

RAP HOUSE

THE LAWYERS MAKE THE SCENE



In a house condemned and waiting for the bulldozers of Norfolk's Redevelopment Housing Authority there is a sign on the bulletin board, "De lawyers are here." Young people, some garbed in the extravagant styles of the "hippie" drift by, some to stay and talk, others simply to check out briefly this new item on a changing scene. The place is new, called "Rap House", and sponsored in its origin by the Young Lawyers Section of the Norfolk-Portsmouth Bar Association.

In Virginia Beach, off the main streets of a summer resort, a group of lawyers, doctors, and dentists have been given the use of a series of locations, the back tables of a coffee house, a room in a house named Jove's Mountain, where young people experiment in community living, and now another place, a room above a shop that caters to the cult of the surfer.

Several nights each week legal and medical advice is made available without charge to the burgeoning population of young people at the beach scene.

These two experiments, of two different styles and origins, are part of a continuing involvement of those in the legal profession with the problems of their communities.

Those involved speak in terms of two problems they wish to attack; drugs, and the intangible but present "drug scene" which have surfaced in the urban area as in many others, and the communication gap between the adult and teen-age world—the drop-out and the establishment. Success is hard to measure; the Virginia Beach project is a year old and the Norfolk experiment has been in being for about six months. But the workers are enthusiastic, hopeful and planning long range.

Rap House was born when a group of volunteers approached the Norfolk-Portsmouth Bar Association, asking for backing on a project that would help "get the kids off drugs." The volunteers, many



from Old Dominion University, planned their effort for the middle-class white post-teen-agers and late teens of a specific area of the city.

Rap House is conceived as a youth center, offering alternatives to the way of life represented by the drug scene — outlets for creative writing, art, drama, photography, ceramics, and ecology and public service projects. Legal counseling on problems of broken leases, and information about the processes of the law seemed most needed. Police co-operation with a “no confrontation” policy was enlisted. At this writing Rap House and their neighbors are still getting acquainted. Finding the initial constant presence of the lawyers threatening to some of the young, Rap House now posts a schedule of hours at which legal advice is available, and a schedule for the volunteer doctors.

Attorney John Ryan of Norfolk discussed some of the problems of legal help of this kind. The volunteers are advisors, not advocates. Where legal help is necessary the inquirer is referred to the Norfolk Legal Aid Society, and in criminal matters the process of court appointed attorneys is explained. AWOL soldiers seeking conscientious objector status are referred outside the organization, as are all draft problems, for counseling. “We don’t advise how to evade the law,” says Ryan, “but inform those who ask what the provisions of the law are.” The notebook for volunteers kept at Rap House includes the text of the new Virginia drug laws, for handy reference.

Virginia Beach’s Free Clinic has developed a different life style than Norfolk’s experiment. No organization originally

backed the Beach project. Attorney Bernard Barrow itemized some of the differences. The Beach has no place of their own to work out of, there is no college age group to call on for volunteers. The age group worked with is different, and the focus is on a transient summer population of youth, rather than the young residents of an urban neighborhood. At first the volunteer doctors and lawyers went to the clinic only one night a week; now they are scheduled into the program five nights.

The load varies from night to night on something of a crisis basis. There is no legal aid association available in Virginia Beach, so advice relies more on court appointed attorneys. Problems run to the omnipresent landlord-tenant battles, school problems of expulsion, suspension, etc. (including rights under dress rules) minor traffic offenses, and draft and drug problems. The longer presence of the free clinics has built more confidence in the program, and Virginia Beach is busier than Norfolk’s fledging operation. The doctors deal with hepatitis, venereal disease, and some bad trips.

The long range goal? Barrow speaks in terms of personal relationships with those they talk with, hoping that the youth caught in the drug scene will learn by example, “not by telling.” The results are not startling. “Some are so alienated, but at least we provide some adult to talk to.” The communication is a side product, but an important one to the volunteers.

As time passes these projects will have more to suggest to others who wish to begin similar operations. Where they succeed they will have blazed an honorable trail for a society reaching out to those outside the structure.