

# COMMUNITY WITH A CONSCIENCE



This remarkable group developed "RIEL"—a simple yet highly effective means of helping a neighbor in trouble

by Theodore Irwin

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO a young salesman was notified that his home would be taken over because he had failed to keep up his mortgage payments.

Will Jackson (his real identity must obviously be masked) was desperate. His commissions had been sharply cut, he had a wife and three small children and his relatives couldn't help him.

Like a drowning man clutching for a life preserver, Jackson turned to a unique organization in Larchmont, N. Y., called RIEL (Religion in Everyday Life). A member of this group heard his story and arranged for a three-months' extension of the mortgage payments. Four days later, RIEL obtained a new job for Jackson. Today, he's back on his feet, virtually out of debt, his morale high.

"RIEL is like a big brother," commented a Larchmont official. "Or you might call it the conscience of the community."

Essentially it's a nonsectarian venture in giving friendship, advice and sometimes financial aid to neighbors overwhelmed by hard luck, tragedy or common predicaments. Business and professional men in town run it, working closely with a clergyman.

"To us," they say, "religion is not a one-day affair. We try to practice it all week long."

When someone is troubled, his religious leader is often the first to hear about it and can offer spiritual and moral support. But too often, problems arise beyond his capacity. That's where RIEL comes in, as an extension of the religious leader's two hands.

Working quietly, members of RIEL take time out from their own affairs to discuss cases, receive assignments and meet those who need a helping hand. Starting last February with a nucleus of three businessmen, the group now has at least a dozen other laymen pitching in.

Larchmont, like all communities, has people who at times are faced with seemingly insoluble personal problems. Many dread losing their self-esteem by applying to social agencies. RIEL has been amazed to find how often the average person, when under pressure or lacking experience, is blind to obvious solutions to his dilemma.

While the group has its own bank account from voluntary contributions, it draws more often on the town's bank of human resources. Surprisingly few cases are settled with money. Time, energy, understanding, kindness and expert counsel—these usually do the job.

Baffled, bewildered or despairing, people come to RIEL with their troubles. Its activities have ranged from straightening out an insurance tangle to adjusting the affairs of a man ill with cancer, helping a distraught widow discover a new meaning in life, even finding a dog for a disturbed boy.

Many situations are urgent. Recently, the head of a family was arrested for passing bad checks.

RIEL stepped in, investigated the man's character, posted a bond, negotiated a settlement and saved him from a jail term.

"In my 11 years on the bench," said Police Justice Henry T. Hornidge, "I have never seen anything like this."

RIEL "bails out" neighbors in other ways, too. One merchant was going on the rocks when RIEL asked a merchandising expert in the same business to analyze the enterprise. "The quality of your products isn't suitable for this area," he advised the shopkeeper. "Besides, you're using the wrong selling methods." By modifying his approach, the merchant salvaged his business.

The marriage of one couple was threatened because the house they were building was costing more than they had anticipated. RIEL recruited a builder to steer them out of the mess.

Anonymity is assured every applicant for help. "The one sin is to shame someone in trouble," says a RIEL advisor. The group is so secretive it makes the FBI seem talkative!

THE "conscience of the community" idea originated at the Larchmont Temple, where dynamic, boyish-looking Rabbi Leonard Schofer had long felt frustrated by many appeals he couldn't handle as merely a spiritual leader. One evening, at a discussion of a building fund, a trustee asked, "What should a house of worship do, once its own material purposes are fulfilled?" Among all the proposals, the "community conscience" project won out and Rabbi Schofer suggested it be called Religion in Everyday Life.

One of the early leaders of the work was David B. Solove, a real-estate man. Previously trying to broaden his interests, he had spent Wednesday afternoons in art galleries, but failed to find this stimulating. Then he had asked the rabbi for a Wednesday community job. There was plenty for Solove to do—problems that a layman could best handle. RIEL was a natural outgrowth.

"I get tremendous satisfaction out of working in RIEL," Solove says. "After a game of golf, I can't look at the score. But after helping people, I can look at the results all year."

Harold Krensky, vice president of a New York department store, was drawn into RIEL work after he had lost his son in a car accident. "The tragedy," he said, "made me take a fresh look at my life and the problems of others." The greatest need of troubled people, RIEL has learned, is to feel that they're not alone—that someone cares.

Other awakened communities in the region have been bombarding the group with requests for how-to-do-it details. "We hope the idea will snowball," says Solove. "Virtually any church or synagogue can use a form of RIEL."

As the president of the Larchmont congregation, Sidney Philip, puts it: "We have built the Temple. Now we will have the Temple build us!"

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