

# HOUSE *of* REFUGE, HOUSE

*Founded by a charismatic priest, Covenant House, a group home for homeless youth, stood as a bulwark against New York's worst urban nightmares—until it all fell apart. Yet its careful, fifteen-year reconstruction has proven its enduring worth.*

*Father Bruce Ritter spent considerable time learning the intricacies of a neighborhood, connecting with its people, and involving himself in all of their problems: poverty, violence, drugs, unemployment, and police corruption.*

# of CARDS

BY AMY M. SURAK AND PETER J. WOSH

Covenant House, a Catholic-oriented charity that provides shelter and social services for homeless youths, has been an important and occasionally controversial part of New York City's philanthropic infrastructure since the late 1960s. Supporters have viewed it as a model organization that effectively reaches a tough and troubled group of street children and have praised its pragmatic approach, entrepreneurial edge, reliance on private-sector funding, and spirit of volunteerism. Critics have claimed that it rose from very humble beginnings to its current status as a \$120 million-per-year charity by making, in the words of one former *New York Post* reporter, "Faustian bargains with corporate benefactors," relying on semi-erotic fundraising letters and engaging in managerial practices that ultimately produced sexual and financial scandal. History, however, reveals a more complex reality.

Covenant House traces its origins to the mid-1960s and Manhattan College, then an all-male and traditional Catholic liberal arts institution in the

Riverdale section of The Bronx. The Reverend Bruce Ritter, a Franciscan priest who taught theology and administered the Christian Life Council at the college, inaugurated the ministry as an outgrowth of his social commitments. Father Bruce had been a popular figure on campus since his arrival in 1963. He encouraged students to work in Catholic anti-poverty programs, fostered lively debates about the Vietnam War, and enthusiastically introduced the liturgical reforms associated with the Second Vatican Council into his ministry.

By 1968, however, Ritter had grown tired of campus life. He decided to resign his tenured professorship and begin what he characterized as a "ministry of availability" in New York City's East Village. He convinced several devoted former students from Manhattan College, a few Franciscans and members of other religious communities, an assortment of friends and relatives, some aspiring social workers, and a number of casual acquaintances to move with him into a tenement



COVENANT HOUSE ARCHIVES

on East Seventh Street near Avenue D in one of Manhattan's worst slum districts. Thus began an idealistic crusade with the simple goal of serving the poor.

*The idea for Covenant House originated at Manhattan College, where Ritter taught theology and administered the Christian Life Council.*

## Desperate Circumstances

In the late 1960s, the East Village was crime-infested, drug-ridden, and in deep decline. The *Village Voice* observed that the neighborhood had "the bleak air of postwar Europe or industrial Manchester..." Rather than hosting a thriving hippie counterculture, the East Village appeared to be attracting children who were running away from desperate circumstances like broken homes and abusive domestic situations. Ritter and his loyal cadre of volunteers sought to protect these youths from the dangerous aspects of East Village street life by providing



*In the late 1970s, Covenant House began operations in Times Square, an area dominated by massage parlors, peep shows, adult book emporiums, pornographic movie theaters, topless bars, liquor stores, pinball arcades, fleabag hotels, and cheap boardinghouses.*

them with basic food and shelter at night in a safe and supervised environment.

Homeless youths became the nearly exclusive focus of Ritter's efforts in the early 1970s, and dominated the work thereafter. White runaways from the suburbs initially composed a significant percentage of this group, but East Seventh Street volunteers soon noticed another growing population of street children, whom they characterized as

---

**By the end of the decade, Covenant House's annual budget was nearly \$90 million. Its expenditures exceeded federal appropriations for runaway children.**

---

"urban nomads." These older teenagers usually had been shuffled through New York's foster care system and frequently ended up in the East Village without skills or education. Some came from abusive homes, many were

African American and Spanish-speaking, and more than a few suffered from serious addictions. No existing public or private agencies appeared to address their specific problems.

In 1972, Ritter received a small municipal grant and formally incorporated his ministry as Covenant House. Its programs expanded as Ritter acquired property and opened additional homes throughout Greenwich Village and on Staten Island. The fledgling organization began to operate what Ritter called "a small but classy group home operation," based on the principal of open intake.

### **An Urban Gomorrah**

By the late 1970s, however, Ritter had shifted his focus yet again and set his sights on opening a much larger shelter for homeless youths in an even more notorious New York City neighborhood. Times Square had long enjoyed a reputation as an urban Gomorrah, a sexual circus overrun by hookers, pimps, and junkies and dominated by disreputable entertainment, commercialized sex, and sleazy underground pleasures. A stretch of nearby Eighth Avenue even became known as the "Minnesota Strip," owing to the supposed national pipeline established by pimps to recruit thousands of young blonde, blue-eyed, Midwestern prostitutes to New York City.

Covenant House began operations there in 1977, and the move proved to be a

public relations bonanza for Ritter. Newspapers and television networks featured highly complimentary stories about the remarkably energetic friar who seemed to be single-handedly confronting porn peddlers and corrupt politicians and who had personally taken on the task of rescuing New York's homeless and hopeless teenagers. Youthful volunteers flocked to the ministry by the hundreds, inspired by Ritter's sermons, lectures, and somewhat salacious monthly newsletters. He spoke with moral clarity, certitude, and passion about the problems of homeless children, attracting unprecedented support and more influential audiences.

Yet the organization's rhetoric shifted in important ways. Ritter closely tied Covenant House to anti-pornography campaigns, and began associating the problems of youth homelessness almost exclusively with prostitution, sexual exploitation, and deviance, while the broader social concerns that initially informed the East Village ministry receded.

Growth occurred at a dizzying pace during the 1980s. By the end of the decade, Covenant House's annual budget was nearly \$90 million. Its expenditures exceeded federal appropriations for runaway children, with over ninety percent of its contributions emanating from private sources such as wealthy Catholic philanthropists and major corporations. Its direct



mail program became a model for non-profits everywhere. It opened twelve more programs for homeless youths throughout Canada, the United States, and Latin America. A professional staff coalesced, more sophisticated programs expanded the offerings beyond mere crisis care, and the ministry appeared to be an unqualified success story.

Throughout, Father Bruce Ritter served as the organization's charismatic leader, attracting universal praise and personifying Covenant House for its supporters and advocates. Even Ronald Reagan praised him as one of America's "unsung heroes" in the 1984 State of the Union address. Ritter appeared to be carrying his religious commitment out of the pulpit and onto the streets in the best tradition of Catholic social reformers. But matters soon took a surprising turn.

### From Success to Stunning Fall

In 1990, Ritter's image and philosophy were compromised when a series of sexual and financial allegations surfaced, and his entire ministry suddenly seemed ready to collapse. A young male prostitute who resided at Covenant House charged that Ritter had provided him with money, an apartment on Eighth Avenue, and a no-show job in exchange for sexual favors. Shortly thereafter, two more former shelter residents alleged that they had also engaged in sexual relations with Ritter.

Investigative reporters began to unearth other allegations that ranged from sexual abuse to financial improprieties to identity theft to official misconduct to administrative incompetence. Both the Manhattan district attorney and the New York State attorney general launched probes into the charity, and throughout the year sensational revelations dominated New York City tabloids and news broadcasts. Within a few months, Ritter was forced to resign under pressure from his Franciscan superiors, the Covenant House board of directors, donors, and civil authorities. Yet he continued to deny the allegations against him, refused to enter a counseling program prescribed by the Franciscans, and spent the remainder of his life in seclusion at a farmhouse near Cooperstown until his death in 1999.

Meanwhile, Covenant House struggled to survive. Contributions declined by \$22 million in one year, its debt skyrocketed, and public confidence dissipated. Neutral observers questioned whether the organization had lost its moral compass. The board of directors had responded initially by commissioning a full-scale review of operations

by a respected and independent investigative firm, Kroll Associates—but the final report criticized the board for failing to monitor institutional affairs, documented questionable financial dealings by some directors and corporate officers, and concluded that "the cumulative evidence that Father Ritter engaged in sexual

*Homeless adolescents found a place to sleep in this Covenant House shelter in Toronto. In the 1980s, the charity opened twelve programs throughout Canada, the United States, and Latin America.*

---

**A young male prostitute who resided at Covenant House charged that Ritter had provided him with money, an apartment on Eighth Avenue, and a no-show job in exchange for sexual favors.**

---

activities with certain residents and made sexual advances toward [volunteers] is extensive." Though no individual allegation could be proved without question, the Kroll report asserted that "if Father Ritter had not resigned... termination of the relationship between him and Covenant House would have been required. [He] exercised unacceptably poor judgment in his relations with certain residents."

The report actually constituted the first step toward institutional recovery. City and



COVENANT HOUSE ARCHIVES

*Sister Mary Rose McGready, D.C., and former New York Governor Mario Cuomo, shortly after the sixty-two-year-old nun became president of Covenant House.*

state authorities elected to drop their investigations of Ritter and Covenant House without pursuing any indictments. The Child Welfare Board independently reviewed the charity's programs, characterizing its operations as a "generally well-conceived and appropriately structured response to the needs of homeless youth." The Council of Better Business

Her long experience in social service administration with the Daughters of Charity and the Diocese of Brooklyn proved critical in transforming Covenant House. She devoted more attention to early intervention, vocational training, and aftercare programs, downplayed the sensational emphasis on prostitution and sexuality, rebuilt the donor base by personal appeals and appearances, and sought to diversify the charity's revenue stream. Sister Mary Rose also intentionally cultivated her image as a "no-nonsense nun" and crafted a public persona that contrasted dramatically with that of Bruce Ritter: "I am very aware that I am a symbol. And I use that as much as I can...I also think that the fact that I was a woman and a nun in a habit helped to restore the image of Covenant House."

By the late 1990s, the charity had recovered from its crisis, though the scars remained visible. The debt disappeared, fundraising stabilized, and new programs opened in venues ranging from Washington, D.C. to Oakland, California. Revitalized and healthy, Covenant House operates today nationally and internationally, with programs in twenty-one cities. It continues to make a difference in the lives of many desperate teenagers. But it has dramatically shifted its rhetoric and altered its philosophy from the days when Father Bruce Ritter railed against pimps and peep shows in Times Square. ■

---

**"I am very aware that I am a symbol. And I use that as much as I can...I also think that the fact that I was a woman and a nun in a habit helped to restore the image of Covenant House."**

---

Bureaus and the National Charities Information Bureau restored Covenant House to their approved lists in early 1992. The board of directors thoroughly reformed its operations during the 1990s, reaching out to social work professionals and adopting administrative practices more in conformity with accepted non-profit standards.

#### **Recovery Progresses**

The board also selected Sister Mary Rose McGready, D.C. as the charity's new president.

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Covenant House commissioned a comprehensive archives and history project in the late 1990s as one way of coming to grips with its controversial past. Peter J. Wosh wrote the organization's history in *Covenant House: Journey of a Faith-Based Charity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). Amy M. Surak created the Covenant House Archives and also served as a principal researcher throughout the undertaking.

Research for the project relied heavily on repositories in New York State, especially Manhattan College Archives in The Bronx; Daughters of Charity Archives in Albany; Conventual Franciscan Archives in Rensselaer; Archives of the Diocese of Brooklyn; Archives of the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse; the New York Municipal Archives; the Rockefeller Archives Center in Tarrytown; and the New York State Archives. The authors also conducted numerous oral history interviews. The Covenant House Archives in New York City now maintains all official documentation relating to the charity.