

Angels of Grace

Formal youth program comes to needy center at heart of northwest side

By **JOSEPH DITS**
Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND -- The Rev. Verneil Lewis spent lonely moments with the crumbled plaster of Grace Community Baptist Church.

He cried and prayed.

"God, you want me here?"

"Yes."

His tiny congregation of almost 30 members kept up with essentials, like heating bills that exceeded \$3,500 a month.

Some days were so chilly inside that the Gospel came out in visible puffs of steam.

Who could give up? Dozens of youths swarmed regularly into the gym and center, which at 749 Harrison Ave., sits in the heart of the city's near-northwest side.

Angels kept the building alive piece by piece -- hospitals replaced the boiler and roof, a generous person brought in plumbers.

The fixing never stops.

Now a nonprofit group called Ark Angels has introduced a youth program and is taking on the chore of finding help for the building's needs, but these angels need the community's help.

"Our goal is to begin to change the look of the center from the inside out," says Ron King, who founded Ark Angels four years ago. "If you feel like you're walking into a first-class place, it's going to change your whole attitude."



Ron King, founder of Ark Angels, now is serving as director of the Grace Community Center in South Bend.

Tribune Photo/MARK SHEPHARD

The group aims to take teenagers, turn them into mentors and tutors for younger kids, and then ask them to recruit and train other teen leaders. College students will help to lead the youth.

There's a part, too, in which adults will work with teenage moms, teaching them things about cooking (in the Grace kitchen) and life.

Child care will be available.

The program will keep track of students' progress in school and on the ISTEP test, King says.

Tutoring will begin late this month at the Grace Center and at the South Bend Housing Authority. King hopes to expand the program to other community centers, too.

Ark Angels this summer worked out kinks and gave older kids some practice in helping younger ones. King says about 125 kids took part.

On the dust of the Grace Center's concrete basement floor, where old tile has been scraped away, young girls snap their feet, clap and call out a routine they choreographed themselves. A small puddle of water sits nearby.

"Hey everybody, hey everybody, say hey, what's up? ..."

They giggle, sigh, improvise and repeat until their snaps and claps meet in jazzy rhythm.

"You have to be confident in yourself," 33-year-old Katrina Harris tells them. "You're a group but individually you have to know that you can get the job done."

What they learn is "working together, and it's hard," says one of the steppers, Valerie Hopkins, 11.

Clemisha Beard, 13, says the trials of teamwork have taught her to "stick together through hard times."

"It's better than being home, stuck out on nothing," says Katyiana Griffin, 11.

In another room, three 11-year-old boys swing their arms and fidget as they press their memories.

"Who are you?"



Young members of Ark Angels practice a step dance routine in the basement of the Grace Community Center in South Bend. They are, from left, Tynisha Purnell, Katyiana Griffin, Keisha Griffin, Clemisha Beard and Valerie Hopkins.

Tribune Photo/MARK SHEPHARD

To help Ark Angels

If you want to help Ark Angels at the Grace Community Center, call Ron King at (574) 904-1707. Money is always

