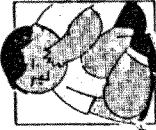


NO DAY TO CELEBRATE

City shares in despair of thousands of dropouts

By **KIM PHELAN**
Staff reporter



Agenda '90:
Children in crisis

does it feel?

The 19-year-old's face went blank. This wasn't a trick question. It wasn't multiple choice. He just needed to fill in the blank.

"Nothin'," he mumbled. Tonight, 186 proud seniors will parade across the stage at the Municipal Auditorium to accept their diplomas — keys that could open doors to colleges and future careers.

But the future for Juan is a bleak

one. He holds no keys, and there are no open doors.

Today, Juan and his girlfriend will spend a lazy afternoon drinking beer with friends, and wandering through the local flea market while his mother watches their baby boy, Kevin Rene.

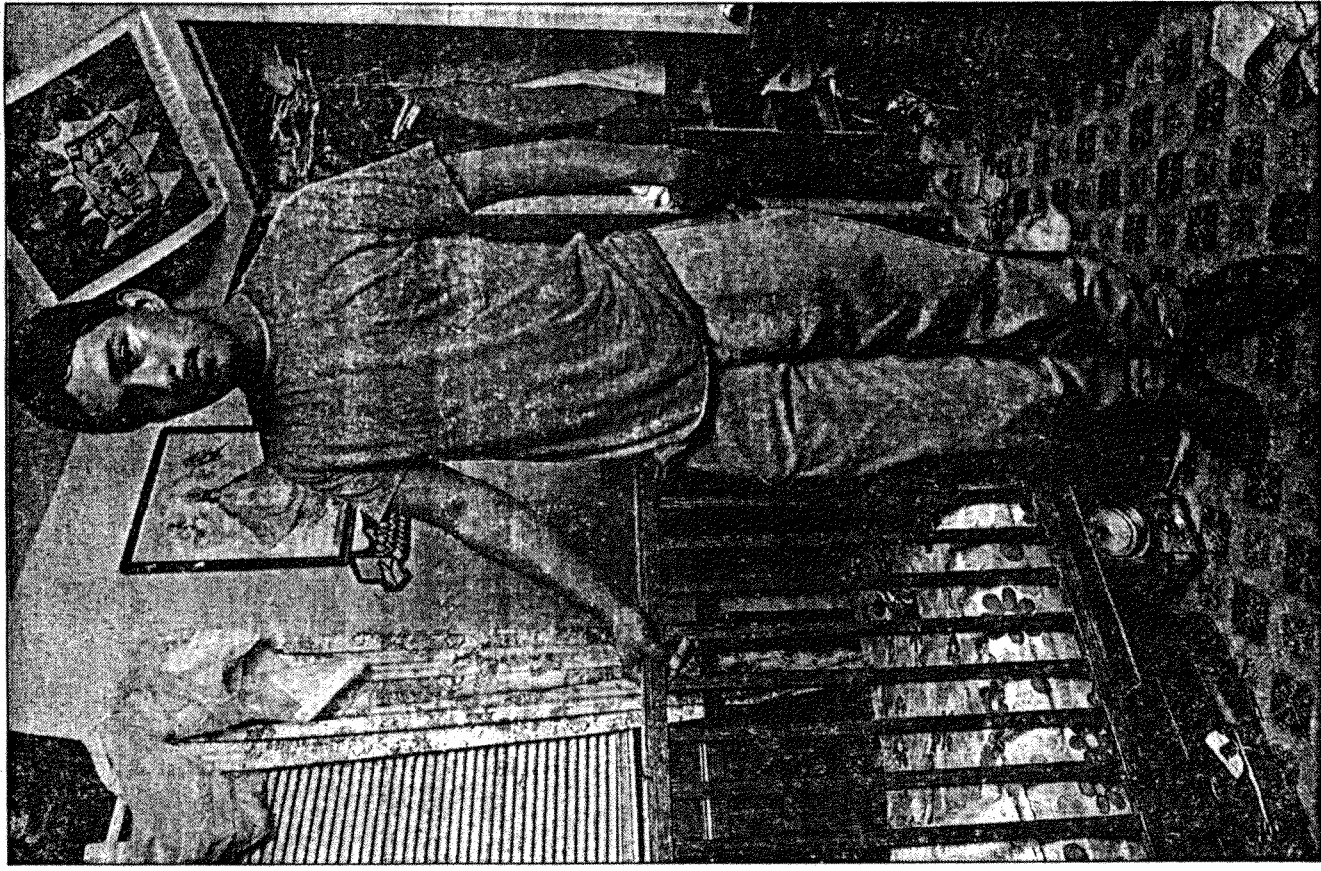
Today, like nearly every other day since he dropped out in October, is boring.

"I should have stuck it out," Juan said, sitting on his front stoop. "It's hard. I expected to have a job by now."

Juan is only one of about 100 students at Edgewood High School who quit school this year.

Edgewood School District, owner of one of the highest dropout rates in Bexar County in grades 7 through 12, saw more than 5 percent of its students drop out last year, according to the Texas Education Agency. School district officials say the dropout rate is actually closer to 7 percent.

Please turn to DROPOUT/A10



NO OPEN DOORS: Juan Gutierrez stands in his bedroom. The 19-year-old dropout will not be graduating with his class at Edgewood High School tonight.

DROPOUT: Future is bleak

DROPOUT/from A1

Edgewood isn't the only place with a problem. Nearly 6,500 of the 94,706 students attending high school and middle school in Bexar County (with the exception of the military school districts) dropped out last year before graduation.

Statewide, about 82,000 of the state's 1.36 million middle and high school students quit school last year, giving Texas the seventh-highest dropout rate in the nation.

Statistics show about a quarter of those come from poor families. More than half are males who quit to find work, or had flunked a grade level.

Texas' dropout problem also is at the root of a protracted fight among legislators in Austin over the financing of the state's public schools.

At Edgewood, most of the dropouts - at one time or another - have passed through the office of Vice Principal George Pena.

"I feel I still have to fight," Pena said. "It's easy to sign the paper and say goodbye. But it's not going to help them; it's not going to help us. We already have a reputation."

Texas, concerned about its national reputation, has mandated that each school district provide an at-risk coordinator to help students who have dropped out of school or are in danger of quitting.

In San Antonio, especially, the dropout problem is steadily gaining attention as one of the critical issues, one with a devastating ripple effect. Dropouts, experts say, tax the quality of life in their community, drag down the work force and local economy, contribute to increased drug and alcohol abuse, and a higher crime rate.

But even with an increase in prevention programs, Pena said, the ultimate decision not to quit rests in the students' hands.

"They're going to have to make the choice," Pena said. "And the choice is not a good one."

"I tell them, 'Your choice is you can drop out and live happily ever after. Everything is successful. No more school. You don't have to get up in the morning."

"Then you face reality: What it's like to be without a job."

Pena paints them a picture of supporting a family on minimum wage and a menial job while watching co-workers with diplomas being promoted above them. The picture



I should have stuck it out. It's hard.

- JUAN GUTIERREZ
Edgewood High dropout



Isn't pretty.

"They get an earful before they leave," Pena said. "But these are the kids who decide to come to my office. These are the ones we can fight with. The others just quit."

Juan said he quit over the school's policy that prohibits students from wearing steel-toed boots.

"They are weapons," Pena said, adding that students caught wearing them are sent home to change shoes and asked to return. More often than not, Juan did not return after being sent home. Eventually, he just stopped coming, even after the school gave him a new pair of tennis shoes to wear instead.

"They kept sending me home," Juan said. "I got tired of that. So I decided to stay home."

Juan's decision to leave the classroom and join the unemployment line wasn't difficult. The path had been forged by his family.

Juan said his father and mother were dropouts, too. His father left school in the third or fourth grade to help support his family and now is between jobs after finishing three weeks of construction work in Florida.

Juan's twin brother, Encarnacion, dropped out in his senior year at Edgewood after buying his ceremonial cap, gown and ring, only to discover that he needed another half credit to graduate.

"They want me to go back just for a mistake that they did," said Encarnacion, who now is studying auto painting at Mansfield Business School in San Antonio.

"I'm not going to do that. At least I'm going to be the one in the family to get a graduate certificate (from Mansfield)."

Last year, Juan's pregnant girlfriend also dropped out of Edgewood. She eventually moved in with Juan's family, where she pays Juan's mother \$150 a month in rent for her and Kevin Rene to share Juan's tiny bedroom.

She pays Juan an additional \$2 for gasoline each day if she misses the bus and needs him to drive her to the Gunter Hotel where she scrubs toilets, makes beds and vacuums floors for minimum wage.

Juan's two friends left school and found jobs with Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of the Southwest and Triple S Steel Supply, where high school diplomas aren't required.

A Coca-Cola spokeswoman said jobs made available to those without high school diplomas involve basic sales positions, stocking and truck driving.

"He sees that they are making good money, and he thinks he can make big money," said Encarnacion, who dreams of landing a job in Hawaii that pays \$150 to \$200 a day.

"If he wants a good job, he's going to need a diploma. Right now, he is doing nothing. He doesn't work. His girlfriend supports him. I guess he is just lazy," Encarnacion said.

Juan said he has applied at a handful of places since dropping out. Burger King, to cite one example, never called him back.

"If they don't want me, I don't want to work there," he said, although his home telephone has been disconnected.

He picked up an application at Triple S Steel Supply, but never returned it. He has thought about applying at Bausch & Lomb Eye Wear Division near his home, and decided not to apply to another business because it was too far to drive.

Juan said he went to Coca-Cola several months ago, but decided not to fill out an application after he was told to apply through the Texas Employment Commission, and warned that it may ask for a high school diploma.

Now he is having second thoughts about stocking soda bottles for \$5 an hour.

"If they ask me, I'll tell them I have a GED (General Equivalency Diploma), but I forgot to bring it," Juan said. "That's what my friend did. That's what he said I should do."

But Pena has another suggestion. He wants Juan to return for his GED.

"Juan was a good kid," Pena said. "That's what makes it hard. The problem is that they are looking for short-term success. They don't look long-term."

DROPOUT PREVENTION/RETENTION PROVIDERS

Students who need help staying in school, want to earn their GED or return to school can contact the following coordinators.

Alamo Heights School District

Jane Leizear
7101 Broadway
San Antonio, Texas 78209
824-2483

East Central School District

Ann Berg
6634 New Sulphur Springs Road
San Antonio, Texas 78263
648-7861

Edgewood School District

Soledad Ramirez
4127 Eldridge
San Antonio, Texas 78237
433-9412

Harlandale School District

Jan Gallagher
102 Genevieve
San Antonio, Texas 78285
921-4360

Judson School District

Mary Casper-Griem
P.O. Box 249
Converse, Texas 78109
658-6251

North East School District

Frances Evans
10333 Broadway
San Antonio, Texas 78217
657-8714

Northside School District

Janelle Harshaw
5223 Blessing
San Antonio, Texas 78228
432-6002

San Antonio School District

Isabel Salas
311 San Fernando
San Antonio, Texas 78207
227-1206

Somerset School District

Audry Elliott
Box 279
Somerset, Texas 78069
622-5671

South San Antonio School District

Millie Klein
2515 Sioux
San Antonio, Texas 78224
924-8541

Southside School District

David Herrera
1610 Martinez-LaSoya
San Antonio, Texas 78221
626-2346

Southwest School District

Maria Ferrer
Rt. 9, Box 205 AF
San Antonio, Texas 78227
622-5301