

VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

Several weeks ago, in the city of Fort Wayne, Indiana, spring floods sent the waters of the three rivers which converge at that place over their banks. Part of the city was under several feet of water; other parts were threatened as the snowmelt continued, the rains fell, and the rivers crept to higher and higher levels.

The city put its men to work building sandbag levees to hold back the flood, and it looked, for a while, as though they might be successful, but as day after day passed, and the waters rose to new heights, the heaps of sodden bags of sand began to weaken. Areas of the city which had been protected were now dangerously threatened.

If the levees gave way, loss of life and property would skyrocket. It wasn't just the houses along the river that were now in danger; the entire city faced the possibility of inundation. Meetings were cancelled, schools were closed, homes were evacuated. Still the waters poured past and still they rose higher. The crest would come soon, perhaps in 36 or 48 hours.

The men working on the man-made dikes were by now exhausted. Trickle of water seeped through stacked bags of sand. Those trickles could become pouring torrents unless the levees were reinforced. Every foot must be monitored by day and night, the trickles blocked.

Then came the kids. Big ones and little ones, boys and girls, polite ones and fresh ones, dropouts, good students, poor ones, children of the well-to-do and those of the hard-pressed. They were energetic, sharp-eyed, determined and enthusiastic. Working together as though with months of training, the kids slogged through the cold, through the mud, under the lights strung at night, in the pouring rain; they turned their many hands to saving their city.

Some shovelled sand. Some filled bags. Some carried bags. Some pushed wheelbarrows. Some heaved the heavy sandbags into place, packing them against the weakened base, throwing them high on top to raise the level and hold back the water. Wherever they were needed, there were the kids.

Anyone in Fort Wayne will tell you that without those kids the disaster would have been far worse than it was. Together, they saved millions of dollars in flood devastation; no one can guess how many lives they saved.

They turned out by the hundreds, not because they would be paid for their efforts, but because they were needed. They didn't work hour after hour in the cold, through the night, in the mud, because they were forced to; they did the job because they wanted to. And they did it superbly.

The city of Fort Wayne will long remember that the children with their stout young bodies, their willing hands, their

spirit and energy, saved many square miles of land from the ravages of the flood.

It shouldn't take an emergency to waken us to the realization that, given a chance and good reason, kids can contribute as much good to their communities as it sometimes seems they do harm. The children at Fort Wayne are no different from children everywhere in this country.

Given responsibility, they accepted it, fulfilled it, and gained more than appreciation and gratitude in so doing. They gained self-respect and self-esteem. They learned a far better lesson in sportsmanship and teamwork in a matter of hours than they might ever have gained on playing fields.

Ninety per cent of the trouble with kids today (if there is trouble with them, and in many places there seems to be) is that they are given no meaningful part to play in society. All that's expected of them is school attendance, showing up for meals, and coming home nights at a reasonable hour.

And they have so much to offer, so much to give, so much worth our while to develop, especially while they are young, enthusiastic, tireless, and willing. And they are willing; the way they responded to the flood in Fort Wayne demonstrated just how eager young people are to respond when given important necessary roles to play.

Not every village, town, or city experiences emergencies like the flood at Fort Wayne, a fact for which we can all be thankful. Nonetheless, every place has its army of youngsters that poses problems for the community. There is mischief, vandalism, and crime, everywhere. Statistics indicate most of it is perpetrated by young people, people between the ages of 12 and 25.

Isn't it barely possible that meaningful work could put idle hands to constructive use? If those fertile minds could be called upon to improve society rather than destroy it, wouldn't we all benefit? As it is, the unchannelled energies of children are wasted; worse than wasted, because those energies find outlets in wrong-doing in many instances... not because kids are bad but because kids are bored.

And adults would be bored, as well, were they to feel non-contributory, be given no outlet for building experience, no recognition for the good things they are able to accomplish. Kids respond in the same way older people do when given the same opportunities.

Is it Utopian to believe we might learn a vital lesson from the experience of Fort Wayne, and those kids, when the flood came?

Most kids would like to participate more in adult activities. Most would like jobs, to earn money. Child-labor laws prohibit that. Perhaps it's time those laws were relaxed. Already our unemployment figures are approaching ten per cent? That won't last forever. The minimum wage requirements preclude paying decent wages for untrained help? Those, too, with adequate pressure, can be changed so that adolescents can participate in the adult business world.

No law of this land is cast in concrete. But no change will be made unless people demand it. Children are permitted to work for less than minimum wages in family-owned enterprises. How did that exception come about?

This is not to advocate putting kids into sweatshops; quite the contrary. But the earlier children learn they can earn the respect of adults, the sooner they seek respectability; the

sooner they find they are valued for more than their charming personalities, the quicker they learn to make valuable contributions to society.

Let's take what lessons are to be learned from Fort Wayne and build on them. If kids are vandalizing cemeteries, for instance, let's get kids involved in the care of memorials to our dead, open the books to them, give them reasons to be concerned with maintaining cemeteries. If schools are being destroyed by children, let's teach them the economic facts about schools, make protection of school property a part of their responsibilities-- not as punishment, but rather as problem-solving devices and as part of their education.

If kids want a community building, let's involve them in the planning and the actual work; the construction, the painting, the furnishing, the decorating. If the results aren't quite up to professional standards, why not let the children have it their way anyhow, so they may have pride in their own efforts? Sure, we can help with the financing; but no youngster will ruin things he's put his own effort, sweat and energy into creating.

Busy hands are happy hands. And our children's hands are idle.