

by Deborah Schoch

Collegetown's Bank Wall may never be designated an historic landmark, but it remains a prominent fixture in Ithacan geography. Young people have traditionally converged outside First National Ithaca's Collegetown branch to sit on that wall and contemplate the Dryden Road scene. But while contemplation itself is harmless, wall-sitting can lead to more unsavory activities.

One local merchant--Triangle Book Shop owner Robert Johnson--has experienced such activities first-hand. On the evening of Aug. 29, Triangle's assistant manager walked down College Avenue to make a night deposit at First National. He was assaulted by an unidentified youth and chased up to Chef Italia before the youth fled empty-handed. Two weeks before, Triangle lost 11 pocket calculators to a thief entering through a ventilator shaft; a week earlier, an attempted robbery occurred at nearby Stuart's.

These incidents have not improved Collegetown's image, and many merchants view the Bank Wall as a breeding ground for juvenile crime.

Devising an alternative to the wall has thus become a major concern of two Collegetown agencies. Mainline, at 420 Sheldon Ct., is now exploring means of reaching and aiding local youth. Meanwhile, a recreation hall named Our Place has opened in the WVBR building at 227 Linden Ave.

Pinball Parlor

Our Place, an entirely youth-run concern, came into being as a pinball parlor. Last winter several high school students devised a plan for a recreation center catering to the needs of younger Collegetown regulars. Together they rented a small room on WVBR's first floor and brought in the pinball machines.

Financing, of course, was the greatest obstacle. Our Place barely made it through the spring months on pinball proceeds and donations from local organizations. The kids came, however, and a few faces disappeared from the crowded Bank Wall.

This summer, by popular demand, Our Place expanded to include a larger room in the WVBR building. Today it offers eight pinball machines, two pool tables, a snack bar, television and a collection of comfortable armchairs. Open from 2:30 to 10:30 p.m. on school nights and until midnight on weekends, the center is now frequented by young people from all areas of Ithaca.

On a recent Saturday night, close to 30 kids were pounding away at the pinball machines, watching TV, or simply hanging out to talk with friends. Pat Cozzarin, an Ithaca High School senior, manned the snackbar. He explained that the Our Place group consists mainly of "freaks," but that some "jocks" are stopping by. "They come up to Collegetown to get drunk," Cozzarin said, "but now they come here to play pinball."

No liquor or drugs are allowed on the premises. One high school sophomore leaned against the snackbar with a can of Schlitz in his hand. "Out with that," Cozzarin bellowed, and the sophomore disappeared, returning a moment later without the can. "Our Place," he commented with a wide grin, "is just trying to keep kids out of trouble."

"I'm really impressed with the way it's come off," said Rob Hamlin, another high school sophomore. "A lot of kids come who aren't even hanging out in the streets."

Hamlin explained that Our Place is only one function of Give Us a Chance, a corporation made up of area young people. Another division, Willing Workers Maintenance Company, finds temporary jobs for local kids who would otherwise be unemployed. Letters have been sent to local businesses, offering services ranging from yardwork to window-washing to the cleaning of completed

construction sites. A new Willing Workers Collating Service will begin operation this fall.

Jason Wittman, advisor and board member of Give Us a Chance, Inc., is clearly optimistic about the corporation's chances. "The structure is all here," he said. "All the kids have to do is plug into it."

A Cornell grad student in Community Service Education, Wittman once worked for Mainline and founded Alpha House in 1974. Although he was the "catalyst" behind Give Us a Chance--and often funded it out of his own pocket--he credits the kids with getting the project off the ground.

No Duplication

Over at Mainline, several staffers expressed admiration for Our Place and Wittman's initiative. "He's doing a part of what we wanted to do," said David Morrissey, a Mainline volunteer. "Still, there's enough kids in need of help up here that we're not duplicating each other's work." After five years as a Cornell-oriented drug counseling service, Mainline has begun widening its operation.

A year ago, Morrissey continued, Mainline reassessed its objectives and discovered that hard-core drug problems had dwindled: "We realized people weren't freaking out anymore, but there were a lot of kids with nothing to do...or doing something destructive." Then Mainline was approached by the Ithaca Youth Bureau and asked to work with local young people. Three Youth Bureau representatives had spent the summer of 1974 in Collegetown and they reported an upsurge of drug and alcohol abuse among junior high and high school students.

To cope with this upsurge, Mainline prepared a formal proposal for a Collegetown youth center. The proposal was passed in June by the Tompkins County Board of Representatives, but a suitable site failed to turn up after a summer-long search. Even so, Morrissey admitted, "a lot of the need is being satisfied by Our Place."

In the meantime, other youth-oriented plans have been put into action. Mainline operates in two capacities--as a crisis center and a long-term service--and both are increasingly geared toward young people. In the "crisis" category, the traditional hotline is still functioning from 7 to midnight, and more kids are making use of it. A hot-



"Sam Gould's"
Collegetown Store
Ithaca's Best