

New mission at The Mount

- Ending contracts with city agency
- Shifting focus to disabled, other programs

By PAUL M. McPOLIN
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

The Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto, is ending its 111-year tradition of providing refuge to New York City's orphaned, abandoned and abused children.

Father John C. Drumgoole's legacy of helping children will not be forsaken, however. The New York Archdiocese-controlled facility plans to shift its focus to new educational and recreational programs for all Staten Island kids and the opening of more campus residences for developmentally disabled children, adolescents and young adults.

"We will no longer be caring for the abandoned, dependent or neglected children of the city of New York," said Michael Drespel, who was named Mount Loretto's acting executive director in June. "We will be serving children in a different way. It's a new beginning. It's so important for people to know that we're going to continue to be there."

"We don't see this as an end to the agency," said Dr. John Brennan, president of the board of trustees. "We feel it is better for the youngsters and the community that we change our focus. It was not an easy decision."

The board's decision came after months of discussions among Mount Loretto administrators, the Archdiocese of New York, child welfare officials, the Board of Education, the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) and Borough Hall, Drespel said.

In a statement given to employees this morning, the board announced it had "decided to discontinue all of its Child Welfare Administration (CWA) programs under an orderly phase-out schedule."

Mount Loretto is currently contracted by the city and state to place 350 adolescents — referred by courts, child welfare agencies and families — in cottages on its 360-acre Pleasant Plains campus or in community-based foster, adoptive and group homes.

There are presently 101 young people living on campus under CWA contracts, 190 children in the foster boarding program and 67 adolescents in nine group homes scattered around the Island, Drespel said.

Under the new plan the Mission will no longer accept CWA referrals when its current contract expires July 1, 1995, Drespel said.

Management of the group and foster homes will shift to the CWA and its remaining social-services contractors, Drespel said. The location of the off-campus homes will remain the same.

The cottages on Mount Loretto grounds will be emptied for use by disabled clients, with current non-disabled residents gradually being placed in other programs.

Drespel said he envisions about 80 people referred by OMRDD living in small apartments on

campus by 1996. Currently there are 16 OMRDD residents on campus.

"We're going to move cautiously and sensitively on how we turn the place around so that children and their families are not adversely affected," Drespel said.

The trustees' decision represents a brave new world for "The Mount," which was established by Father Drumgoole in 1883 as a boys' orphanage. Even as the campus evolved from pastureland where 1,500 orphans grew food, raised livestock and made their own shoes to the highly specialized social-services center it is today, its primary mission to provide shelter for needy children remained intact.

Faced with dwindling referrals and the financial drain of maintaining a huge campus, Mount Loretto leaders said they felt the need to change course.

"The buildings are large, congestate-care buildings; they're old and they need a lot of renovation," Drespel said. "Hand in glove with that is the number of referrals are down. It's difficult to maintain a program if you don't have the oil that's going to turn the wheel. The less children we have, the less income we have."

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Observers wondered whether the Mount's leadership also weighed the fact that some of its residents — many of whom bear the emotional scars of being abused in drug-infested homes, a problem unknown in Father Drumgoole's day — had become extremely hard to handle. Recent years have brought reports of crime and violence linked to Mount residents, including allegations of bus robberies, burglaries and beatings.

Drespel denied such concerns entered the board's thinking, saying the Mount has been relatively calm the last two years. "There's no child that cannot be helped in some way, shape or form," he said. "We shored up our staffing. We haven't had major incidents." The new path is fraught with uncertainty. Administrators say their ambition is to turn the Mount into an educational, devel-

opmental and recreational center but acknowledge that none of the programs on their wish list are in place.

"As we begin to contemplate new programs, we do it with an eye toward preparing to enter the 21st century and responding to social needs," Drespel said.

Among the proposals being considered in very preliminary talks, Drespel said, are Head Start; a Beacon school, or school that also functions as a community center; afterschool recreation programs similar to the public system's latchkey; an expanded pre-school; an "inclusionary program" pre-school in which developmentally disabled students are placed in regular-education classes; day care; infant care; and partnerships with Bayley Seton Hospital — another Archdiocesan facility — to provide senior care and

nousing.

If the new programs — and their income — do not materialize, however, what will become of the Mount and its 360 acres? Observers have long theorized that the underutilized campus is ripe for development.

"I have contingency plans but

I'm not going to discuss them because I'm approaching this from a very positive point of view," Drespel said.

He stressed that the Archdiocese is not mulling selling any of the Mount's valuable real estate, which includes a rolling seaside meadow, ocean bluffs and

wooded, upland property.

The state has also expressed interest in acquiring some of this land for preservation purposes.

"We're going to be using our facilities," Drespel said. "We are not selling any land. We are going to use the land productively and creatively in line with Father

Drumgoole's ministry."

More than 300 union jobs also hang in the balance.

Drespel said many layoffs are not anticipated, claiming that most workers will fill other jobs that open as the transition in programs occurs. Others will be hired by social service agencies that absorb the Mount's caseload, he said.

Drespel said he envisions a smooth transition where case workers follow their cases.

The future of South Richmond High School, a Board of Educational-education institution on the campus where Mount Loretto residents comprise half the students, is not known.

Drespel said he hopes to have at least a few of the proposed programs in place by July 1, when the child welfare cases cease.

Borough President Guy V. Molinari said his office will try to help Mount Loretto map out its options by gathering information and providing funds.

Molinari said his deputy, James Molinaro, and chief of staff, Marilyn Haggerty-Blohm, got involved in discussions with Mount Loretto when "we became aware of the fact that they were going to change the use. We were mainly interested in trying to achieve some positive re-use of the grounds. There's been a lot of concern on the South Shore about the future use of Mount Loretto."

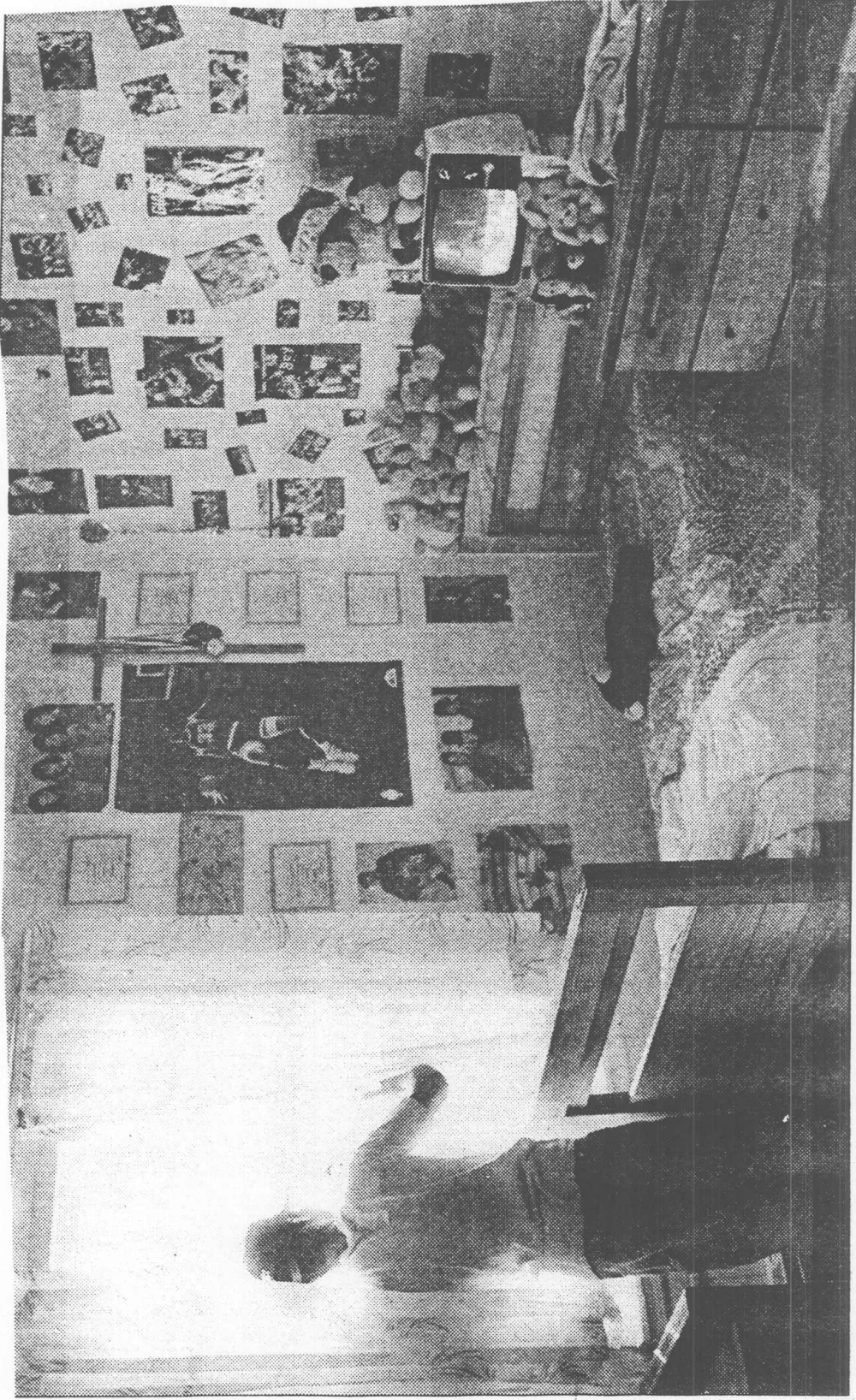
He suggested the Mount's gym, pool and sprawling fields could fill the void of youth recreational facilities on the South Shore. He advised the Mount to sit down with "professional planners" and devise a strategy.

CHANGES AT A GLANCE

Will no longer accept Child Welfare Agency referrals as of July 1, 1995

Cottages will be emptied for use by disabled clients

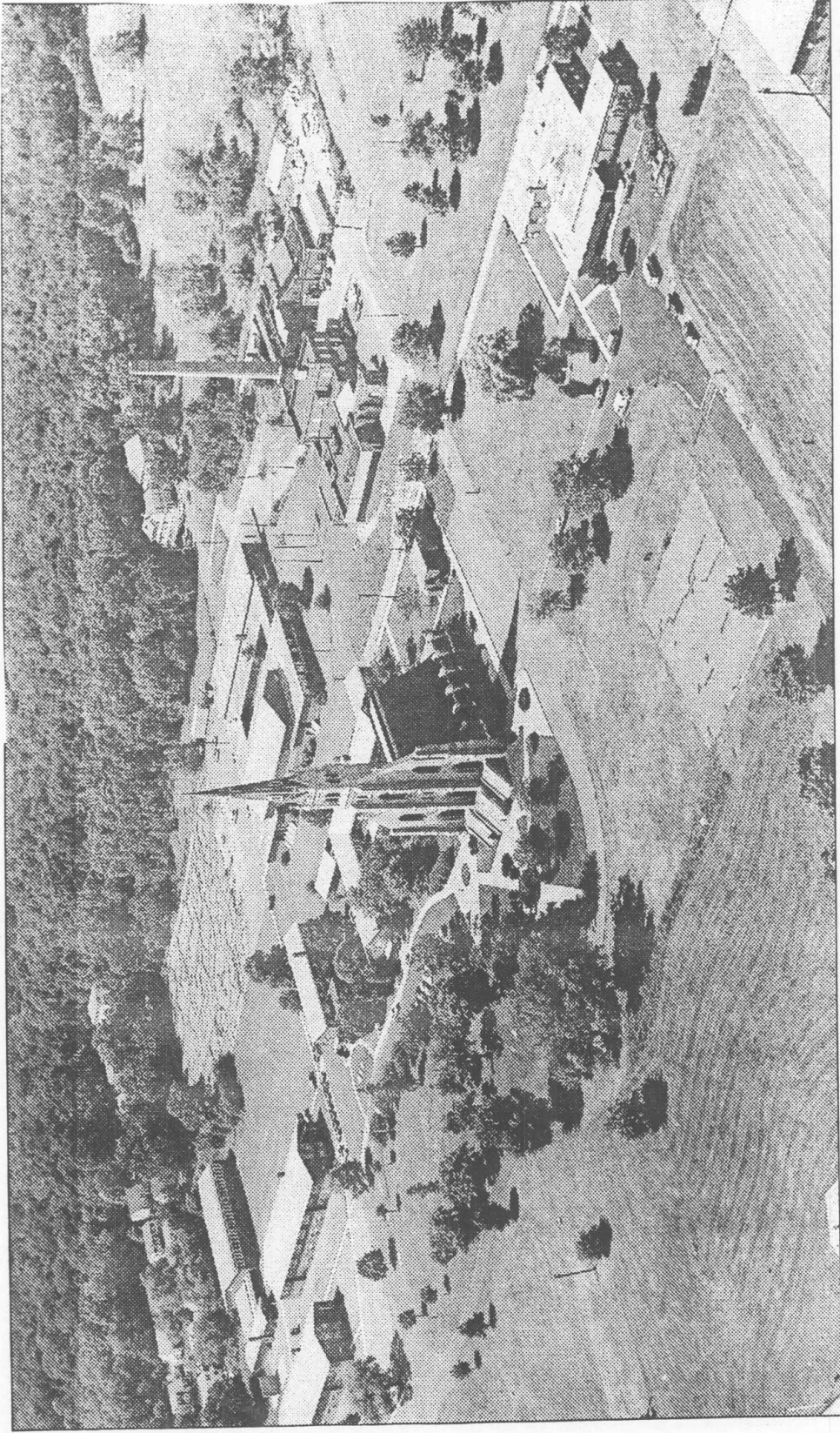
Current non-disabled residents will be gradually placed in other programs



ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

A young man looks out a window from his room at the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin in this 1991 photo.

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ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

The grounds of the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin.

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A short history of the Mount

By PAUL M. MCPOLIN
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Here is a map to a century of peaks and valleys at the Mount.

■ Thanksgiving Day 1883. The Rev. John Christopher Drumgoole, an Irish immigrant ordained at 53, opens a boys' orphanage on a 524-acre rolling seaside meadow in Pleasant Plains. The mission on the old Bennett farm is an outgrowth of the St. Vincent DePaul Society Newsboys Home in Manhattan, an orphanage for the new wave of homeless immigrant boys who survive by hawking newspapers.

■ March 11, 1888. "Father John" finds himself trapped in the worst blizzard in city history while trying to visit the sister mission in Manhattan. The priest is turned back in St. George for the long carriage ride back to Pleasant Plains. He dies two weeks later of pneumonia.

■ 1888. Father Drumgoole's successor, the Rev. James Dougherty, opens the mission to girls, housing them in an abandoned fisherman's hotel on the ocean side of the property. He also embarks on a building program that adds the four-story St. Elizabeth building, a dining hall and residential cottages.

■ 1891. The Church of Sts. Joaquin and Ann, the Mount's spectacular steeped centerpiece, is completed, built from a design chosen by Pope Leo XIII. The pews and much of the woodwork are crafted by the orphans, who comprise the workforce in what has grown into a small, self-sufficient city. They grow food, raise poultry and livestock and make their own clothing and shoes.

■ 1930s. The Mount continues to grow, its population peaking at about 1,500 during the Great Depression, when many New Yorkers are thrown into poverty.

■ World War II. More than 3,000 alumni serve, some returning to a small graveyard on the mission's grounds.

■ 1961. The dairy closes, symbolizing for many the end of the Mount's rural roots. At this point, however, the Mount has already changed. It is less an orphanage than a temporary shelter for about 700 children from broken homes.

■ 1971. The church is filmed for a scene in the movie, "The Godfather."

■ 1973. The church, save its stone facade and steeple, burns to the ground in a spectacular blaze that ignites in the boiler room.

■ 1976. The church is rebuilt, thanks in large part to a \$140,000 Island fund-raising drive led by the Advance.

■ 1979. The mission, forever adapting to the needs of the day's children, opens its doors to 100 Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, who are placed in foster homes and a group home in Clifton.

■ 1980s. The Mount is significantly smaller, both physically

and operationally. In 1979 it cedes a large parcel of land for the building of Resurrection Cemetery the following year. The number of on-campus residents shrinks to 300. The type of resident also changes. Most are now minorities, many abused or neglected, and some have developmental disabilities that require around-the-clock supervision.

■ 1990. Controversy erupts when charges of a gang-sex incident, later determined to be unfounded, land on the front page of a Manhattan tabloid. The Mount, the Archdiocese and the city are spurred to overhaul security, maintenance, staffing and programming.

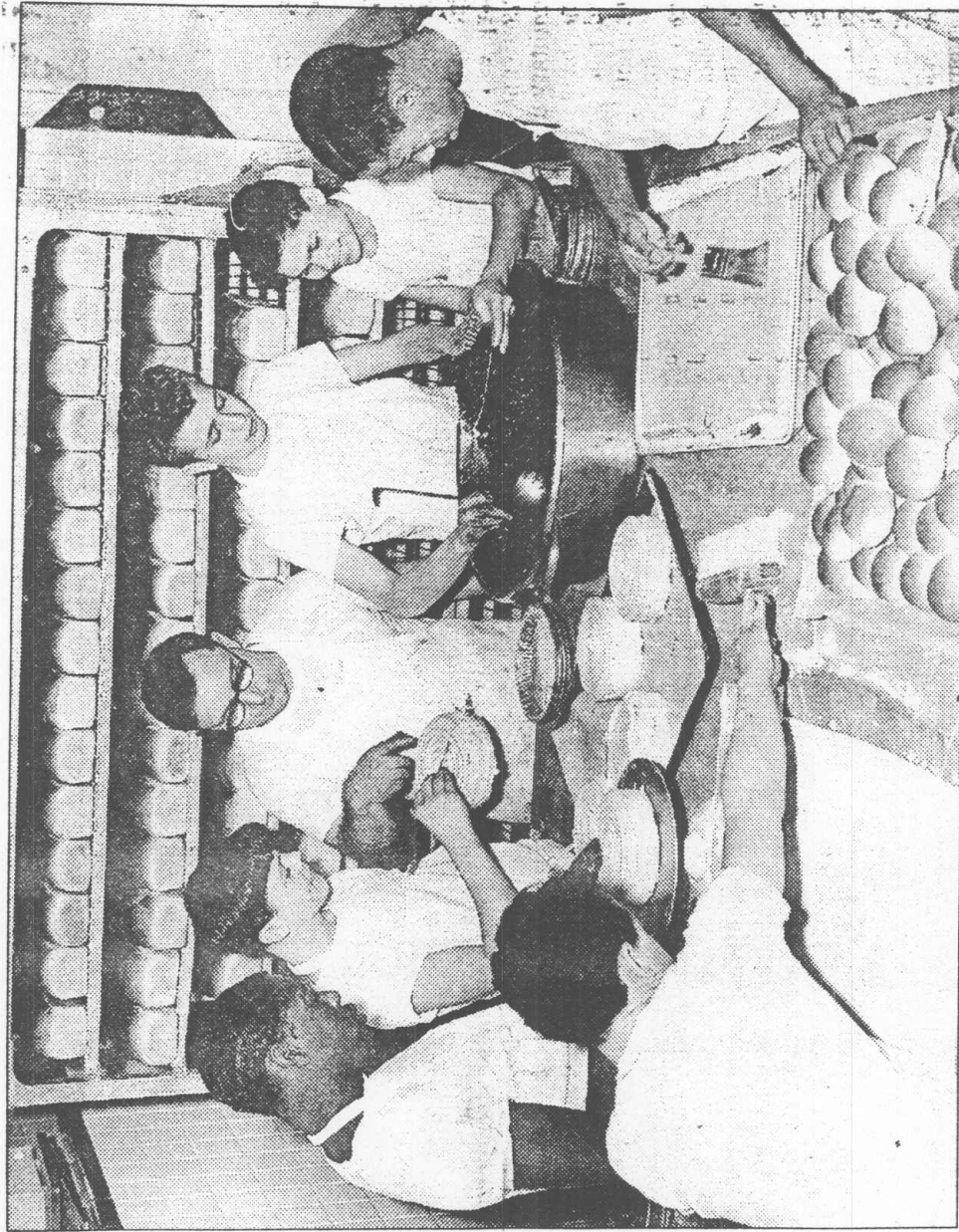
■ 1993. A Board of Education report shows South Richmond High School, a special-education facility on Mount grounds where Mount residents comprise 50 percent of the students, has the highest number of serious incidents of any Island school, including 27 assaults. Police reports of students assaulting kids from other South Shore high schools on city buses also surface.

■ June 1994. After 111 years of service to the Mount, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin leave. Their presence at the Mount has de-

clined steadily since the 1930s, when more than 80 nuns cared for Mount children.

■ Sept. 26, 1994. The Mount officially announces it will no longer take referrals from the city's Child Welfare Administration and its intention to phase out or transfer to other agencies more than 350 on-campus and off-campus residents to focus on educational, recreational and developmental programs.

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ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

An instructor leads a class in baking at the Mount in 1964.

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