

# Students Advised by Students

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

One of the subjects was loneliness at Archbishop Molloy High School last weekend.

"I understand her loneliness," a senior, speaking in a gentle tone of his widowed mother, declared to some colleagues. "I'm not saying I'm turning my back on her. But I'm 16 and she's 50 and I'm going to have to live my life."

The student stared at the floor of the classroom much of the time, obviously feeling strained, but the open admission of this classic conflict of adolescence was a clear relief to him, too. It was all part of one of the most popular elective courses for seniors at the school, in Briarwood, Queens, and, according to educators, one of the most unusual in the country.

It is the peer-group counseling course in which the school has been tapping the greater life experience of the seniors to help sophomores

deal with personal, family and school problems.

Last weekend, the 40 students selected from among 375 volunteers in the senior class received their first training in the art of leading a group-counseling session. Next week, after additional days of training, they will be assigned in pairs to groups of sophomores who will be invited to attempt a more candid understanding of themselves.

The sophomores will attend the sessions twice a week as part of their religion course. They will be guided by the seniors who will receive a credit toward graduation but, more important, will hold a new sort of leadership role that, according to teachers and students, has become one of the school's strongest morale builders, vying with athletics.

The program began informally eight years ago as an after-school experiment in "one-on-one" counseling—a fancy way of describing the

freewheeling method of Brother Richard in matching a troubled youth with an older student of similar background or interest who had "been through it all."

Brother Leo, one of the Marist teaching order that runs the school, is a friendly, rough-hewn man from Boston, who is very popular with the students as he butts into their affairs, and recognized by fellow teachers as intuitively gifted at getting people to mesh and help one another.

His style includes a disarming mixture of athletic orientation ("I discovered I could get linemen to call plays . . .") and abrupt Christian observations ("The idea of this thing is, uh, ya gotta get up on the cross to really help, you know what I mean?").

Patrick A. Murphy, the director of the program, explained that Brother Leo's personal efforts became a

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formal program in the late nineteen-sixties when the school's religion department yielded time in the freshman and sophomore classes where, during a period of trauma in much of the Catholic church, a need for innovation was recognized.

From largely unstructured gatherings and conversations among students, the program grew in size and format to the point where, this year, two outside consultants were hired to teach the seniors the best ways of guiding counseling sessions. The consultants, Dr. Wayne W. Dyer of St. John's University in Queens and Dr. John Vriend of Wayne State University in Detroit, spent three days over last weekend at the school, on Manton Street near Queens Boulevard, assisted by the school's regular guidance staff of six full-time and four part-time members.

"None of you should leave this group feeling you can just sit around and encourage conversation," Dr. Dyer told the seniors at one point, after listing the various warning signs that a group is drifting rather than focusing in turn on each member's needs.

Some of the pointers were blunt — ignore a sophomore who is obviously speaking mainly to curry favor with the leader; eventually he will have to focus on individual

problems to rejoin the group. Some of the tips were subtle — when the word "you" is heard more frequently in place of "I and we and they," this indicates progress beyond a mere hand holding stage to candor in talking about others in the group. And some advice may have seemed a bit risky—don't be afraid of long periods of silence; chatter for its own sake is pointless.

The 40 seniors, who experienced less structured group sessions as sophomores two years ago, held their own group sessions under the observation of the two consultants and the guidance staff who offered critiques that had some sharp edges.

"Listen," one young man was told, "you should have nailed that guy when he came out with 'That depends.' He was beating around the bush and ducking the issue."

## Specific Problems

The effect of such teacher criticism, after the session's round of self-criticism, was attested to by a number of seniors in the third day's closing group sessions.

"A rank-out [needling] doesn't bother me anymore," one senior said.

"I always used to hide things, and I find that's wrong and I need people," said another.

Specific problems range from drugs to parents to sex

and include things like pimples or jutting ears that can seem disastrous to a youngster and only amusing to the forgetful adult, but worthy of careful reassurance to a senior who has survived the same.

The guidance staff and, at certain intervals, the two consultants, will review the sophomore sessions to strengthen the seniors' techniques. Now Brother Leo is trying to get neighborhood families and the students' parents involved in the program, too, and school officials say outside aid will have to be sought for the program, which at present is financed by student contributions of about \$30 each.

Last weekend, a visitor could sense a good deal of self-consciousness as the seniors were put through their introspective paces. But near the end there was also a mood of accomplishment as the seniors in one group discussed the post graduation future.

Girls in their lives, college and career choices were discussed by each, with a number speaking of leaving home. Optimism was the unspoken consensus until one young man brought the group up short by interrupting: "Yeh, well how many are really leaving home mainly to get away from it?" Four hands went up and the session ended with this problem unsettled, but out in the open.

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**Participants in the peer-group counseling course at the Archbishop Molloy High School in Briarwood, Queens**

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