

ONLY HUMAN

Hope on the Bowery

By SIDNEY FIELDS

Three of the four are alcoholics, including Lucy, who is only 22. The fourth is John Tusa, an ex-jewelry polisher, who aches for them and thousands of others like them. The unwanted are legion.

Lucy has a few other problems: A slight case of epilepsy. She's pregnant and talks about "marrying the guy." As she tells it, she's been away from home since she was 17. Her father, who was a seaman, died two years ago. Lucy worked in a dress factory after school and when she finished school she worked full time as a seamstress. She married and was divorced. Her son, 1, and her daughter, 4, are now in foster homes. She came to the Women's Shelter seven months ago and has been hanging around the Bowery Residents' Committee since.

"I used to take pills," she said. "Ups and downs. Now it's drinking. But I've been dry for two days."

Margaret Grable, 46, a childless widow from Fort Wayne, Ind., came to the Women's Shelter last May. She said she's had a drinking problem, since she was 20. She used to work in restaurants. "Every time I started drinking I'd leave my job and take off."

There are a lot of women on the Bowery now. John Tusa, 39, director of the Bowery Residents' Committee, which claims to be the only effort down there run by Boweryites to help themselves, explained why: "Since 1970 the state's Mental Hygiene Department has been discharging patients from its institutions and every year about 12,000 hit the streets, scavenging out of garbage cans and holing up in doorways."

"And a lot of them with alcohol-related problems drift down to the Bowery," said George Adam, 55, who was doing all right in catering before he came to the Bowery six years ago. He's one of the founders of the Committee.

John was born and raised a few blocks from the Bowery and got to know its misery. He prospered as a jewelry polisher, returned to high school at night when he was 27, eventually earned a degree in sociology from CCNY and is a thesis away from his Master's.

He left his craft to become a housing relocation counselor, which was more to his liking. When a flop house was to be torn down to be replaced by a building for single Boweryites he found out what they needed by asking them, not the professionals.

"But the building was three years away," he said. "What about their immediate needs? They're 'bums' to everybody, missions, shelters, ambulance drivers, emergency room nurses. If they can make a flop house they're put out at 7:30 a.m. and can't return until 4 p.m., regardless of the weather. There are 50 to 100 aged transients, alcoholics, psychotics, drug addicts, homos, criminals, all crowded into one big dormitory room."

With 10 Boweryites and some money from foundations, which doesn't cover the costs, he started the Bowery Residents' Committee at 267 Bowery last October. Ironically, it's housed in what was once Sammy's Bowery Follies, whose call was "Come down and see



Lucy, Margaret Grable, John Tusa and George Adam in conference.

how the seedy side of life lives." It now has 40 active members, and another 70 drift in and out of the community center the committee set up as a refuge for them. The center is open seven days a week plus evenings. Alcoholics Anonymous meetings are held on Wednesday and Sunday evenings.

"This has made me take a U-turn in my life," George said. "The idea that we can help ourselves is a revelation. I didn't think it was possible."

The Committee established three workshops to train its members for jobs: General Repairs and Maintenance which has seven students, Food Services attended by five men and four women students, and Office Skills and Procedures with four men and four women. Five men are being trained as paraprofessional counselors.

"One has already been graduated and works for the Department of Social Services," John said.

Every day at 3 p.m., the trainees and 20 volunteers go out in teams of two to patrol the Bowery, tell them there's a center they can come to where they can get help, and give them emergency assistance if they need it.

"If they're on the sidewalk bleeding they're not always drunk," said George. "They've usually been mugged. In the winter they could freeze to death."

A psychiatrist is at the center once a week to give what help he can. Four student nurses from St. Vincent's Hospital go into the flop houses to give what aid they can.

"We try to reach them wherever they are," John said. "We can't wait for them to come to us. That's been the mistake down here."

Margaret Grable has finished her course in-office skills, "I'm job hunting," she said. "I can type and file." George, who's had a drinking problem for 15 years and has been dry for nine months, is a senior paraprofessional trainee. Lucy, who's in the Food Services class says she'll make it when she gets a job and gets her kids out of foster care.

"There's hope here," said John. "Even on the Bowery there's hope."

On his letterhead is printed, "If there's hope on the Bowery, there is hope for the world."