

# Skipworth attempts to aid troubled kids before they become hard-core

By Michael Schmieman  
Emerald Contributor

At a time when many parents, judges and police officers are convinced that most of Lane County's youths are doomed to violent lives full of hard drugs and social diseases, a man responsible for providing shelter for the most hostile of these children says today's kids are not so bad.

"This is not a district that is loaded with hard-core delinquents," said Frank Mills, superintendent of Skipworth Juvenile Home. "These kids are definitely salvageable. There is absolutely no question about the fact that we are turning around an awful lot of kids."

The primary function of the county's juvenile detention center located at 2411 Centennial Blvd. is to provide temporary care for children awaiting trial and/or placement in foster homes.

Skipworth's responsibilities include protecting the community from the destructive behavior of malicious youths, providing an environment conducive to normal development, and assuring immediate accessibility of these children to the juvenile court, which is in the same building.

According to Mills, most "students," the term he prefers, return home under some type of supervision provided by local or state agencies such as the Children's Services Division.

Those convicted of serious crimes and who continue to have discipline problems are sent to state training school. Others, who have no suitable home to return to, are placed in group homes often located on farms or ranches. Some end up in the state mental hospital in Salem.

Mills said children with a history of starting fires are particularly difficult to place.

Although the average length of detention is 15 days, Mills explained this figure is misleading because it includes children who are held only a matter of hours before being released to their parents, and others who are permitted to serve sentences by checking themselves in on consecutive weekends. Mills said it is not uncommon for a youth to spend two or three months at the facility.

After running away from home several times and violating the conditions of his probation on a shoplifting charge Shan Cuellar, 14, wound up spending eight months in the detention center.

"A lot of kids will say they have been in Skipworth when they really haven't," Cuellar said. "But I can tell when they are lying because they talk about what a tough place it is.

Anybody who's been in there knows it's not tough at all."

Cuellar, who was released in December, said many kids act "bad" for the first week or two because they are scared and don't know what to expect.

"They come through the door full of rage," confirmed Mills, adding the "warm, caring, and understanding staff" help dissipate the anger quickly.

School, group counseling sessions and daily chores fill most of the weekdays in Skipworth. Weekends consist of leisure time, movies on Friday and Saturday night, occasional special events or trips, and family visitations on Sunday afternoon.

The counseling sessions and chores are mandatory; the rest are considered privileges that can be lost with disruptive behavior.

Two full-time teachers and two aides paid by Lane Educa-

tion Service District (LESD) apply themselves for the first time and discover that they are capable of being good students.

"This happens often enough to make the job satisfying to me," he said.

Currently the center houses 26 juveniles ranging in age from 12 to 17. All but two of them are boys.

Normally a crew of three, two men and one woman, provide supervision from a communication center. When the center is particularly full, or particularly active, another person is added.

In 1978, the Skipworth facility had a staff of 90. Today, 35 people including part-time child care workers and cooks, cover three eight-hour shifts.

"In 1982, we lost seven group counselors and our therapeutic recreation specialist. We've been operating under austere fiscal conditions since," Mills said.

He said the current budget of

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about \$900,000, roughly a third of the Lane County Juvenile Department's total budget, will provide a safe environment, but will not allow as much individual attention as many of the children need.

Mills said that drugs are not the main problem of today's youth, but are one of many problems. He believes, however, that most of these problems have solutions.

"In 10 years, I've seen only a half dozen hard-core delinquents out of the thousands who have come through here," Mills said. "Most of them are neat, needy kids. Someone can get to them."

"I prefer this because I get to work with smaller groups of children and I think I have the skills for working with troubled kids," Lynch said.

"When a kid gets unruly I tell him he is doing the kind of thing that will get him in trouble, and I give him a five-minute break to decide what he wants to do. Sometimes that's enough, but some days they are determined that they are going to fail. When that happens, they spend most of the day locked in their room and lose all their privileges," Lynch said.

According to Lynch, LESD took over the program six years ago, and the district became more interested as it grew more familiar with it. He said the district is committed to a student-teacher ration of 10 to one, and sometimes adds a third teacher when the budget permits.

"These are the kids who normally hide in the back of the class, if they are in school at all," Lynch said. "Here, if they don't want to be in class, their only other choice is to be locked in their rooms."

Lynch said a lot of children

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