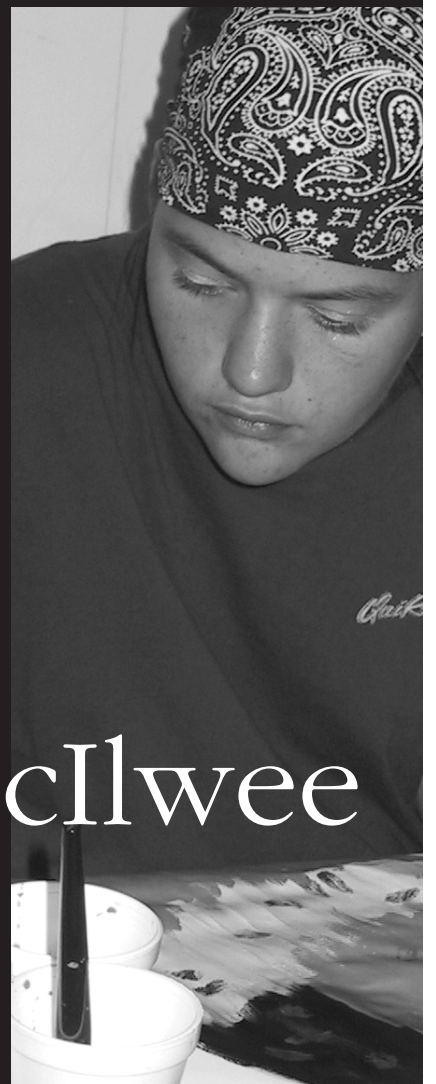




after 33 years in youth corrections, John McIlwee retired... for a few months. He began his career as a parole officer, then ran detention centers and treatment camps for youth. By the end of his career McIlwee was the regional manager and developer of youth programs for the Colorado's southern region.

In 2000, he was asked to head the Colorado Springs Affiliate of the Urban Peak, an organization whose mission is to serve homeless and runaway youth. Urban Peak provides them with a safe, caring, stable environment and assists them in permanently exiting street life. The organization believes in the potential of every youth to contribute to our world.

Story & photos by Pamela Jones



mean street

With John McIlwee

Most people are surprised that there is a growing homeless youth problem developing in Colorado Springs. In the past year alone, Urban Peak served 274 homeless youth 15 to 20 years of age and helped 40% get off the streets. The organization has achieved this feat without a shelter.

"With a shelter we could get 50-60% off the street," say McIlwee. Raising the \$1.5 million to build a shelter is the main focus of McIlwee right now. "We just don't want the kids to spend another winter on the streets." McIlwee answered the most

frequently asked questions about the homeless youth for *Springs Magazine* in a recent interview.

What's the attraction of Colorado Springs for homeless youth?

82% to 90% of the kids on the street of Colorado Springs are from Colorado Springs. It is our feeling that each city has a responsibility to deal with their disenfranchised people. These kids are part of the city, they can learn to be productive citi-

zens in this community and that's why we are here. We can help get them off the streets. We can also help them learn skills so they can stay off the streets.

If the family is in Colorado Springs, then why are they homeless? Are they just rebellious?

Many of these young people have situations at home that they simply are not capable of dealing with. This could include families that are dysfunctional young peo-

ple that have their own issues and they can't deal with normal family situations. Some of the young people have past abuse, some have drug and alcohol abuse, some simply choose not to follow the rules and the parents have become frustrated with them. When they reach a certain age they told them they were on their own. Some have been abused and some are on the street because they feel that is a better place for them to be.

Another reason we have a lot of young
continued on next page

mean street

continued from previous page

people over the age of 18 on the street is that they age out of the foster care system. When they reach the age of 18 the foster system no longer cares for them and they cannot locate their families or the families are not functioning in a way they can go back to so they end up on the street.

How would you respond if someone said, "I put my time in raising my kids, it's not my problem." How does homeless youth affect the entire community?

The kids are on the street and they become a burden to the community. They panhandle or get in trouble with the law. They sell drugs to survive. Some of them get involved in sex in exchange for food, drugs or a place to stay.

When young people are involved in sex for survival, they are at risk of getting sexually transmitted diseases, HIV. When that happens, because they have no insur-

ance, then the cost reverts to the community. They can get injured on the street, that cost again goes back to the community. They are not paying taxes, but taking money from the tax roles. If we can help them become productive citizens then they become tax-paying citizens.



Drawings in this article by Eemily, a young artist and Urban Peak client.

So are you saying the community is paying for the youth anyway?

Let's look at it another way. It costs the Urban Peak about \$3,000 in services to get a kid off the street. It costs \$50,000 a year to put a kid in youth corrections. It

cost a lot to put them in foster care. So we think that if the city and community get behind us, we can do it a lot cheaper this way.

What is the benefit of a shelter?

What the shelter allows us to do is to get the kids stabilized for a long period of time, so we can have consistency while working with them. Since we don't have a shelter, a kid can come into our drop-in program for one day and we don't see them for two weeks. It is very difficult to be consistent, to find out what their problems are and help them deal with it. The shelter gives up to a ninety day period to get these kids stabilized, get the GED program and move on into some other kind of housing, even a home or an apartment of their own or supportive housing. Without the shelter, it is very inconsistent and we don't get as many people off the street as we could if we provided shelter.

How long would a kid stay in the shelter?

The longest stay should be ninety days. They have a curfew. We do the curfew in the city for under 18. For older kids we would still close the door at the same time and if they are not in, we would have to consider whether they want to be with us or not, and they may not be part of our program. They have to show positive behavior, they have to take care of things, and they have to earn certain privileges. Say,

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going out for a particular recreation or something, we can help them earn certain privileges to put money away to buy things they need. Basically we can take them and teach them how to do a checkbook, how to take care of an apartment and how to take care of themselves. We can take them at this age and teach them things they should have learned when they were much younger and did not. Without those skills, just a job and an apartment are not going to do it, because they don't know how to deal with those things. At the shelter, we can support them while they are on the job, and we can work with the employers. With a shelter we can have daily programs for our youth.

What can the Colorado Springs community do to support the Urban Peak?

The cost of the shelter is \$375,000—\$300,000 to rehab the building and then a certain amount to furnish. Capital campaign is for about \$1,500,000. It consists of a committee to decide the corporate funding and the [fundraising from] individuals. Some foundations will not give any money until a certain amount of money is raised, some have committed to help us until we get a property and get things going. We also have to go through city regulations and neighborhood things until we can proceed with rehab on the building. We would like to do the campaign in a year; most people do it in two to three years. We are rushing it so we don't have to have too many kids on the street, or for more than one winter.

Urban Peak Wish List

Bring to Marion House Soup Kitchen and ask for Urban Peak

- Coats
- Winter hats/gloves
- Sleeping Bags
- Socks
- Boot-like shoes
- New underwear
- Sweatshirts/warm pants
- Deodorant
- Toothbrush/toothpaste
- Phone Cards to call families/friends
- Baggy sizes
- Cash donations for Christmas gifts during the holidays.

Call 630-3223 to receive the list by mail, or for more information.

(continued on next page)


Second Annual awards dinner and benefit silent auction. Several youth will be featured throughout the evening, each sharing a personal story about leaving a life on the streets.

When: Wednesday, November 13, 2002


Time: 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Where: Colorado Springs Senior Center
1514 N. Hancock Street
Colorado Springs, CO
(719) 385 - 5933

Cost: \$50 per person, available at UPCS office (719) 630-3223, or 14 W. Bijou, Colorado Springs, CO 80903.



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— HOURS VARY BY LOCATION —

Drop-In For Dropouts

Story and photos by
Pamela Jones

Urban Peak Throws Lifeline To Homeless Youth

Drop-in is the name given to the open doors for youth at the Marion House Soup Kitchen, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and at the Dwelling Place, First Congregational Church, Mondays and Fridays. Seven days a week the Urban Peak's caseworkers and volunteers go on outreach with a backpack full of soda, snacks, socks, condoms and bleach among other seasonal items.

The team covers the parks, malls and other venues making contact with runaway and homeless youth. Urban Peak gives out a card with it's address and phone number, the hours of drop-in, the services they offer and those offered by other agencies. Most of the kids who come for help to Urban Peak come through outreach, or referral by agencies or other youth in the program.

The streets of Colorado Springs are not



Denny's indefinitely, but now they just get moved on. Moved on, from place to place, all day: nomads in their hometown.

About three months ago Urban Peak began an art project where volunteers drop-in on Tuesdays with donated art supplies from Meningers and Art Hardware for a couple hours of creativity. The youth have been invited to share their stories in whatever form appeals to them. Out of these stories have come some commonalities.

The most common theme among the homeless youth is what they think the community thinks about them. One hundred percent of the kids feel negatively judged in some way or another as they move through Colorado Springs. Eighteen-year-old Ashley echoes their collective mind in this line of her poem: "They think we're junk but we're not."

Jason repeats a similar refrain in what he calls his poem, *Shadow Theory*:

"People don't ever see me,

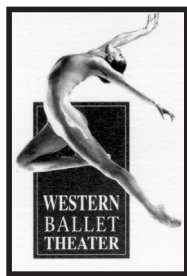
I'm just a shadow

They've already judged, so they can't really see me."

Laura, who is taking it 'one step at a time,' shares a part of her story with us.

At 5' tall and about 95 lbs, Laura has been off and on the streets of Colorado

as harsh as those in large metropolitan areas. Not yet anyway. The streets still take its toll on the hearts, minds and bodies of the youth. They come to drop-in bruised, angry, frantic, hungry, and as winter approaches they will also be cold. There was a time when they could hang out at

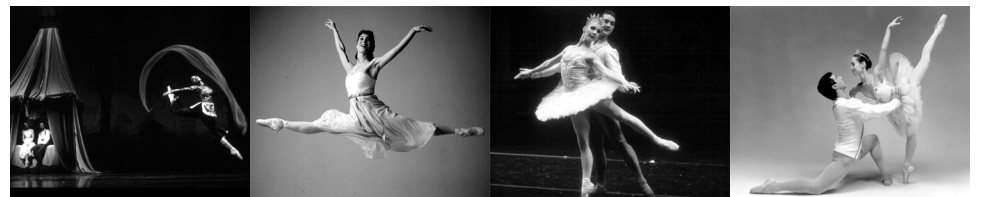


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Springs a while, for longer than she cares to say. "Before I was sleeping on the streets, I was running around on them. I couldn't honestly tell you how long...it doesn't matter anymore, what matters is that I'm doing well, thanks to Urban Peak, pretty much."

Like many of the youth that make contact with Urban Peak, Laura came for some of the survival basics of life.

"I went to the soup kitchen to eat and I asked them for socks and that was the beginning...of the end," Laura smiles. One of the caseworkers at Urban Peak was a familiar face for Laura, she says, "I knew Tracy when she worked for Cleo Wallace, so they made her my caseworker and that was cool. I felt like I could talk to her already."

Now Laura is dreaming of a future off the streets.

"I've always dreamed of studying law and psychology, but I've decided to that I'm probably too nice for law and that it would become personal. So I'm examining criminal justice or sociology because I've always had an interest. I'm not for sure what I want to study yet. I want to go to college and get a good education. I've got my GED a while back. Urban Peak has helped me get applications and to fill out applications for Pikes Peak Community College. That was a big step because I intend to graduate from a two-year and then go on to a four-year, hopefully. I still have some psychology issues that I need to work on, though."

"I've grown up quite a bit and realized a lot of things with the help of the workers at Urban Peak. A while back they tried to

get me into rehab, they got me into Excelsior and back with my mom. They help me with everything. They help me to make the right decisions when I can't see the good way out, but they never tell you exactly what to do. I like how they always suggest things," Laura continues

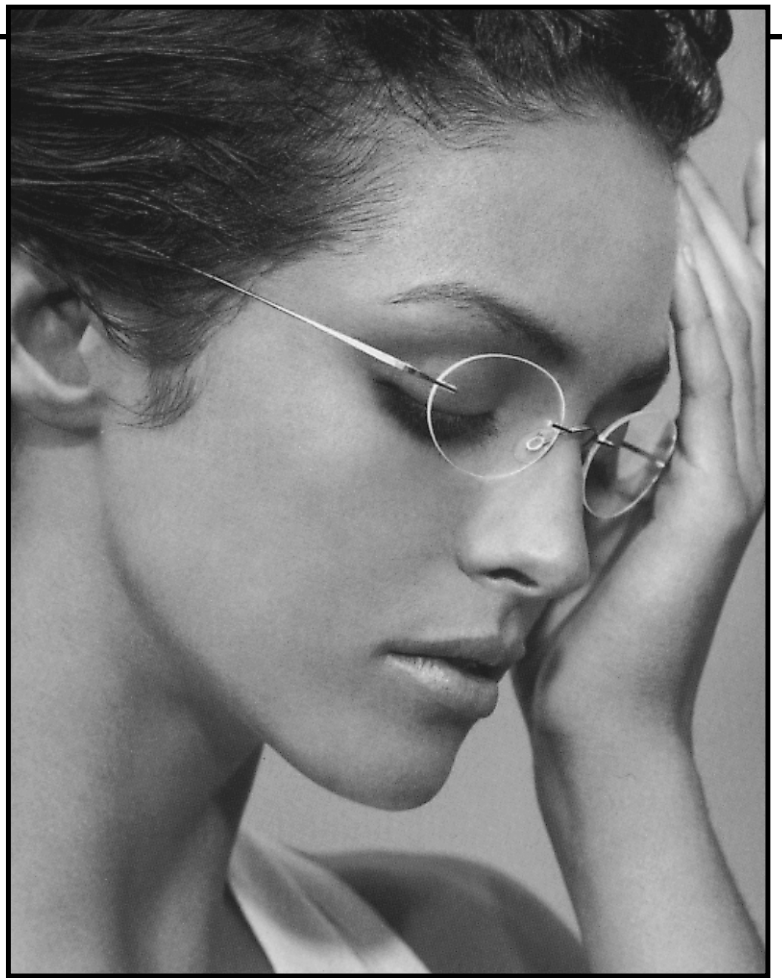
Laura continues to show up and work with the people at Urban Peak. Like many young people, she writes down her thoughts, participating in the Tuesday programs when the youth are encouraged to share their poetry, drawings and songs. Laura shared one of hers with *Springs Magazine*:

"In my life I've lived and I've died
I've never really smiled but I've cried
My life has been lived in a cloud of smoke
Drugs and misery...you know that's no joke
Roaming the streets trying to see
Just what this life can give to me
Acting big and talking real loud
Chilling with a down crowd
If you ask I'm always fine
I guess God will get to me in time
And I cherish my little bear teddy
It's all that I have, all that makes me steady."

How Billy Pulled His Life Together

The Urban Peak intervened with Billy a few months after he landed on the streets. "I was on the streets for two to three months and I went to the food stamp office

continued on next page



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Dropouts

continued from previous page
asking for help for rent and they sent me to Urban Peak, where I met Andrea, my case-worker."

At the annual awards dinner and benefit silent auction, Wednesday, November 13, Billy is one of the youth who will be honored for putting his life back together.

Billy, a clean cut, straightforward and intelligent young man, came upon circumstances that overwhelmed him and brought him to Urban Peak.

"I was living with my Dad, who moved out to be with his girlfriend, and left me to take care of the place on my own."

"So, I had an apartment and was working a job. Something happened with that job to where I didn't get paid. I was already behind on my rent and then I got evicted. My Dad was living with a female and we didn't get along too well, so I couldn't go there. And my Mom was in the same situation, she was with a man and I couldn't go there. And there I was," Billy explains.

After a while on the streets, many youth develop strong bonds with what they call their 'street family' to fill the hole. Even though 85-90% of the street kids are homeless, they no longer

associate with the neighborhood or school friends. Because of Billy's early intervention, he did not have the time to have a street family. He maintained relationships with the people he went to school with. Life got hard for him and he needed some support.

Billy says, "Urban Peak gave me a



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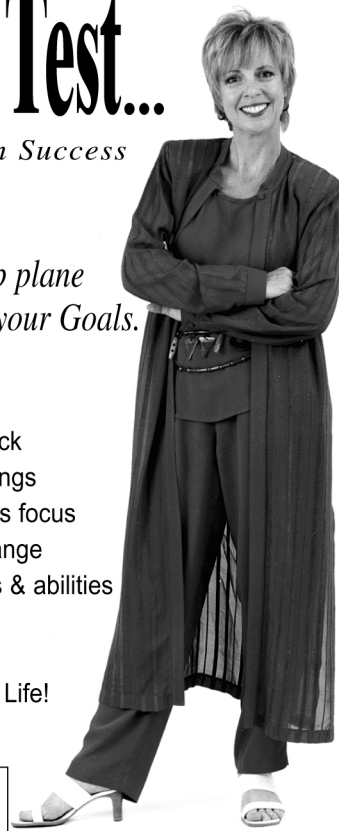
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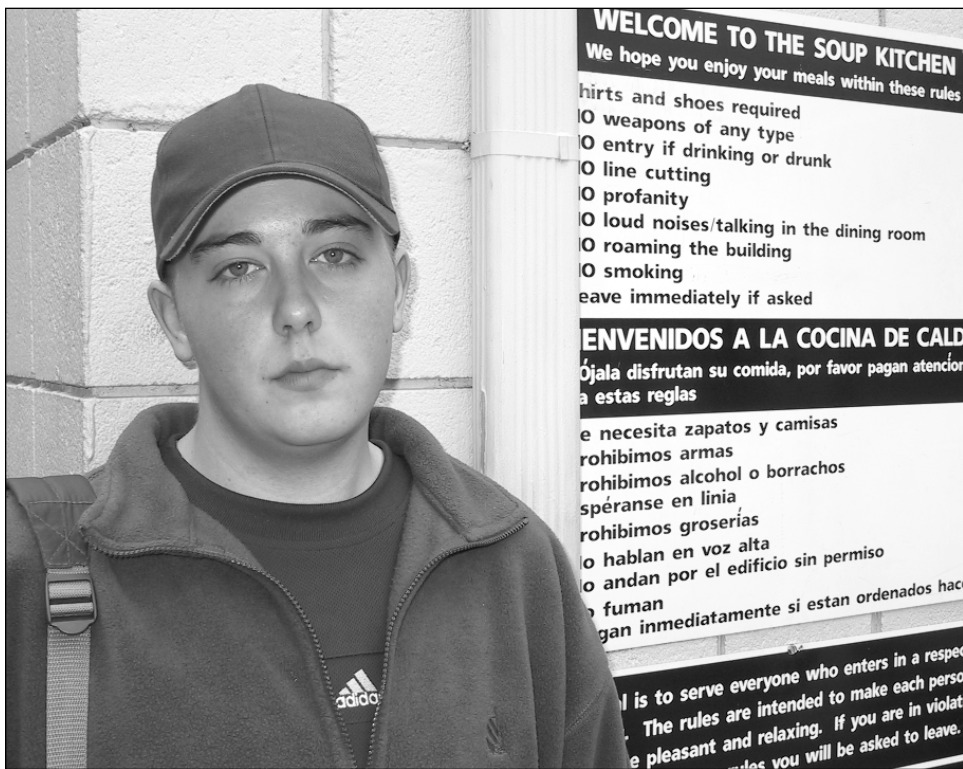
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desire to succeed. They gave me hope in myself. They told me they were out there and that they cared. For me, if I have something or somebody to be proud of me for doing the right thing, that helps a lot. They are cool people. They give me a lot of support. They showed me that it feels good to do things for other people."

"I have a different attitude. It used to be, I don't care. I was doing the wrong things to survive. I came here

and started doing the right things. The Urban Peak is my conscience on my shoulder. They make me want to do the right thing, grow up and be an adult."

"One day I want to be a success with a family and a house. Raising children to be a success like me. I want to sell insurance or stocks. I'm working on my GED right now. I come to Urban Peak to do that every Tuesday. I'm taking my practice test again and when I pass, I'm going to enroll in Pikes Peak." ▲

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