



'Nobody's Phony'

text and photos
by nancy jaffer

It's a teenager's dream. A place where "nobody's phoney, trying to put on a show for anybody else."

It's the "Back Door" coffeehouse in Eau Gallie's old Imperial Hotel. And strange as it may seem, it's run by a church.

The coffeehouse was started last November by Jamie Buckingham, minister of Eau Gallie's Tabernacle Baptist Church.

"It grew out of my philosophy of what a church ought to be," he explained. "A church is more than a shrine — it's a group of people who think religion is an everyday affair and belongs more on the curbstone than in the cathedral."

A handful of church members and some teenagers fixed the hotel's old bar and lounge, which was falling apart. They covered gaping holes in the ceiling and removed tacks that were sticking in the floor. They whitewashed the dull walls. Then the kids took over. They painted psychedelic signs in bright blues, greens

at the Back Door

and reds. They run the gamut from "Love is Hate" to "Love Thy Neighbor."

"Sometimes they put stuff up we had to paint out," said Earl Witherby, the group chaperon. Such over-ruling is rare, though.

Witherby believes in letting the kids have as much freedom as possible, and is organizing a teenage board of directors to run the place and plan its activities.

The Back Door is, in effect, a teenage community center. It is open for entertainment only on Saturday nights, when there is a 50-cent admission charge, and soft drinks and coffee are served.

Other afternoons, it's open from 2:30 to 6 p.m. for ping-pong and pool, soft drinks or just talking. Occasionally it becomes a supervised evening study hall.

The coffeehouse is never used as a preaching outpost, according to Buckingham. "All we've tried to do is be friends — we want the kids to know we care. As kids have found out about it, they've shown up."

"I love the Back Door because we run it," said one Eau Gallie high school girl in an electric-pink shift during intermission at a recent Saturday night program.

"It's the only place that has folk music around here."

A girl with long, blond hair, wearing a short skirt and a serious expression said she had her doubts at first when she heard the place was run by a church.

"But they don't take you into a little room and try to conform you," she said. "At first I was scared people would come up to us and ask us to go to church. But it never happened."

Couples find a refuge in red-plastic booths that line one edge of the room.

"I really think it's nice" said a Melbourne High School senior. He said it was better than a local rock music place because "it doesn't cost \$6 to get in and there's a better atmosphere. You can relax."

The featured folksinger on a recent Saturday night was 19-year-old George

Keough of Indialantic, who sang a traditional repertoire, accompanying himself on a non-electric guitar.

He sang folk songs and standards far removed from the current cries of "Electrical Banana" and "Eight Miles High."

The group sang along with "Michael, Row The Boat Ashore," and seemed almost in a trance listening to "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow."

He was joined on stage several times by members of the audience. There was a girl named Joy, who sang harmony and a boy, who would give his name only as "Sandi" who sat on a high stool next to Keough and sang as though he was part of the act.

The stage was only a small wooden platform, picked out by multi-colored lights that made a large American flag on the wall look almost ultra-violet.

"You know what I like best here?" asked a girl drinking a soda while she swung her legs from a bar stool.

"If you come here and feel like doing something — you do it."

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