

Hospitality House

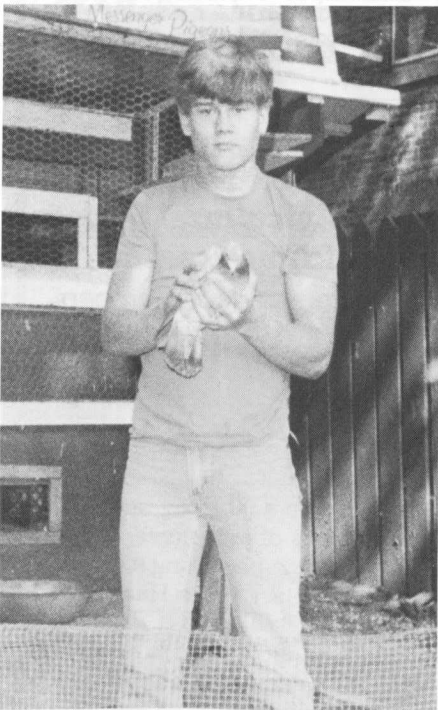
by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

"One day at a time" is a clever catchphrase. Most of us have heard it. Few of us really understand its significance. We go along making plans months, even years in advance. We dream. We plot. We presume.

Photos courtesy of Felix Reyes, Albany, New York



Felix Reyes stands beside the residents' pigeon loft.



Residents involved with Hospitality House pigeon project.

It's not that way at Hospitality House on Central Avenue in New York. Not that way at all. For here resides a group of young men and women with drug and alcohol problems. Substance abusers if you will. They share their abode with a dozen homing pigeons, two dogs, a mother cat and her seven kittens. Quite a menagerie you might say. But this article isn't about the dogs or the cat with her litter. It's about outcasts. It's about pigeons. It's about kids, really, who have left a life on the street to find out if they can still make it. "One day at a time."

Hospitality House has always sheltered troubled young people. Pigeons have only recently come into the picture. But they've come with a purpose; to provide responsibility, diversion and comradeship for those who are searching to reclaim themselves. Typical of all new programs there must be someone who believes strongly enough to start the ball rolling. In this case the person was Felix Reyes, pigeon flyer, substance abuse counselor and former heroin addict.

Reyes grew up in the Bronx, a street-wise kid who played stick ball every afternoon until he noticed an outsider to his group, a boy who was trying to settle a pair of pigeons on the fire escape. The boy told Felix that every time he released his birds they'd fly home to Manhattan where they had been raised. Consequently, he would have to make trip after trip to retrieve the pair and start all over again. Felix was fascinated.

Not long afterwards, Felix met Teddy McHugh whose greatest passion was the sport of pigeon-flying. The old Irishman owned more than 600 flights and tipplers; breeds popular to the roof top flying game. He kept one pet, a muffed tumbler, which always rode upon his shoulder. McHugh took an interest in Felix. He invited him to become his apprentice and allowed him and a pal to build a homer loft on his roof. He also cautioned them to stay off the streets. This latter lesson went unheeded, according to Felix, who spent fifteen years caught up in the stranglehold of heroin.

It was the pigeons, actually, according to Reyes, that became his life raft. In a sense he could feel a kinship

with these gunmetal grey creatures, whose very lives depended upon simple acts of kindness.

Reyes did pull his life together. He kicked heroin and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from Suny in Binghamton. From there he went on to become a drug abuse counselor at the facility. He encouraged construction of a loft, a weathered but tidy coop bearing a sign which reads, "Messenger Pigeon" in bold yellow and blue letters. Reyes then chose the most interested young residents for special responsibilities. They learned to feed, water, clean-up after and train their feathered charges. Awesome tasks? Of course not. But, for many, the ritual of caring for pigeons was the first good thing to come into their lives for a very long time.

"I've gained confidence working with the pigeons," says one resident pigeoneer. For him and several others at the house, pigeons have come to stand for peace, affection, and an altogether new kind of "high."

"It's great just to watch them fly," admits Reyes. In many ways the site of the airborne creatures is something very close to a spiritual experience.

The pigeons living at Hospitality House are the offspring of some very fine flying birds donated by several outstanding pigeon raisers. They are respected by house residents. They are given the best of care. According to Reyes, the kids have car washes to earn money for feed. They see to it that the birds are kept in clean surroundings. And most of all, they see to it that the pigeons are given what homers value most — a chance to fly.

When the time comes for individuals to leave the drug treatment facility, they realize that it is their turn to use their wings. Some will carry with them lifetime memories of their first encounter with homing pigeons. A few, says Reyes, will actually set up their own lofts. For these it may mean the beginning of a new life, a new love.

"It's about love, respect and concern," says Reyes proudly. And it all began with birds.

Note: Hospitality House is always needful of support. Tax deductible donations can be sent to: Hospitality House, 271 Central Ave., Albany, N.Y. 12206. 