

## There's Just No Such Thing As a Dunsel



Virginian-Pilot Photo by R. L. Dalton

Houseparents at home: Tilly and Ed Conley, Shannon, and David.

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Norfolk—"We destroy dunsels by finding a use for them," said Tilly Conley, describing the job she and her husband share as houseparent for Hope House.

Hope House is a residence for mentally retarded young men, most of whom are trainees at the Tidewater Vocational Center.

A "dunsel," Ed Conley explains, is a word for "something that has no use." It was coined by one of his seven trainees at TVC's Esso Service Station at 5015 Colley Ave.

The young man confided to Ed that he had seen a medical report describing him as a dunsel, someone who would never be useful.

The Conleys feel there's no such thing as a dunsel.

Since they became house parents at Hope House, a two-story brick structure at 3611 Granby Street, they have brightened up the house with things made from items that might have been dunsels. A piece of scrap lumber was sanded and stained by Ed to become a coat rack. Then Tilly painted Pennsylvania Dutch figurines on it.

The service station also has some dunsel décor.

During off-hours at the station, Ed and the trainees experiment with welding old oil cans together to see what they can create.

Among the things they've created are a large oil can abstract sculpture and oil-can Santa Clause which one trainee made and sold.

While Ed is teaching general car maintenance at the service station during the day, Tilly takes care of Hope House's 12 room and her two children, David, 2, and Shannon, 2 weeks. She also does all the cooking.

The cleaning isn't overpowering, now, Tilly said. Since September only two young men have lived there. "The cleaning only takes a couple of hours," she said.

“We try to make Hope House as much like a family environment as possible,” Tilly said. “The boys and Ed all go to work and come home about the same time, so we usually eat together.

“Each boy makes his own bed, cleans his room and does his laundry, but sometimes I’ll do their laundry for them, if they’re in a bind,” she said.

The Conleys have an apartment on the first floor of Hope House.

Tilly was hired as housemother in September when Ed was taking graduate courses in Special education at Old Dominion University. When TVC took over the service station Nov. 1, Ed was hired as instructor.

Ed, who has taught secondary school English, said he left graduate school “Because I was just learning what I already knew expect on a different level. I wanted to move into therapy on a close level, but I couldn’t do that in a public school.”

He said the gas station is challenging and rewarding in both the teaching and business aspects. “The gas station is a new venture by TVC. We’re trying to make it break even. There’s been no new boom in business since TVC took over, but we have hope,” Ed said.

As for teaching the trainees who range in age from 17 to 24, Ed said, “I have all of mankind’s problems right there in my gas station. The situation forces you to be very practical when you’re working with slow boys. You can’t be intellectual, you have to be practical and that’s one area in which I had to grow myself. The boys sometimes have more knowledge of cars than I do, so I’m learning too.”

Ed Said he has not had any problems with customers

The boys will train six months at the service station then go to other stations to work. All of the trainees at the service station live with their families.

The Conleys treat the young men like family, Tilly said. Sometimes the boys will go out to a movie with them. Other times, one of the boys will baby sit.

Hope House, which opened in July 1969, is supported by the Hope House foundation.

Cooking is one of Tilly’s hobbies

Another favorite pastime is candle making, and she hopes soon to have her own candle workshop in the basement alongside a woodworking area Ed is building for himself and the boys.

“I like having an old house. I’m learning how to fix things,” he said, adding that he preferred the type of work he was doing now to teaching. He installed an intercom system in each room that facilitates waking everyone up in the morning. He’s also set up a donated pool table in a large central room upstairs.

The Conleys plan to stay at Hope House indefinitely. Both of them feel their work is rewarding.

Tilly, who receives \$60 a week salary, commented, “It’s nice to get paid for being a housewife.”