

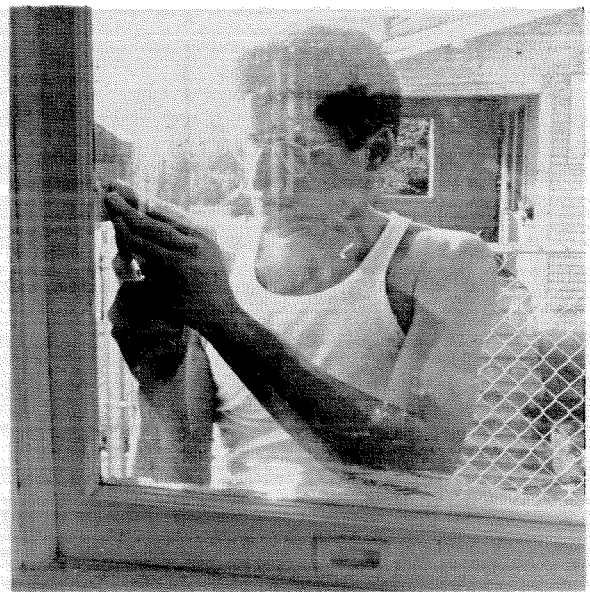
THREE DAYS IN THE "GHETTO"

by Michael Meo

No domestic question has the importance today of the Negro problem—yet few issues are less easily resolved by means of the traditional Caltech method of equation and slide rule. In order to give Caltech students a first-hand acquaintance with the actualities of ghetto life, the Caltech YMCA sponsored a program last month in which 20 students lived and worked in northwest Pasadena for three days, sleeping in the homes of Negro hosts at night and participating in social work during the day. The major focus of the program to those participating was in the area of communication, and the reactions of the students varied according to either the enhancement or frustration they experienced in this area.

The living-in was "Phase Three" of the Y project, "The Urban Ghetto: Blight and Promise," that has already sponsored a visit to the campus by United States Senator Thomas Kuchel and the stay on campus of a dozen or so articulate Negroes who lived in the student houses for three days. The Westside Study Center, a community social service organization run by Pasadena Negroes, was co-sponsor with the YMCA of "Phase Three." A keynote present in both organization and execution of the project was informality—informal assignments, informal requirements of the host.

Because of an unfortunate stress on the word "ghetto," the view many students had received of the Pasadena ghetto before they entered the program was usually considerably different from the reality they encountered. Some expected to see rats biting children, but they did not; few "ghetto facts to make an honest man shudder" came to light. Indeed, most of the homes to which the Caltech students were assigned were middle class; I slept one night in a home which had a swimming pool.



The author does his share toward rehabilitating the Westside Study Center headquarters in Pasadena.

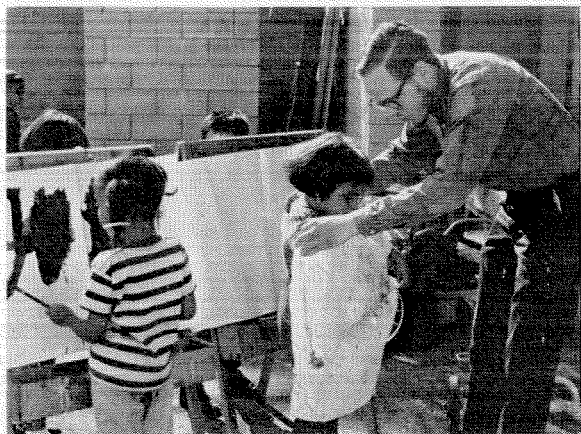


A briefing session, attended by participants, prepares Caltech students for "the actualities of ghetto life."

If the aim of the project was limited to showing liberal-minded Caltech students (for they were the only kind who participated) that Negroes are people who are just as kind, generous, and friendly as white people, then it succeeded overwhelmingly. The students' reception, in spite of the fact that one Caltech participant was beaten up as he walked along Fair Oaks Avenue the final afternoon of the program, was extremely hospitable. After only one day in the ghetto, students commented on the large number of blacks who uncritically accepted them as comrades, joked and laughed with them. After three days at a Head Start program center, one Caltech student half-seriously boasted that he was an "old hand" around the place. What was true where the students worked was even more true where they slept. Almost every family invited its guest to return some day, and many mothers described their guest as "one of the family." No participants had any reservations in their praise of this aspect of the program.

The superficial acceptance among ghetto

A Caltech senior reports on his brief exposure to ghetto life in Pasadena



Warren Burton, assigned to work in a Head Start Center for three days, now volunteers every week.

residents made some students overly optimistic about their experiences. Relief that they were not ignored, resented, or viewed with suspicion (as had been predicted they might), made many students feel that their ability to communicate with and understand black people and their problems was greatly heightened. One of the participating students likened his experiences with the Negro problem to a three-stage development. When he came to Caltech he was in *ignorance*; when the Negro tutors spoke to him last term about life in the ghetto, he *conceived* the magnitude of the problem; finally, after spending 72 hours in the Pasadena ghetto, he reached the level of *understanding*. Negro hosts and co-workers, however, doubted the validity of such sweeping statements.

In contrast to the roseate visions of some of the Caltech students, many Westside Study Center personnel had pessimistic apprehensions about the white man's approach to the Negro problem. And on other occasions a more open and puzzling hostility manifested itself. One way for the students to deal with this hos-

tility was to join it. Once the Caltech students had found that the Pasadena Negroes would readily work and laugh with them, they usually made little effort to probe further. Some of those who did probe more deeply were willing to accept a one-sided view of the problem and to repeat what I call the black "party line."

To explain the term, consider that it is an Establishment "party line" that only hoodlums and criminals were responsible for the riots in American cities recently. Such a one-sided view is disproved by the fact that there were 65 race riots last summer alone and the fact that riots have been breaking out for the last three years. Most intelligent men reject such a formulation of the story. I call a black "party line" an explanation of current history that has similar oversimplification and bald disregard of contradictory evidence, but tends to shift the blame on the whites. An example of the black "line" is the allegation that every major American city is a concentration camp, and that the mayor and the police chief are the keepers; yet such is the feeling of a number of Caltech students after listening and watching for three days in the northwest of Pasadena.

Another example is the tendency of black men to overemphasize their disadvantages. One boy whose father had an MA and whose grandparents had only finished the eighth grade tried to tell me about his disadvantage. But my own father has only a BS and my grandparents did not finish grammar school.

If the YMCA program had as its goal the appreciation by its participants of the psychic as well as the socioeconomic distance between the black and white communities, it had partial success; if it intended to foster real communication it was, to a great extent, only superficially successful.