

Emmaus House more than home

By **CLAIRE SERANT**
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TEN MONTHS AGO, Kelly Robinson stayed at Times Square during the day, slept at the Port Authority at night, and in between worried about getting high.

Today, Robinson's attitude has changed. Instead of thinking about the crack and alcohol that led to his troubles, the 21-year-old Brooklyn native concentrates on the wooden cabinets he makes for Emmaus House, an emergency shelter and residence for the homeless located on the corner of 124th St. and Lexington Ave.

"I'm not thinking about how I'm going to get drugs, or rob somebody or do a hustle," said Robinson, a resident of the non-profit shelter. "I know if you want to help yourself, you can help others, too."

Teaching self-reliance to the homeless through work has been a goal of Emmaus House since it began as a shelter 20 years ago, said Rev. David Kirk, 53, a Catholic priest who founded the program.

Strangers together

Named after a Biblical village where Jesus's followers went after his death, the East Harlem building is the "road that brings strangers together," according to Kirk.

"We don't believe in the shelter system. We are about empowering the poor rather than making them dependent," he said.

By sharing duties that include pro-

viding meals to the homeless, renovating and maintaining their five-story residence, Kirk said the needy are able to improve the quality of their lives.

The sale of the wooden cabinets to hospitals and private organizations adds a modest income of \$25 a week for Kirk and 55 Emmaus residents whose ages range from early 20s to 74 years old. The workers learn how to read plans, organize large jobs, and a skill that can support them once they leave the training program.

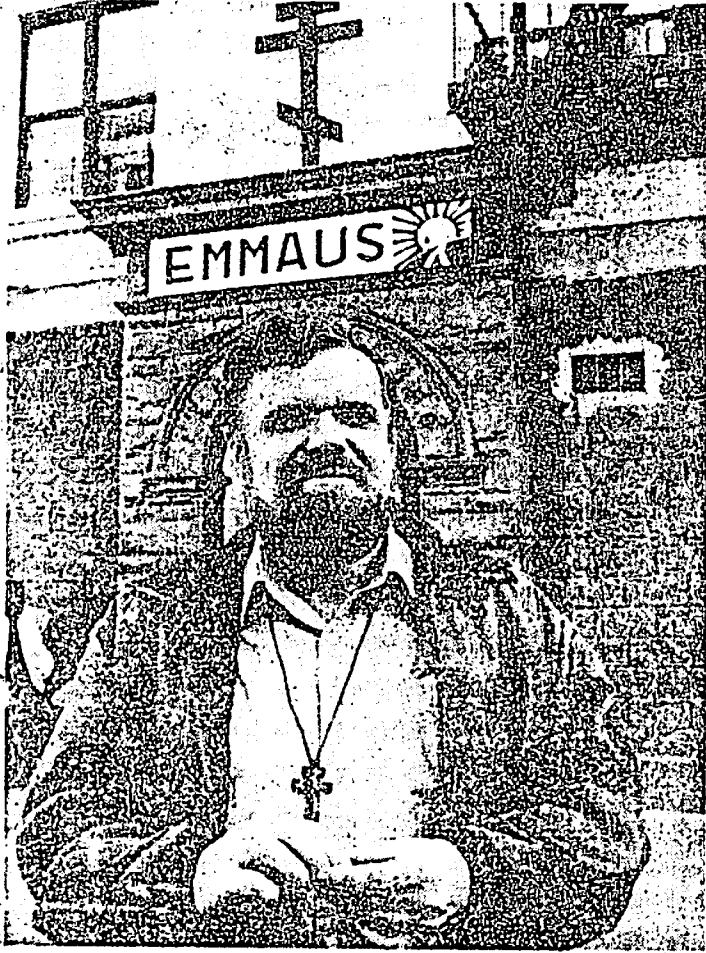
Last year, the three-year-old wood shop brought in \$125,000 to the organization, which does not accept government aid. Kirk said more than half of Emmaus's fees goes to purchase materials and lumber for the cabinets.

Rosemary Watson, 28, a former restaurant worker, said learning to live on \$25 a week along with the carpentry skills has given her a sense of hope for the future.

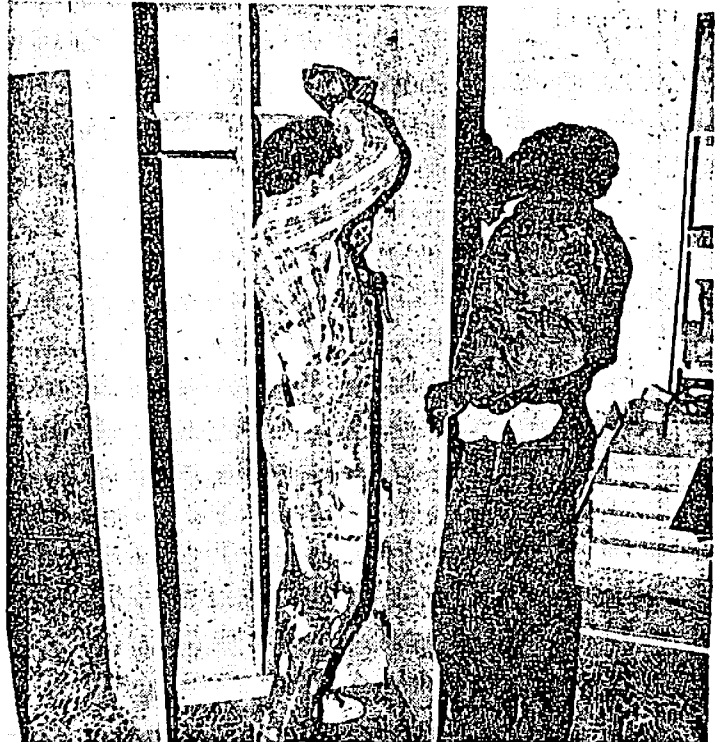
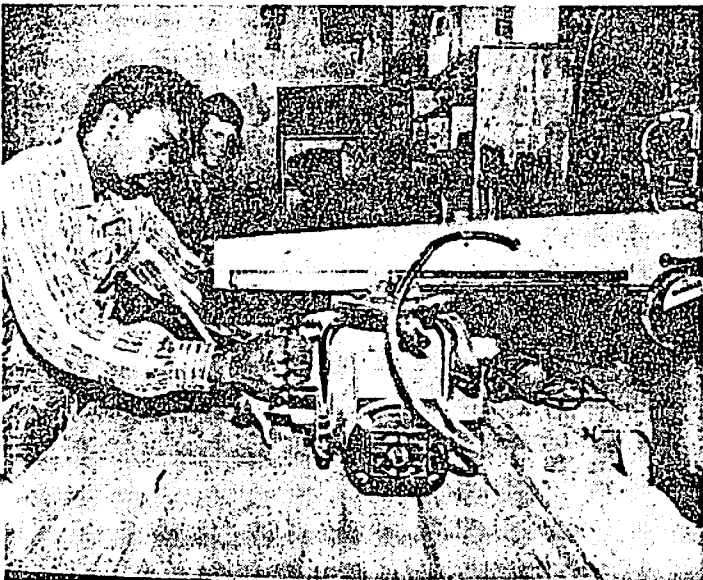
"I'm getting more confidence the harder I work," said Watson, a two-month resident. "Now, I have something to keep me occupied—work and friends."

With plans to expand the carpentry program to a South Bronx location, Kirk said purchasing the abandoned building adjacent to the house in order to add more services is another goal.

He said, "Most shelters give people a bed with no meaning and no purpose. We try to give value and meaning back to the community."



PROGRAM FOUNDER Rev. David Kirk stands before the Emmaus building. Below, Kelly Robinson mans a saw in the making of a wooden cabinet. **DENNIS CARUSO DAILY NEWS**



FINISHING touches are applied to cabinet which will be sold to a hospital or private organization. Sales of the hand-made cabinets help subsidize the Emmaus program.