulate enough to communicate the urgent needs of the people he serves at Beacon House. And he told the congregation about an opportunity to do the work of Unitarianism, to express in actions the values church members profess to believe: to help each person develop a religion for living by the highest standards of human conduct.

Jane Williams, a patent examiner for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, heard the message and said she was inspired by Robinson's energy. "I was looking for an opportunity to help in the community. He offered this opportunity without a lot of bureaucracy."

She said she decided to take the risk of venturing into the crime plagued Edgewood Terrace neighborhood because of Robinson and her "personal search to help children."