

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

An enigmatic and close-knit community, the "Post Office Kids" are often misunderstood and shunned. Here is one kid's story.

Meet Erin Casey. If one were to pass her on the corner, she might seem to be just another loitering kid, some angst troublemaker dressed all in black.

This 16-year-old used to go to Chapel Hill High School until she dropped out. Now she works so she can pay rent to her mother and buy her own food.

With her hair dyed black, multiple piercings and black fishnet stockings, Casey has the gutsy fashion sense of someone who hangs out at by the Franklin Street post office often.

She looks like the quintessential "Post Office Kid."

"Some people don't like me, and they don't know why," Casey said. "They see me wearing ripped up jeans and spikes around my neck, and they don't know why. They never talk to me."

Like Hector's or Sutton's Drug Store, Casey and the rest of the kids who hang out on the steps of the Franklin Street post office are a sort of institution in Chapel Hill.

Drawn to the Street Scene Teen Center, they form a close and supportive community, yet one that is shrouded in mystery to the general public.

Many in the University community have their own opinions as to who these kids are or what they are like.

"Some say they're just disenchanted rich kids, and others just assume that they're searching for a place to stay.

But no matter what the opinion, many agree that these kids are part of a thriving subculture that they've created.

Why I Live at the P.O.

Any Friday night, Franklin Street is alive with college students, adults and, of course, the Post Office Kids.

At 10 p.m. this particular night, a large crowd has already gathered on the steps of the post office.

A petite redheaded girl wearing a yellow lace shawl quoted Samuel Beckett and said she wanted to "be happy" when she grew up.

A 16-year-old boy wearing a white T-shirt with dark circles under his eyes stood by a doorway. The teenage boy is in drug rehab and has dropped out of high school, saying that he's had trouble with the police in the past. He talked about his band, Rectal Projectile.

New people arrived, but the crowd waxed and waned as some people made their way into the Street Scene Teen Center, located beneath the post office.

Discussion ranged from the new Madonna song to the fine line between feminists and femi-Nazis. "I'm not a feminist, I'm an equalist," one girl declared. "Males are dumb," another added, "But so are most people."

Although some kids said they were not particularly fond of the area high schools, a dark-haired girl named Elizabeth said she liked high school better here in Chapel Hill than at her former, more rural high school.

"One day I wore black lipstick, and some kids started saying I was a witch," she said. "Yeah, a lot of people are like

"The goths - they're going to blow up the school," her friend added.

Though these girls come here almost everyday, they don't necessarily consider themselves part of the Post Office Kids. "Yeah, I'm a drifter," Elizabeth said. "It makes you lonely."

Street Scene

These kids often find themselves drifting into Street Scene Teen Center, tucked underneath the post office.

The center, founded by town officials and local merchants, was constructed as a haven for teenagers who, in a college town, often find themselves at a loss for something to do.

According to Street Scene Director Carol Walbourn, though, this corner has always been "the place to hang out."

"Over the last 30 to 35 years, there has always been a teen center," she said. "But 15 years ago it died, and lots of kids were just hanging out downtown. Merchants and parents came together to form Street Scene."

Robert Humphries, executive director of the Chapel Hill Downtown Commission, said the Downtown Association, the precursor to the Downtown Commission, decided that rather than run the Post Office Kids off they needed a place to call their own - hence, Street Scene.

"Sure, we get complaints from

time to time when the kids are misbehaving or whatever," Humphries said. "But while these kids may be scary-looking, not your average-looking Gap kid, they are really all good kids."

Inside, Street Scene is like a large, dim, unfinished basement. There are big couches, a low stage and a pool table. In a darkened back room there is a television, an ancient-looking computer and some sleeping kids. Bright murals are painted on the walls.

The center is part of the Chapel Hill Parks and Recreation Department and includes both an adult board and a teen board. The adult board handles financial matters, but it is the teens who have the autonomy in running the center, Walbourn said.

Casey corroborated this claim, saying the adults who worked there were also friends with the teens. "(The center's) really great. The best thing about it is there is no pressure," she said.

On weekend nights, Street Scene is a venue for local talents who haven't quite made it to the level of performing at Cat's Cradle. "Music really draws them," Walbourn said.

This "them" is not limited to teens. Walbourn said some people who hang out beside the post office were as old as 27. Most 16-, 17- and 18-year-old Post Office Kids are able to move from outside to inside the center as they like, but once patrons turn 19, they are relegated to staying outside.

This "them" is also not a homogeneous mix of backgrounds. "If you see kids on the corner, you are seeing a cross-section of ethnic and economic



Robert Eubanks, 18, a recent graduate from military school, plays video games at Street Scene Teen Center on Monday. Located beneath the Franklin Street post office, Street Scene draws a large crowd of area teenagers, some of which are commonly referred to as "the Post Office Kids."

strata," Walbourn said. "Some are from wealthy families, some have dropped out of high school and a few don't have a home. Asian, Hispanic, African-American - it's also a racial mix."

Walbourn said the one characteristic that united the kids was their sense of independence. "With this independence, be it positive or negative, often comes a certain type of dress," she said.

Casey said local officials were meeting the needs of local teens by sponsoring Street Scene. Casey said she had worked through a lot of her problems thanks to her friends at the post office, whom she sees as a support network.

"My mom wanted me to go to the psychiatrist, but I told her I have friends who will listen to me because they care and not because I'm paying them."

Casey said she's out by the post office almost everyday. "I know about every person there," Casey said. "And if not, I at least know who they are."

Nearby businesses also seemed pleased that Street Scene offered teens a place to go. When asked if the crowd outside the post office detracted from business, Hector's Manager Jose Constino said, "Not really. Not at all."

The Homelessness Question

Walbourn said she was also aware of the whispered speculations of teen homelessness with these kids.

She served on the special social service task force that investigated teen homelessness in 1999.

The task force found that speculations of 10 to 30 homeless teens roaming the streets of Chapel Hill were "overblown" and that a teen drop-in shelter was not needed in the area.

Walbourn estimates that only 1 to 3 percent of these youth do not have a home. The larger problem, she said, was that some chose to leave their homes for an extended period of time, either crashing at the homes of friends or in abandoned buildings called "squats."

"There is a problem here, but it is not extensive," she said. "The problem is more leaving home than absolute homelessness. Most of these teens have chosen this life on the road."

Walbourn said community members were working to find these kids temporary housing and said a plan for a Youth Commission to address such problems was also under way.

But Casey said she believed that teen homelessness was a problem that the town should address more directly. She said she speculated that there were at least 15 homeless teens in Chapel Hill.

"Most have been living on the streets for awhile, and most left home-by choice because the streets were a better alternative than home," she said.

Casey said she had dated a few of these homeless kids. She has slept on the roofs of buildings with them and has helped them rummage through trash bins for food.

"At work when they tell me to throw part of a sandwich in the trash, I'll wrap it up and take it to them," she said.

People under the age of 18 are not allowed in the Inter-Faith Council homeless shelter on Columbia Street, but even those who are legally adults prefer not to go there, Casey said.

"They stay at squats with people they know and trust," Casey said. "It's better to be able to go to sleep knowing you'll wake up with everything you had the night before."

A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Post Office Kid

While Casey seems tough on the issue of homelessness, she's equally streetwise. Behind the black clothes and tough exterior, however, Casey is a friend, a poet and a survivor.

She is an alumna of Alcoholics Anonymous and survived molestation in the 2nd grade. Today Casey is off of all the drugs, including antidepressants, and only drinks occasionally.

Despite her own struggles, it frustrates Casey when people single her and her friends out as troublemakers just because of how they look.

"Lots of people focus on the Post Office Kids, saying 'they do drugs,' and the truth is, no, they don't," she said.

As in any group of people, Casey insisted, some drank, some smoked pot, but there were also those that abstained from these vices completely.

Casey has grown weary of the hierarchy of appearances. "So many people are worried about fitting in socially that they don't worry about anything else at school," she explained.

This independent style that Casey epitomizes has caused Post Office Kids to stand out at their high schools, but not as much as one would expect.

"Certainly they have a style that is different," said Chapel Hill High School Assistant Principal John Birkholz. "So visually there is a division, but socially they interact and talk with everyone else. There are some excellent students out there (at the post office) with very high academic achievement."

Casey said the school environment was more divisive. "I tried to fit in for so long, and then I finally rebelled and tried to do what everyone hated, but now I'm at the point where I just act and dress how I want," she said.



Kids drawn to Street Scene Teen Center on Franklin Street relax and watch television in the lounge. The center serves as a social base for many teenagers in the area.

Of Casey's friends at the post office, she speculates that only about three or four are seriously considering college. A few are high school graduates, a few have G.E.D.s and several are dropouts like she is. Some of them are enrolled in high school, but just don't go.

Casey plans to eventually get her G.E.D. But even while she is not in school, she is still a creative thinker. Casey said many people who hang out at the post office tended to be especially creative, whether it's doing artwork on leather or writing.

"I have journals and journals full of poetry," she explained. "I'd like to start sending poems in to publishers."

Casey's dream is to work in a coffee shop, live in her own apartment and

write in her spare time - or go into body piercing in Vermont.

And so do these Post Office Kids hold any sort of grudges towards UNC? Not so, Casey said. "A couple of people here want to go to UNC. Some don't like UNC students because they may have met one or two they don't like, but I don't like to lump people together like that. Still, if someone glares, most of us will glare back," she said.

When asked what she perceived as the greatest problem facing today's society, Casey didn't respond with a typical answer. "People don't listen," Casey said. "People don't pay attention enough. So many things could be prevented if people paid attention to one another."



SPECIAL TO THE DTH/TARA PUROHIT

Erin Casey, 16, is a "Post Office Kid." A recovered alcoholic, Casey now writes poetry and plans to get her G.E.D.

If ever your dreams
Haunt you like ghosts
And fill your life with fright
Just come to me
And speak your woes
For I've experience the night
If ever your pain
Takes over your joy
And makes you want to die
Just come to me
And express your hurt
For I know what it's like to cry
If ever you feel
There's no where to go
And there are too many demands
Just come to me
And realize
There is someone who understands

Blessed are the people here
The ones outside
A life of fear

Wicked are the people here
Who don't enjoy
What things are near

Shallow are us people all
Who stand
But watch the others fall

Stupid are us people all
Who are so large
Yet think so small

POEMS BY ERIN CASEY