

Jason Wittman

# Young Man

## with a Mission

By SID MESIBOV

"Sometimes I find myself the monkey-in-the-middle."

The self-styled simian caught in the center is Jason Wittman and he was referring to his occasional role as an impartial mediator between parents and children, a role he finds very much in keeping with his philosophy that "the therapist should get out of the office and go to people rather than wait for people to go to him."

Wittman has been doing just that for the past few years, as many youngsters and parents will attest.

A Cornell graduate in Business Management at the Ag. School, Wittman had served for four years as a Lieutenant in the Air Force, worked in a glass fibre plant and is currently in Ithaca completing Master's requirements in Community Service Education. But the major part of his daily — and nightly — efforts are devoted to helping, counseling and guiding "people with hang-ups" and age is no barrier.

"I started at Main Line," he said. "Soon, it became obvious to me Ithaca needed a therapeutic community and I formed Alpha House. You see, I'm not a dogooder who hears about things that need doing and then plunges into them without any background of my own for reference. I've been through the hang-ups. Incidentally, the title 'dogooder' doesn't bother me at all although it's become a sort of synonym for a meddler. Well, if my kind of 'meddling' produces a positive result and helps someone, the name doesn't really matter."

He left Alpha House early in 1974 because "There was too much administration detail that took time away from what I thought I ought to be doing. I'm a people person; too much paper

work subtracted from my goal of immediacy which was to reach and talk to people when they needed it, not when it was convenient for me."

Where does he conduct his "business" these days?

"I'm on the street and I'm available," Wittman informed. "I often go around in a small blue panel truck and just park. Many kids know my 'office'. If I'm not in it, I'm somewhere close by and they find me."

What goes on when kids — and adults — seek him out?

"We just talk," he said. "I know the hassles of growing up and often it's a case of where-to-turn or what-to-do. I'm a resource person and I guide them to the proper facilities. I think this is necessary since kids, as a rule, simply won't go on their own initiative. They think there's some sort of stigma attached to seeking out agency help." He bit into a sandwich and gulped down some coffee.

"Ithaca has great facilities with marvelously trained and understanding people operating them," he went on. "But it seems to me that not enough people needing them go. What bothers many of them is the feeling that a clinic is a cold, impersonal place. They're really looking for a person to unload on. That's the role I see myself filling."

From his own experiences as a youngster on the streets of a city, Wittman takes a realistic look at today's dilemma about street groups. "You hear a lot about the generation gap," he mused. "It wasn't any different with today's parents when they were kids. They probably hung out with the gang much as kids do today because there was no other place to go. And today's youngsters will keep on doing it."

"Essentially, there's nothing

bad or wrong about it as long as it doesn't dissolve into vandalism and larceny and drugs. The peer group will always be with us; the problem is to work through the hang-ups before they get out of hand." For the past two years, Wittman has been conducting a therapy group at GIAC on Sunday nights and its membership spans all ages.

"It's for those who want to explore their own feelings about a lot of things," Wittman explained. "They can do this in an atmosphere of personality comfort. This is the first step toward remedial action. Believe me, they're an intense group and what they have to say and reveal comes from 'way down deep. This kind of integrity with one's self is what it's all about in the final analysis."

Wittman acts as "Chief Advisor" to GIVE US A CHANCE, INC., a non-profit corporation whose membership consists primarily of young people who have joined together to work towards finding creative and innovative solutions to some of the problems they experience.

"We're trying to establish an off-the-street facility in Collegetown where most youngsters congregate," he stated. "That area seems to be the focus for just hanging around. If the kids had a place in which to congregate, maybe some of the aura of tension and yes, danger, could be eliminated. The intense young man bolted down the rest of his sandwich and stood up."

"Well, thanks for listening," he said. "I'm due down at the corner of College and Dryden. Some kids have a problem and they want to talk it out." Somehow, I felt better knowing those kids would "Talk it out" rather than fight it out.