

Street wisdom

Young outreach worker hits the ground to aid Hub's homeless kids



STAFF PHOTOS BY MATTHEW WEST
LISTENING POST: Outreach worker Desirée Allen, left, talks with one of the many homeless teens who congregate daily in Harvard Square.

By CARA NISSMAN

Hip-hop music blared from a boombox as a half-dozen youths visiting from Harlem break danced in shiny red costumes in exchange for money one afternoon last week in Harvard Square.

Another ragtag group of young adults sat just inside the entrance to the Red Line T station with their backs to the raucous performers, sporting punky threads and easy smiles. They held an old book open to a blank page on which they'd written "Best Friend \$1.00."

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In the middle stood Desirée Allen, a tall, slim young woman with cropped dark hair, checking on the T stop crew of kids.

"Nice sign. How've you been?" Allen said to a teenage girl with thick black eye makeup, ripped, black-and-white tights and a T-shirt declaring "Ignore me and I'm yours." "What's going on?" Allen added.

"We've made \$10!" the 16-year-old girl said, grinning. "We're going to Uno's for all-you-can-eat night."

Allen visits these and other homeless and runaway youths as an outreach worker for Bridge Over Troubled Waters Inc. The program was founded to aid the countercultural young people who collected on the Boston Common in the late 1960s.

"Street work is really the backbone of the agency," said Genny Price, executive director of Bridge. "Street workers are on the cutting edge of what's happening on the streets. They're like the canaries of the coal mine. We can tell about



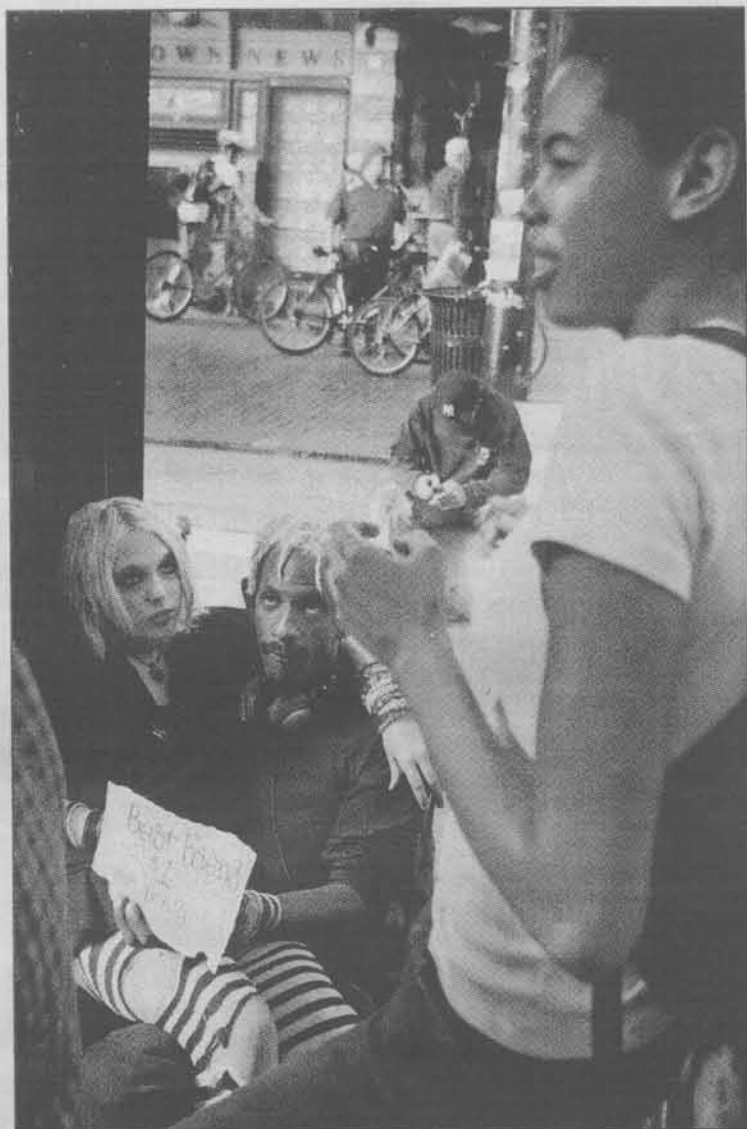
DESIRÉE ALLEN

three to five years before social services about what's happening" regarding drugs and diseases.

Every weekday from early afternoon to 10 p.m., Allen walks around Boston and Cambridge to check on youths who, for numerous reasons, lack traditional homes. She goes armed with a book of resources available (dental care, counseling) and a sensitive ear.

"I just listen and be supportive," she said. "I don't act like I know what's best for them. I make it very clear that I'm not a trained counselor, but I can tell them where to find one."

Allen usually hits hot spots, including Copley Square, Harvard Square and Boston Common, but she takes detours a couple of times a week to find out if there are new hangouts. She also watches for new faces.



SIGN OF THE TIMES: Allen says her job as an outreach worker is to offer support, not lectures, to the Hub's troubled youths.

"It's important to interact with runaways within the first week they're outside the home," she said. "It's really critical. They may not want help now, but they'll know there's an agency out there to help them if they ever do."

Allen, who said she has never felt unsafe on the job, often comforts youths after they've experienced setbacks. Last week, she talked with a homeless girl who lost her job partly because of her multiple piercings.

"People should accept you for who you are," the youth said.

"They should, but sometimes they don't," Allen softly replied.

Allen, who grew up in Boston, became interested in marginalized youths as a teen volunteering in Paraguay. She studied international relations at Stanford University, and returned to Boston after graduation to do outreach full-time.

Her career as a street outreach worker began last January on a day a blizzard buried Boston.

"It was the worst winter ever and I was thinking, 'Oh my gosh, what have I done?!' " she said. "But I stayed out there. There were really only a few kids, but I wanted to make them understand to what extent I'd be there for them. For a lot

of kids, it's not a choice."

Since then, Allen has built relationships with several kids on the street. One 20-year-old in Harvard Square lauded her efforts.

"I trust her," she said. "A lot of street workers come out here and some of them have no idea. They think they can come out here and solve all our problems. But she's willing to meet us where we're at. She's not judgmental at all."

"You learn quickly that there are no easy answers," said Allen, whose Arabic tattoo on the back of her neck means "conscious."

Allen's youth — she's 23 — sometimes can hinder her work.

"It's sometimes hard," she said, after a visit to Copley Square at dusk with some youths who playfully call her "Stilts" because of her height. "You hope when you're approaching a kid that you don't seem like you're being too presumptuous. You don't want them to be like, 'Here's this young person telling me what to do.' "

But mostly she connects with the kids, even when they break her heart.

"Sometimes it's really hard to see a kid in pain when you know the source of it is a lot deeper than you can fix," she said. "Sometimes, I feel helpless."