

# Finishing up

## Unusual school here to graduate 1st class

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A dozen students will receive their "Senior High Accommodation Program" diplomas next month as the first full-fledged graduating class from Tucson Unified School District's most bizarre high school.

The school is an old red brick house on the corner of the Tucson High School football practice field, 350 S. Campbell Ave. It has been open for 10 years and about 600 students have passed through its doors. However, it has no football team, no prom — and no graduation ceremonies.

"Not as long as I'm here," Principal Clyde Tidwell said of such a ceremony. "Rituals dehumanize people. Why do you think kids show up in gowns with nothing on underneath and throw firecrackers? They're trying to show their individuality."

Tidwell isn't your everyday principal and the "accommodation program" isn't your run-of-the mill school.

Tidwell, a 23-year veteran in TUSD schools, has made a career out of working with students no one else could reach. There have been kids like:

—Monte, who when asked to do a little creative writing, told how he wanted to kill his mother. "His father beat the hell out of her," Tidwell said, "and he didn't respect her because she wouldn't stand up to him (the father)."

After some counseling, Monte told how

he had been considering killing his father also.

—Thomas, a current student who has been kicked out of Vail, Naylor, Carson and Doolen junior high schools for fighting — either with teachers or other students. He liked the accommodation program "because you don't have to do nothing and you still get credit for it."

—Former runaways, kids on probation, girls who have been beaten and raped by their fathers or other family members. There are others who are running from something — often gangs they have alienated at their home schools. One girl told of being knocked unconscious on the way to school — and of being dragged out of a classroom by other students — before she found a sanctuary in the accommodation program.

All, for whatever reason, were administrative nightmares in their regular high schools. They often respond by saying no one would listen to them, or no one cared. TUSD administrators call them "drop-outs" or "prospective dropouts." Tidwell calls them "flush outs."

"These kids are hated," Tidwell contended. "I get calls from principals saying 'Get that little son-of-a-bitch out of here.'"

"Most educators are actively involved in flushing kids out of the school system."

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he added. "If a student has an 'X' problem but the school is only equipped to handle 'B' problems, the kid doesn't have a chance. These kids can't concentrate on algebra or conjugating verbs with this kind of turmoil inside them. You have to get involved in the personal lives of the students."

Tidwell does that — in a setting that looks like democracy in education run amok.

The students filter in, usually in groups, at various times during the morning. They mill around, smoking and talking. Some of them settle down to what student teacher Connie Knight, in a report she was doing for the University of Arizona, called "mentation and mobilization."

Then students group together with teachers to whom they have been assigned. The 45-plus students are divided among Tidwell, Thomas Anderson, Linda Kohnken and Susan Breitbart, who handles students with diagnosed learning disabilities.

Their "class" might involve sitting around on chairs and desktops with Anderson, discussing a play they hope to write — and later watching actors from Matrix, a drug abuse agency, improvise a drama. It might be making stained glass with Ms. Breitbart, or sitting on the grass with Ms. Knight and John Casciato, the aide, reading poetry and sharing poetry the students have written.

On another day a group might watch a 1960s-vintage film on drug abuse called "The Viper Pit" Most are street-wise enough to know the plot (a high school athlete who gets hooked on heroin after smoking a marijuana cigarette) and jeer at it.

At the accommodation program they don't have to be polite. They can jeer, cuss and argue with the teacher without getting into trouble.

But they can't get by with violence or any hint of it.

Tidwell's philosophy is strictly humanist and non-violent. "I've never seen any good come from punishment in any form," he said.

"The violence in our culture is phenomenal," he said. "Football is our most massive sport. Child abuse, particularly fathers to daughters, is widespread.

"I'm going to be criticized, I know, but I can't understand what the hell schools are doing spending money on sports like football when we have enough encouragement to do violence."

The kids Tidwell deals with are no strangers to violence. Last year, a student spent most of a morning pacing outside the building. A baby he had sired had died in a fire allegedly set by the mother's then-boyfriend. The student vowed, "I've got to off (kill) him. He killed my baby."

Another youth and his friends ran a "protection racket," extorting money from elderly South Side residents.

"I was asked once how I felt when students came in here and said they were going to kill somebody. I said if I let it bother me every time I heard that, I'd be in an institution myself."

So what has Tidwell done for the stu-

dents? Until this spring, only four have graduated — two last year and two the year before.

For some, time and counseling has meant a return to their regular high school, a General Equivalency Diploma, enrollment in a job-training program, the Army, or just a job and an escape from a destructive home environment. Those who graduate from the accommodation program receive a regular 20-credit diploma.

Testing, Tidwell admitted, is very subjective. He said, however, that it is no different from that given by any other school. The teaching staff provides tutoring — individually or in small groups — in mathematics and other basic skills. Gordon Palmer, a non-paid volunteer who is a certified mathematics teacher, said what he teaches "is basic remedial math, something like you get in freshman classes at the University of Arizona."

Some accommodation program students take courses at Pima College (one youth has a full freshman load) and others are enrolled in trade schools.

They also do a lot of reading. The library looks like a cross between a discarded textbook warehouse and a used paperback bookstore. There are always newspapers and newsmagazines. The trick, Tidwell said, is just getting the students interested in reading.

"It's the same here as any library — the books they like are the ones they steal," he said. "The books that stay on the shelves aren't doing any good."

Now that the school is gaining some respectability, Tidwell has bigger plans. He'd like to see an \$80,000 addition built and another teacher (preferably a science teacher) hired. The addition would have to be part of a future bond proposal. The request for another teacher is in the tentative budget, but TUSD faces an \$8 to \$10 million deficit next year unless the board cuts the district staff.

There is always a student waiting list, and last year Tidwell was told to let the enrollment expand to 75. However, in January, when the student body numbered close to 60, the word came down to cut back by attrition (the school has a 20 percent dropout rate) to 40 students.

The reason was a belt-tightening effort because of a near-million-dollar deficit in the current TUSD budget. Tidwell considers the move false economy.

"If these kids aren't in school here they won't be in school anywhere," he said. "The district loses \$10 a day (in state aid) every day one of these students isn't in school.

"Besides, when they're on the streets they keep a lot of police, judges and probation officers busy."

TUSD officials are basically supportive but uncertain what should be done with the program in the future.

"It gets back to what is expected of the public schools — I'm not sure how much of this kind of intensive counseling we should be doing," said school board Chairman Eva Bacal.

"It's certainly a high priority program, but I don't want it to get too big," said Charles F. Grubbs, regional assistant superintendent.

"The reason for the program's success is its small size. To expand it too much would destroy it."