UrbanAction needs people

By David Sears

Six years ago, before phrases like "concerned students" and "underprivileged children" had become cliches, a group of concerned students created the MIT Social Service Committee, with the intention of tutoring underprivileged children.

The original premise of the founders was simple and very personal: each of them, in considering his own education, decided that he would have had his life at some point been highly influenced by a "significant personality," in most cases a teacher. With this in mind, they collectively decided to become significant to the lives of needy children, with the hope of guiding them to achievement.

That group, after a circumstantial but successful beginning, is now MIT-Wellesley UrbanAction. Last Thursday, at UrbanAction Open House was held in the Student Center West Lounge, primarily for the purpose of recruiting new volunteers. Despite methodical advertising with posters and leaflets, attendance was relatively sparse.

Youth apathy "Something is in the air this fall with these kids . . . I don't know." The woman saying this was pleasant and matronly, a resident of Cambridge. Her concern was not revolution or drugs on campus; she had worked closely with students for several years as a parent-administrator of Tutoring Plus, the program that is one of the main concerns of UrbanAction. What she referred to was common apathy—nothing as exotic as bureaucratic or political apathy, but something more distressing—youth apathy. She considered it to be a crisis.

Personal involvement "We've recruited at all the local colleges—MIT, Wellesley, Harvard and Radcliffe, Simmons, and . . . The kids just aren't interested this year." Normally, some 150 children are paired off with tutors at the beginning of the school year. This is done on a one-to-one basis, with a matching of needs and special skills if possible. Volunteers spend from three to five hours a week in the homes of their students, and the time is not restricted—field trips, to museums and even movies, are encouraged. All of this work toward a goal of personal involvement from each side.

Funds and volunteers Tutoring Plus is directly descended from the original UrbanAction, but has since become essentially independent of the influx of personal involvement in administration. The primary function of the UrbanAction group now is to provide funds and volunteers—the problem at the moment is with the latter.

The whole scope of UrbanAction, in fact, has experienced several major crises. One is a shift toward administration and coordination, rather than control, as more and more programs are initiated or incorporated. Another is a shift away from political involvement, not in a partisan sense, but in terms of government practice is such programs as Welfare Rights and the Greater Boston Committee on the Transportation Crisis.

Fellowship Program As far as intensive personal involvements are concerned, the real core of the organization is now the Fellowship Program. Utilizing funds from the President's office, some 21 students are granted fellowships for summer work in health, education, housing, etc. In the fall, part of their work continues in the form of a seminar which surveys urban problems from the point of experience.

Programs which fall under the administrative jurisdiction of UrbanAction include: Tutoring Plus and Dorchester House, for children; Education Warehouse and Community High School, for high schoolers and older; G.B.C., the transportation crisis; Columbia Point, the EB-Well Project, and the Organization, housing and community problems; Welfare Rights; and the Bancroft Teaching Assistant Project, a new program to aid bilingual classses on the South End. Almost any kind of work in urban affairs can be found within the framework of UrbanAction—whether the interest is there, they urge anyone with such an interest to contact them at extension 2804, or in room 437 of the Student Center.

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