

# Founder of De La Salle Education Center never gives up

They tell about the time Godfrey Kobets hung a kid out the second-story window at the school where he was coaching and teaching. The young man had struck one of the Christian Brothers who ran the school and that is one thing you did not do if Kobets was around.

They tell about the kid who was selling crack cocaine when the cops caught him carrying a concealed weapon. The luckiest thing that ever happened to him, the kid later said. He was sent to Kobets' De La Salle Education Center, where the motto is "If anybody else will take you, we don't want you." Given a second chance, the kid turned his life around.

It has taken both of these Godfrey Kobets — the tough, take-no-prisoners drill sergeant and the tender heart that bleeds for kids with two strikes against them — to have made a dream come true in this town.

Kobets is the founder of the De La Salle Education Center, 3740 Forest. It is a school for hard cases and last-chancers, kids who've



GIB TWYMAN

been kicked out of other schools. They come to De La Salle with drug and alcohol problems, behavioral disorders, learning disabilities. They are dropouts and pregnant teens, the sons and daughters of prostitutes, pushers and thieves.

At De La Salle, they receive the Three R's, plus counseling for chemical dependency, anger and violence.

The school has been hailed as a latter-day miracle of alternate education. Of the 7,000 kids it has served since opening in 1971, 92 percent of graduates go on to post-secondary education or gainful employment. This year it won

the Presidential Award from the Department of Labor, one of three schools so honored nationally.

De La Salle aims to "meet kids where they are" and give them things at which they can succeed. They work at their own pace. Teacher-pupil ratios normally are 1-to-10. The methodology is tailored to individuals.

One of Kobets' favorite stories is about a 14-year-old kid who could neither read nor write, supposedly unteachable. But Kobets saw he had a fascination with mechanics. He challenged the kid with vocabulary and math related to lawn mowers. Once the boy saw it unlocked doors to things in which he was interested, his basic skills soared.

"Education today operates on a theory of attrition," Kobets says. "If you have 53,000 kids, educate 50,000 and lose 3,000 you call it a success. But that deals with the symptoms of attrition, not causes. The causes are breakdown of the family, the diseases of alcohol, violence, neglect.

"De La Salle was founded on

causes, not symptoms. You try to find out the problem and deal with it with sensitivity and love."

Kobets, now 76, began learning about how those things worked in life, long before he became a Little All America football player at Rockhurst College, a wrestler good enough to make it to the 1936 Olympic trials, a catcher good enough to play in the Cincinnati Reds' organization and a highly successful football coach at Rockhurst High School and the old De La Salle High School, forerunner to today's De La Salle, which was at 16th and Paseo.

People who love and respect Kobets — and even those who are trying to avoid him — see him as something of an Ecclesiastical Equalizer.

"He is a guy with tremendous faith, vision and commitment — so much so that he will offend some people when he goes to bat for you," said Jim Daugherty, executive director at De La Salle. "A single-minded person makes enemies. When the Lord went

after the one lost sheep, you can imagine the 99 getting hacked about it."

Though Kobets had a stable home life, he also had the kind of untamed spirit which characterizes some of the kids he deals with today.

"I always had a mind of my own. I don't like to be lied to or insulted or a hand laid on me," he said. "But I also always had somebody, when I did something someone said was crazy, who told me, 'No. That's not crazy. You're going to be OK.'"

Coaching at De La Salle, Kobets found the perfect match for his iron faith in God and commitment to kids. "They never turned a kid away because his grades weren't good enough and if you didn't make your tuition, eh? They kept you anyway. I loved that," Kobets said.

After Kobets spent 25 successful years at De La Salle, it was closed. Kobets had a job waiting for him at O'Hara, another Christian Brothers school, but declined. He borrowed \$15,000 and vowed to reopen De La Salle

in a new form. The first 25 kids came from Guinotte and Wayne Minor, two of the city's poorest housing projects.

Kobets was 55 at the time, and "everyone told me it wouldn't work. I was a fool."

Today, Kobets has moved on to a resident program for drug addicts, Benilde Hall, still at his old digs at 16th and Paseo. His legacy, the new De La Salle, has 320 students, a waiting list of 200 and a budget of \$1.485 million.

You can help by attending a benefit dinner Tuesday at the Westin Crown Center (phone 561-3312). Al McGuire will be the host. The Chiefs' Christian Okoye will receive the Godfrey S. Kobets Award.

I doubt Okoye will ever win an award which has more meaning. It represents a life that took seriously the poem sitting on a table in Kobets home:

*"I sought my soul but my soul I could not see.*

*"I sought my God, but my God eluded me.*

*"I sought my brother and I found all three."*