

Women Find Home At 'Guest House'

By MARLENE MILLER
Women's Editor

They are released from prison with less than \$50 to their names, few clothes, no jobs and often no families to turn to.

Some make it in the straight world. Some turn back to crime because they know little else and some end up where they began, in prison.

BETTY McCONKEY of Alexandria, a parolee herself, has decided to try and offer an alternative to these women paroled from prison. She has opened a home for delinquent women, known as "The Guest House," on Commonwealth Avenue in Alexandria.

"I spent 18 months in confinement myself and I know what they're going through when they get out," Miss McConkey told the Gazette. "My people stood behind me, but so many women have no one to turn to.

"I have a real concern to help those who have been in prison. So many of them are repeaters because no one cared."

MISS McCONKEY cared enough to go out on her own and rent a large house so she could take in up to seven recently released women convicts. Since she opened the house in September, she has had six women stay there. At present "The Guest House" has four residents.

"I went to all the neighbors before I opened the house and told them what I wanted to do

and no one objected," she said.

She also went to Charles Lankford, director of the Fairfax office of Offender Aid and Restoration, and an ex-convict himself, and asked for his help. He contacted a number of church and civic groups on her behalf, soliciting aid in the form of food, clothing and rent money.

"I FELT WHAT she wanted to do was a good idea," Lankford told the Gazette in a recent interview. "She's trying to establish a home setting. She's saying: 'Here's a place for you, I'll help you get a job. Don't do anything wrong and we'll make it together.'"

"I read her as doing a great job; there's not enough people doing things like this," he said.

There is, in fact, no other such home for women offenders public or private, in the state of Virginia at this time, although one is now being planned in Roanoke, according to Lankford.

SINCE MISS McConkey opened her home, she has sent women who have been sentenced to parole, in addition to those who have already served a prison term.

The fact that she has been approached to help these women also, indicates a crying need to Miss McConkey for more homes like hers.

Through the help of Lankford, and as a result of a number of talks she has made at area churches, Miss McConkey has received aid



McConkey And The Guest House

from a significant number of local groups. She needs a lot more.

"SOMETIMES I get anxiety headaches wondering where the next month's rent will come from," said Miss McConkey, but she refuses to

give up. She has been constantly surprised and delighted at all the aid she has been offered.

After a recent talk she gave about the home, a psychiatrist offered his free services to hold a rap session once a month with "her

girls" and a beautician offered her hairdressing talents.

Any person or group willing to contribute to the home can contact Miss McConkey at 549-8894.

AS FOR HER own future, Miss McConkey feels fulfilled

by her work but is eager to prove that she was innocent of the fraud by wire charge which earned her a 5 year sentence in a federal penitentiary.

"My life has been dedicated to the Lord," said Miss McConkey. After Bible college she became a researcher and lecturer in churches on the evils of communism. It was in regard to this work, through the National Patriotic Youth Clubs of America, that she was charged with fraud by wire in 1968, when the charges were dropped, and again in 1970, when she received her five-year sentence.

AS SHE explained it, Miss McConkey had received regular sums of money from a Minnesota man to continue her fight against communism. She sent the man a wire of thanks reading "You will be richly repaid for your services for me." The man later produced this wire claiming it as proof that the money was not a gift but rather that he expected to be repaid.

In explaining the case, Miss McConkey claimed she had been placed on a "Communist party smear list" in 1963 to ruin her reputation. She feels that this had direct relevance to the federal charges later brought against her.

In the meantime, she is devoting herself to "The Guest House," secure in the belief that she "will be vindicated" in time.