

Edison: Camp Kilmer Job Corps works to end its reformatory image

By SUSAN K. LIVIO
Home News staff writer

HN
02/17/91

EDISON — Its offices occupy the aging Camp Kilmer barracks the U.S. Army once used while preparing soldiers for war. The place resembles a prison camp.

Although it was designed to educate and train poor, inner-city youths in hopes of improving their lives, neighbors view the Job Corps Center on Plainfield Avenue as some kind of reform school.

Center officials and students say they are trying to change that negative image through public relations initiatives, community involvement, volunteer projects, and even improving the aesthetics of the center.

"This is not a prison," said Andrew Choffo, director of human resources at the center. "Many people don't know that."

Some 385 young men and women between the ages of 16 and 24 are currently enrolled at the center. Forty of them live at the center. Many are referred through welfare or other social

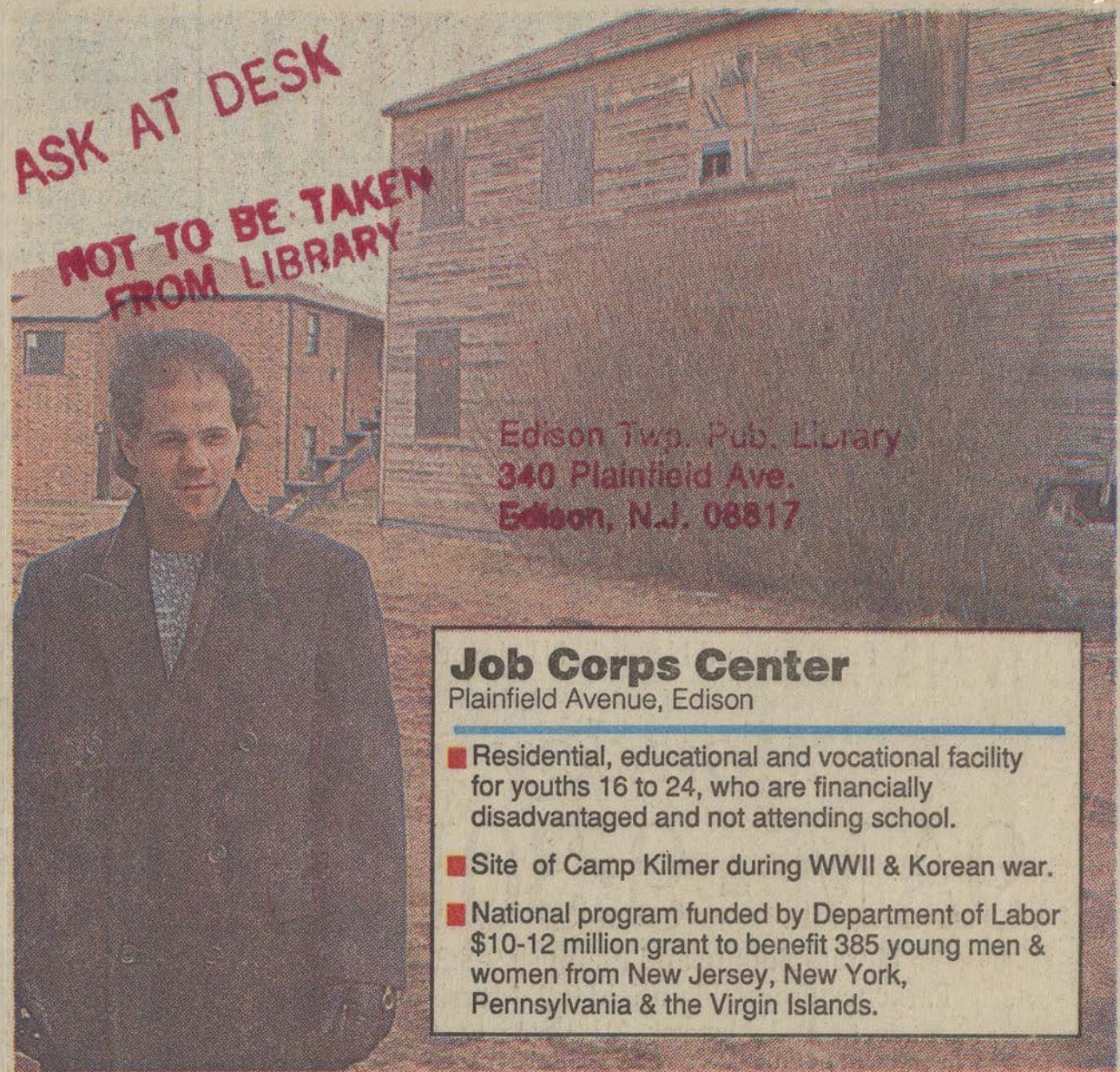
service agencies. Youths who are dependent upon public assistance and those who are high-school dropouts are eligible to join the center, one of nine such centers nationwide, Choffo said. The center in Edison serves the New Jersey-New York region, parts of Philadelphia, and the Virgin Islands.

All the youths at the center are on track to receive high school diplomas, learn a trade and get a job, Choffo said. The students may be trained in carpentry, nursing, word processing, accounting, brick masonry, plumbing or another profession, he added.

Some students live at the center because "their homes are just not conducive to education," Choffo said. "In some homes there is abuse and drugs, but I'd have to say the majority come from a loving environment" that still would offer them little alternative but to drop out of school and work.

But for all its admirable goals, "Job Corps has always had the same reputation associated with a toxic waste incinerator or a homeless shelter — public outcry," Choffo said.

See **CORPS**, Page A6



Job Corps Center

Plainfield Avenue, Edison

- Residential, educational and vocational facility for youths 16 to 24, who are financially disadvantaged and not attending school.
- Site of Camp Kilmer during WWII & Korean war.
- National program funded by Department of Labor \$10-12 million grant to benefit 385 young men & women from New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania & the Virgin Islands.

Marc Ascher/The Home News

Job Corps Human Resources Director Andrew Choffo emphasizes the center is not a prison. It will look less like one when the old barracks are razed this spring.

CORPS

HIS
02/17/91

Continued from Page A1

Edison: Camp Kilmer

Neighbors have complained of break-ins, incidents of vandalism and other petty crimes. Rightly or wrongly, they point to the center as the source of the trouble.

Township police say all those crimes cannot be traced to the center, although some have. In 1985, police were called to the center to deal with several cases of arson there.

Turnover in security personnel was high for many years — guards often found they could not deal with problems at the center. Until a few years ago, when new security management came on board there, police were unwelcome — but regular — visitors.

Just over 25 years after President Lyndon Johnson christened the Edison center as an example of his "Great Society" agenda, the center's staff is trying new ways of fulfilling that initiative — trying to present a positive image of young urban kids doing something productive with their lives.

The staff is wearing more casual-looking clothing instead of uniforms, for instance. The boarded-up, empty barracks fronting Plainfield Avenue will be torn down in the spring. And the center's staff is arranging with local non-profit groups to put students' Job Corps training to use — repairing senior citizens' homes, for example.

Still, the center's negative image continues to frustrate students enrolled at Job Corps, who say they are working hard to make a future for themselves. Roscoe A. Hinson, 23, president of the student government council at the center, says he and his peers are tired of the reputation.

"Oh, you're from Job Corps," people will say to me, like I'm something bad," Hinson said he is initiating a "Positive Peer Pressure Group" designed to help patrol the grounds and counsel peers.

"We have pride, and more than ever we have students here who want to see a change," Hinson said.

"We just want to be accepted," said Choffo. "All we need is a chance and the kids will shine."

Improvements in community safety are already apparent, police say.

"Security at Job Corps is better than it used to be," said Police Lt. Charles Salvemini, head of the department's patrol division. Salvemini attributed the change to Alvin Lotts, security director for the center since 1987.

"Before (Lotts), it was like an island, with only the police con-



Marc Ascher/The Home News

Job Corps student Tamika Osacar of Vineland, left, learns from union carpenter Dale Gibson in a pre-apprenticeship program.

cerned about what went on there. That is just not the case anymore," Salvemini said. "The level of cooperation has so intensified, it has made a 180 degree reversal. If he (Lotts) has a bad apple over there, he wants it out of the barrel right away."

Lotts said the problems have not gone away, however — nor does he expect to wipe them out completely. "You'll have problems when you get 300 or 400 kids together breathing the same air. But most of the kids here are pretty smart — with a few knuckleheads mixed in," Lotts said.

Lotts compares the center to an urban public high school — with more discipline. If a student is guilty of an offense — fighting, possessing marijuana or stealing, for instance — the student's parents may be notified, and a review board will decide punishment. Drug- or alcohol-related incidents may prompt a session with a drug or mental health counselor on staff, Lotts said. Police are called for repeat offenders or for students found with large amounts of drugs.

Center officials have also opened a student store on campus. Shuttle buses run to malls, flea markets and other places. Visitors are restricted; ex-students must have prior approval before returning, Lotts said.

Most of the conflicts between students are usually verbal disagreements — a natural reaction with the mixed cultures — which include youngsters from the Virgin Islands, blacks, whites and Hispanics, Lotts said. One such "disagreement" led to a melee in 1989, which

resulted in the suspension of 13 students from the program, Lotts said.

Cultural education and awareness programs have been instituted to help students learn more about each other, and to increase tolerance, Lotts said.

The programs are working, Lotts said, but "the community has always been reluctant to find out more about the center." Through a community luncheon Feb. 7, the center began to reach out to local business owners to encourage them to hire center graduates, or to take advantage of the free services students offer.

Local businessman and activist Peter Cerrato has enlisted the help of Job Corps students to work during elections, registering 330 students in the process, he said.

Students also have volunteered to help build equipment for the "Just Say No Association of the Society of American Magicians," said Martin Lebowitz, a spokesman for the Edison-based group that stages magic shows for non-profit groups.

While the center staff strives for an image boost, the students are encouraged to keep their minds on their goals — to graduate, receive a diploma, get a job. "For a lot of these kids, this is their only home," said Gloria Jefer, the center's basic education supervisor. "Just because they failed in high school, doesn't mean they have to fail in life."

Edison: Camp Kilmer

Camp Kilmer: a good soldier

'War on drugs' the latest order for Edison site with historic past

By **JOAN GALLER**
News Tribune Staff Writer

NT 6/19/89

Wars have been fought for decades from Camp Kilmer. Some continue today, quietly.

World War II gave rise to the sprawling installation ... which was pressed into service during the Korean War ... sheltered Hungarian freedom fighters ... aided Lyndon B. Johnson's war on poverty ... and more recently, the nation's

war on homelessness.

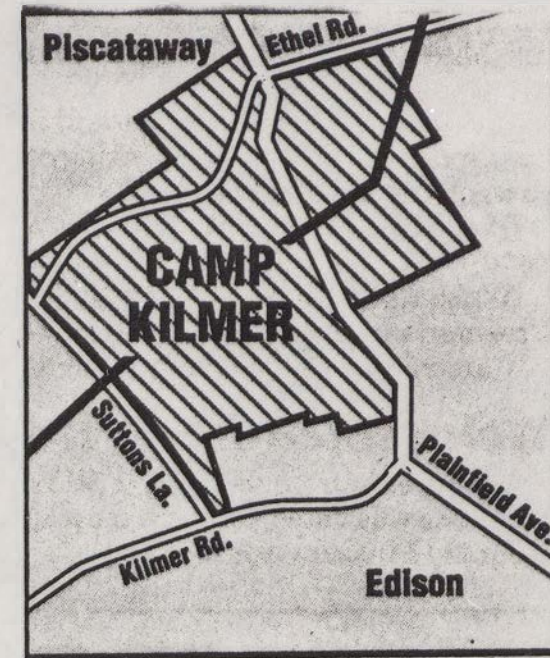
The latest offensive — an offshoot of the nation's war on drugs — was proposed last week when Middlesex County Prosecutor Alan A. Rockoff issued a call for creation of a minimum-security work camp for drug offenders.

The boot camp would serve as an alternative to crowded jails and give youthful offenders an opportunity, possibly their last, to break out of the inter-

locking cycles of poverty and drug addiction, Rockoff says.

Though his plan has evoked enthusiasm and skepticism in diverse quarters, and its realization is being debated, the very proposal presents another possible metamorphosis for Camp Kilmer, which has played a role in so many historic events of the 20th century.

Actually, most of 1,573-acre Camp
See **KILMER** Page A-2



JEFFERY COHEN/The News Tribune

NOT TO BE TAKEN
FROM LIBRARY

Edison Twp. Pub. Library
340 Plainfield Ave.
Edison, N. J. 08817

ASK AT DESK

ASK AT DESK

NOT TO BE TAKEN
FROM LIBRARY

Edison Twp. Pub. Library
340 Plainfield Ave.
Edison, N. J. 08817

Kilmer gearing for another war, this time on drugs?

Continued from Page A-1

NT 6/19/89

Kilmer was given away or sold by the federal government in the mid-1960s, and now supports Rutgers' Livingston College and medical-science complex on Busch Campus; a county vocational-technical school, private industrial park and regional U.S. postal center; and a state-run Job Corps Center program.

But land off Plainfield Avenue on Edison's border with Piscataway and South Plainfield wasn't always a hub of academic-commercial activity, or the focal point of controversy.

Just a hundred years ago, the region was sparsely populated, rich with farms and verdant woods, and notable only for a small tract set aside as a "poor farm" for the county's indigent.

The last of that bucolic serenity was shattered forever in 1942 by the marching cadence of soldiers, the first of 5 million soldiers who trooped through Camp Kilmer's portals en route to the European and African theaters of World War II.

By June 1, 1942, just months after the federal government had acquired some 1,500 acres which straddled Edison and neighboring Piscataway, the camp began welcoming the first wave of GIs, men and women, who would be processed there starting in June 1942 and would ship out via New York harbor.

A crew of 11,000 civilians toiled at a frenetic pace to erect 1,100 two-story wooden barracks, a 1,600-bed hospital, dental clinics, mess halls, a post exchange,

five theaters, and a 10-ton incineration plant.

Initially called the Stelton Staging Area, the military installation was quickly renamed in honor of New Brunswick-born poet Alfred Joyce Kilmer, who penned the immortal poem "Trees" before dying in France, a sergeant in World War I.

In 1950, after just a year under inactive status, soldiers resumed streaming through the gates, bound for duty during the next three years in the Korean War.

Less than three years after the war ended, Kilmer was unofficially and temporarily renamed "Camp Mercy" in 1956, when its gates were flung open to provide refuge to roughly 32,000 Hungarian freedom fighters who fled their native land after Soviet tanks crushed their 1956 attempt to overthrow foreign domination.

For seven months, from November 1956 to May 1957, the camp bustled with activity as planeload after planeload of refugees airlifted by U.S. military transport under Operation Safe Haven were reunited with relatives or friends, or assisted in starting new lives all over the United States.

Richard M. Nixon, then vice president under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, was among the high-ranking officials who visited the barracks to welcome the newcomers who had been admitted under special immigration legislation.

Taps officially sounded for Kilmer as a military post in 1963 when Congress declared most of the property surplus and approved the sale for non-military use.

There was an immediate scramble for the land.

Under federal rules, lands to be used for recreational or educational purposes could be obtained free from the General Services Administration.

Rutgers University emerged the major victor in the first round, acquiring 540 acres to expand its campuses.

Livingston College, the Busch Campus which supports a medical-science complex, and the Rutgers Athletic Center now stand on those prized parcels.

The Army retained 300 acres for its 78th Division Reserves, but later cut that amount significantly, giving portions away for municipal or county uses.

Edison and Piscataway dueled, at times between themselves and often against Middlesex County and private developers, for huge portions of the remaining properties.

Edison submitted various bids to acquire as much as 500 acres for future lucrative industrial ratables.

The township also acquired free, smaller tracts for municipal, educational or recreational uses.

Private developers purchased roughly 500 acres, which later gave rise to the a number of ventures, including the Sutton/Kilmer Industrial Complex, home to a number of large corporations. The Kilmer Postal Facility and a state motor-vehicle agency also rose on Kilmer property.

By the mid-1960s, the faded paint on the deteriorating barracks was peeling when federal authorities designated the

diminished Camp Kilmer for a role in President Johnson's war on poverty.

Johnson's blueprint for a "Great Society" called for creation of the Job Corps, a nationwide program to provide skill training and remedial educational opportunities for the nation's underprivileged youth at a rate of 40,000 a year.

In 1965, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey officially opened the center in Edison, one of 140 across the U.S.

Between 1965 and 1969, when the Nixon administration cut off the program, some 14,500 young men had enrolled in the Kilmer program but only a third graduated. The operation soon found itself among 59 Job Corps centers targeted for shutdown, ostensibly because of its poor track record.

Proponents of the cuts argued that they would save taxpayers \$100 million annually, and that enrollees could transfer to the remaining centers in other states.

But the outcry which attended the Kilmer Corp.'s demise promptly resulted in creation of alternative training programs sponsored by New Jersey, funded by the federal government, and operated with help from the private sector.

Though the training program has changed its name over the past 20 years, it still survives today as the New Jersey Job Corps Center, with a smaller enrollment of roughly 300.

Today, the program is a joint effort of the U.S. Labor Department, the New

Jersey Human Services Department, and ITT Job Training Services.

The latest battle successfully waged on Kilmer's soil involves the homeless — once an urban issue, but one that now touches all levels of society.

Middlesex County officials started eyeing empty barracks still standing at the government-owned section of Camp Kilmer in the mid-1980s as a possible year-round shelter.

It took three years of negotiations and Congressional legislation under a 1982 law that permits the Defense Department to lease surplus property to host states, but Middlesex County emerged victorious with a national first to its credit in gaining acceptance of its plan.

Two weeks ago, the Ozanam Family Shelter moved from temporary quarters in Edison to Camp Kilmer, relocating 74 people, mostly children, to a new, safer, year-round dwelling. It is Middlesex County's principal refuge for homeless women and families, and is operated under contract by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Metuchen.

The county received \$1.1 million from the U.S. Economic Development Administration and Defense Department aid to create the 100-bed shelter.

There are 38 more beds than previously available when Ozanam used facilities at the county's Kiddie Keep Well Camp at Roosevelt Park in Edison.

JOBS

Edison:

CAMP
Kilmer

Continued from Page B1

HN 8/13/87

man, who is heading Gov. Thomas H. Kean's program to reform the state's welfare program, said yesterday the Job Corps is one way to help break the growing cycle of poverty that an increasing number of urban black and Hispanic children are being born into.

"My biggest concern is for children and young people, because one out of every four kids born in New Jersey will live some of their lives in poverty," said Altman, who attended the open house.

Enrollment in the tightly-structured Jobs Corps program is voluntary and a large number of the street-wise youths drop out of the program shortly after arriving. The early wakeup hours — 6 a.m. — and early lights-out hours — 10:30 a.m. — are a dramatic change for teen-agers used to spending many late hours in the streets, said Highsmith.

At the center, the students, who range in age from 16 to 21, can earn a high school diploma while they are trained for careers in the clerical, construction, health services industries or the armed forces. At the center, the teens are required to perform daily tasks, for which they receive a monthly stipend. After five months at the center, each corps member receives an \$80 per month allowance. Upon the completion of the two-year training program, each member receives a \$2,400 award.

The center also has a smaller vocational program for a limited number of men and women in their mid-20s.

While the Jobs Corps has little problem attracting young men to the program, Highsmith said it is harder reaching out to teen-age women, because

many of them have children and are unwilling to leave them behind with other family members.

Harry Williams, 17, who is studying to be a construction worker, said after he leaves the center he will have a better chance getting a job than if he had stayed at his home in Elizabeth.

"This is a good place to come to because it's better than hanging out on the corner doing nothing," said Williams as he was leaving the center's cafeteria with a group of friends on the way to a class.

While Williams and his peers agreed that the Job Corps was proving to be an invaluable experience, they had several misgivings about the living conditions at the center. Dion Wies, 18, of Camden, complained that the dormitories are poorly maintained and that it takes a long time for the center's staff to make necessary repairs.

While many of the teen who enroll at Jobs Corps seem to take seriously the opportunity to better their lives, discipline remains an ongoing problem at the center. The Edison police department reports that during the past summer, police have been called into the center after fights have broken out between the youths.

Alvin Lotts, director of security and safety, said most of the discipline problems occur with overly street-wise youths, who cannot adjust to the structured living arrangements at the center. The Job Corps generally employs an internal review system for processing disciplinary cases. The center expels those young people who it feels can't work within the system.

"Either you're part of the solution or you're part of the problem," said Lotts, who is a former New York state trooper. "We want this program to be for those people who want to make the most of an opportunity."

Camp Kilmer

Edison:

Job

Pt. 1

Job Corps training still a 'part of the solution'

By **MATTHEW GOLDSTEIN**

Home News staff writer

HN 8/13/87

EDISON — Most area residents have come to learn of the Job Corps Center on Plainfield Road through largely negative events.

In recent years, the Camp Kilmer-based center was the scene of several fires found to be arson, a near riot among some of the center's teen-age residents and a bus accident in which one teen was killed.

Thomas Highsmith, the center's director, acknowledges that the Edison program, which was started in the 1960s during the federal government's "War on Poverty," has had a checkered past. But he says not enough attention is paid to the successes of the program, which has found employment for about

96 percent of the teen-agers — most of them poor, from the inner city — who have completed the two-year education and career-training program.

"People think that everybody here is a bad kid. But many of them have high school diplomas," Highsmith said yesterday, during a tour of the center — located amid crumbling barracks that housed U.S. Army soldiers until 1963.

About 500 teen-age boys and girls, coming from economically depressed neighborhoods in Newark, Camden, Paterson and other parts of the state are currently living in the center's residential dormitories and enrolled in a vocational training program. Many of the youths come from broken families and are on welfare.

About 10 percent of Job Corps graduates enlist in the armed forces. Most of the remainder, about 86

percent of the graduates, wind up with private sector jobs, the center claims.

"I'm sure we won't bat 1,000, but we'll have a high batting average," Highsmith, told a group of social service workers attending an open house at the center.

Across the nation, there are 105 federally and privately-funded Job Corps centers, serving approximately 40,000 young people each year. The Edison center, which also serves youths from the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, is the only Job Corps center in New Jersey. The Edison center receives funding from the U.S. Department of Labor, ITT Job Training Services Inc. and the state Department of Human Services.

State Human Services Commissioner Drew Alt-