

Downey Side: 'it's not a program, it's a home'

"It's not a program, it's a home," says Marti Ochs as she describes the Downey Side Home at 34 High St. where she and husband Dick will act as parents of eight girl wards of the state.

Mr. and Mrs. Ochs have just about settled in to the attractive, refurbished three-story house after being selected as house parents by the local Downey Side Advisory Committee and the regional office. Mrs. Ochs has furnished the downstairs which will be their apartment and has even added some hanging potted plants on the second floor common area which will be shared with the eight girls who eventually will move in (two already arrived). Dick Ochs is building a dining room table for the family.

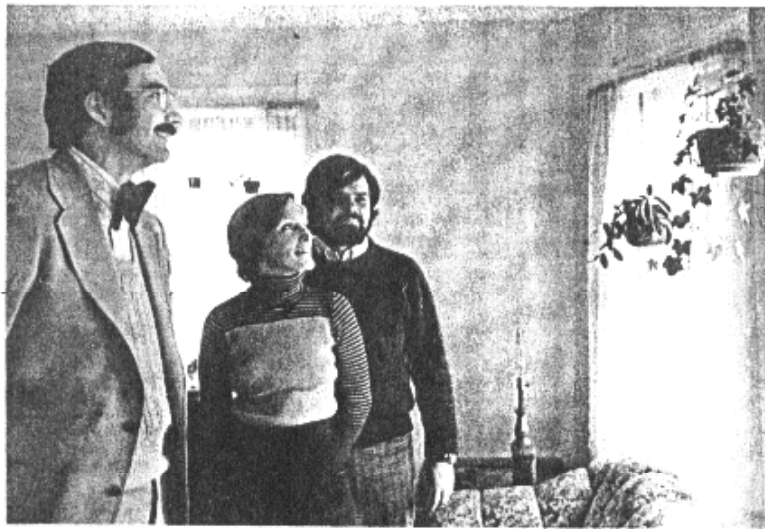
'Synthetic Family'

The local advisory committee bought the home last November, spent December through February renovating it and transforming the third floor attic into attractive rooms for the girls. Downey Side operates several homes in the area providing a "synthetic family" to youths who, for one reason or another, do not have a caring family to which they can go. They are referred to the home by the Dept. of Child Guidance and are screened by Downey Side, Inc.

A home, of course, means parents and that's where Marti, 22 and Dick, 25, Pittsfield natives, come in. Both are familiar with the Downey Side concept because they worked as counselors in Pittsfield homes. Marti with a girls' home and Dick with a boys' home in that city. Marti graduated from the University of Massachusetts with a B.S. in human development and was interested in social work although of the non-institutional kind, so Downey Side seemed a natural opportunity for her. Dick, however, is an electrical engineering student — or he was, before he accepted the house parent commitment for Downey Side here.

Permanent Commitment

What is that commitment? Skip Kosczalka a former house parent and regional director explains: "They make a permanent commitment when they become Downey Side house parents. I'm still involved with the kids who were in my house; I get letters from them and they visit us from time to time." The Downey Side youths come in as teen-agers, spend about three to five years in a home and leave for jobs or schooling. The home, the actual house, is then sold and the house parents do not start a new Downey Side family. There is no need to because they are already attached to "their youngsters," who can consider them when they need advice or a place to go and visit.



Marti and Dick Ochs show Downey Side regional director Skip Kosczalka house plants they have arranged to bring a green homey air to the High St. Downey Side West Side for eventually eight homeless girls. Mr. and Mrs. Ochs are the new house couple.

The house parents have a "subsidized salary" from Downey Side and are full-time parents. Later they may be able

Dick: Outdoorsman

Dick, a burly outdoorsman with a nut-brown beard, is interested in eventually taking the girls on canoeing trips. He keeps in touch

Westfield River and this year is looking for white water thrills on the Farmington.

"I talked to the girls about it, and they're already interested in deep sea fishing off Rockport," Dick says.

Good Location

The Ochs think the High St. location of the home is excellent and although they have not had a chance to get to know the neighbors, are looking forward to their experience here. Helping them, of course, are the local advisory committee, about 20-25 townspeople who have provided guidance, muscle power and materials in the home

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Marti Ochs, Downey Side houseparent.

to take on part-time or full-time work, but they remain as parents with — just as any regular parent — responsibility for their youngsters. Dick may be able to continue his engineering studies when the family routine is established on High St.

Trust Takes Time

Marti is a slender, strawberry blond with a spontaneous smile but a no-nonsense attitude toward the Downey Side commitment. Having been a counselor to Downey Side youths, she knows what to expect: not much at the start but a gradual confidence on the part of the youths toward the house couple.

"There's some initial distrust and defensiveness," Marti says. "And it's understandable, because these kids have had rough 'family' experiences," she adds. "Trust is something you build and it takes time." But what helps is the home-like atmosphere and that's why Marti prefers to call it a "home" instead of a program with its clinical connotation.

Natural Environment

"This is a very natural environment," she says looking around the expansive old house, sparkling under new paint and with the sun pouring through a Tiffany-style window of the early 1900's when the house was presumably built. "These kids have been tossed around but here there's permanency. We've noticed that in less than a week that these two girls have been here."

How does Dick feel about being a housefather to a group of girls after serving as a boys' counselor? The Pittsfield experience will help because some of the situations are similar, he says, adding "But I think I'm going to find it a little more difficult. Girls are a little more emotional." Mainly what he will be concerned with is "building all kinds of family experiences," with the youths. That means at home experiences, rap sessions, interest in their school work, their boyfriends, and a host of other trips that these girls may never have made before — to museums, camping or the like.