FATHER LARRE'S WAR

Troubled teenagers were a mission—and a growth industry—for the charismatic Saskatchewan priest. But

"Give a kid a chance" has been a sure-fire fund-raising slogan for Father Larre. His Bosco Society is now big business

when some of those kids claimed that Lucien Larre had physically abused them, his whole empire came under attack

by PATRICIA ELLIOTT

photographs **PETER SIBBALD**

In a north-end-Regina church basement on an evening in March, 1989, Saskatchewan's best-known priest is preparing to take the podium. Father Lucien Larre, the founder of Bosco Homes for troubled teenagers, is a pro. He works the front rows with hearty handshakes and takes a quick survey of the room, making certain to smile at each face he recognizes. The crowd has come to hear Larre's life story as only he can tell it, beginning with his simple rural childhood and ending with his heart-warming descriptions of "Father Larre's kids."

Larre is a charmer in the literal sense. He casts spells with his voice. But there is more than Larre's simple spoken appeals at work to keep his dream afloat. Bosco Society, the fund-raising arm of Bosco Homes, runs sophisticated direct-mail campaigns, two annual lotteries, a yearly rodeo, and the Big Valley Jamboree, a four-day country-music festival that since 1983 has brought the biggest names in country music to Craven, just north of Regina – and an estimated $10-million annually to the Saskatchewan economy. The thousands of ticket-buyers over the years got a bargain: great music and, in the words of the slogan on the Bosco brochures, the opportunity to "Give a kid a chance." The scale of Larre's good works is so well known that Saskatchewan's grade seven separate-school students can read about Larre (pronounced Larry) in one of their religious studies texts, under the heading "Today's Prophets." The text tells of a tragedy that spurred on Larre's efforts to help the young: the story of a youth who "succeeded in obtaining a rifle and shooting himself." It ends with the discussion question, "How is Father Larre a prophet for us and our community?"

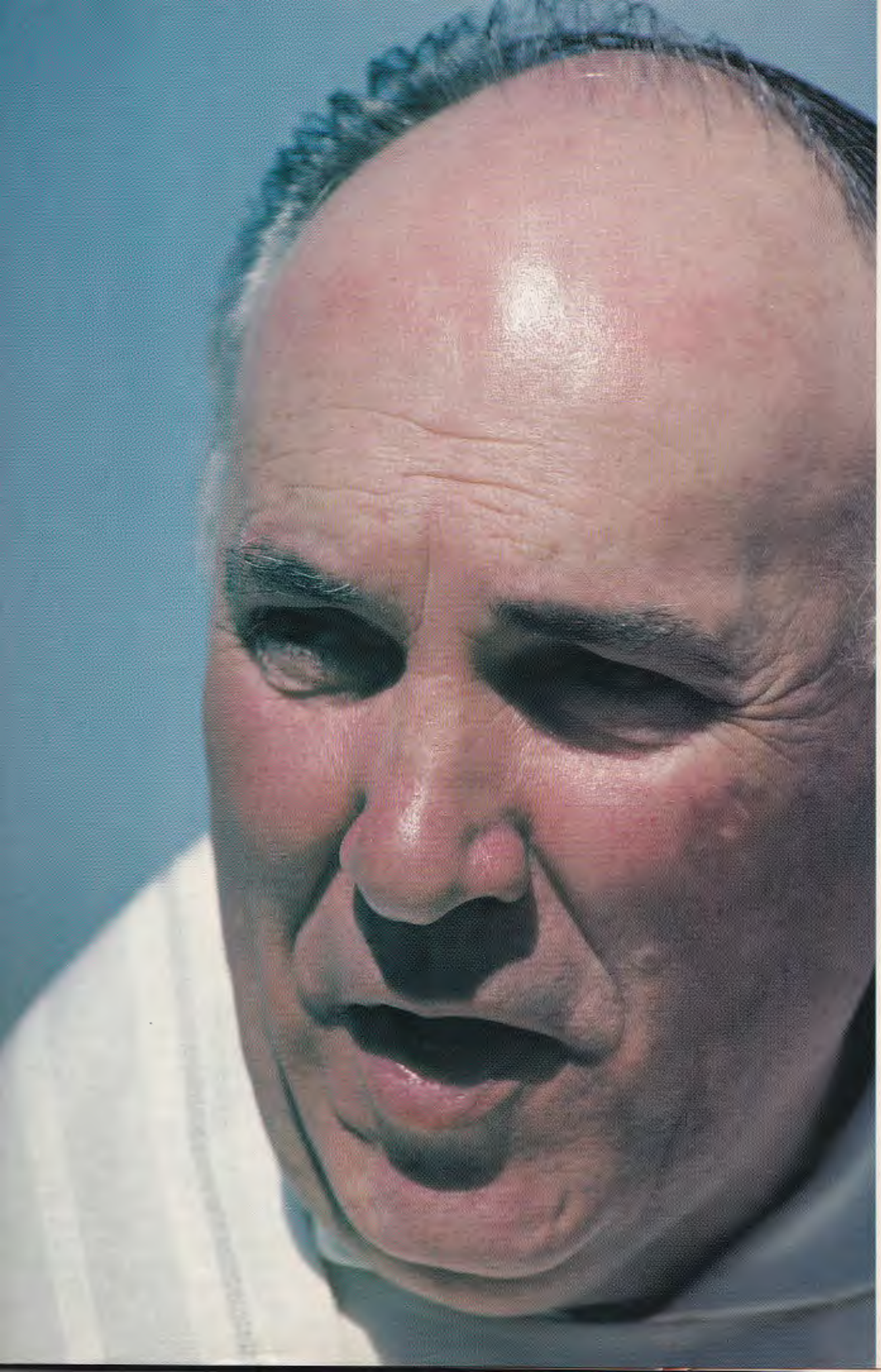
In the cadences of a Sunday morning televangelist, Larre launches into his speech. The greying, burly fifty-six-year-old priest subdivides love, his topic for the night, into Eros, sexual love, and Agape, Christian love. In his folksy way he explains that Eros is good as long as you have equal amounts of Agape. But before he reaches this conclusion, he manages to pepper the speech with what his audience really loves – the anecdotes, jokes, and personal stories for which he is famous. He reels off one-liners about a childhood in a town "so small the mayor and the village idiot were the same person." He talks movingly about "my kids," the 400 or so teenagers who have moved through Bosco Homes since he bought the first house in 1971. At one point he diverges to the priestly crisis in Newfoundland, and the rhythmic, comforting voice is suddenly out of control. His point is how awful it is that the media are lambasting the Church. His audience is cheering and clapping. Some are on their feet. Smiling, Larre hits his stride again and brings his well-worn tale to a close.

Both Garver (top) and Kahnapace have memories of Larre choking them. Larre says, "I never choked a kid unconscious..."

Perhaps the priest had a premonition that night of the media scrutiny he himself would soon undergo – headlines and TV reports that by the end of the summer would link him to allegations of physical abuse made by some of his former Bosco kids. Larre and his expanding empire had in fact been dogged through the 1980s by rumours of financial mismanagement, of questionable conditions in the homes. Former board members, neighbours of the homes, and some residents had taken allegations to the government and to the RCMP, which had launched quiet investigations; Revenue Canada had also looked at the books. Larre said he'd always been exonerated. In those same years, he had moved from triumph to triumph, with the launch of the Big Valley Jamboree and the expansion of Bosco Homes into Alberta. But the rumours wouldn't die and the last year had been especially rough. An ugly power struggle had taken place with Larre and his fund-raising organization, Bosco Society, on one side, and the board of his Regina-based treatment homes on the other. Larre had won, but it had cost: in the spring and summer of 1988 the entire board had quit, followed by all the child-care workers.

On the heels of that debacle, in October, 1988, three Bosco boys allegedly stole some money from one of the Regina homes and took a taxi all the way to Saskatoon, where one of them was charged with sexually assaulting a fifteen-month-old girl. What was going on in the homes? The government, supporting Larre, turned down the Opposition's demand for a public inquiry, but the provincial ombudsman, Gerald McLellan, decided that his office would investigate. His report, released August 15, 1989, didn't stop at the incident itself. McLellan and his three-person team had also interviewed twenty-one past residents of Bosco: "Eighteen of those interviewed were aware of the use of corporal punishment. Thirteen specifically indicated that they had received corporal punishment. Of those thirteen, ten considered their punishment to be excessive."

The media soon came up with names and gruesome stories, and the provincial politicians began to look for both the cause and someone to blame. Four months earlier, the former chairperson of the Bosco Homes board, Virginia Jedlic, had given Grant Schmidt, the minister of social services, affidavits from former residents of Bosco, which Schmidt had turned over to Regina city police. In the legislature, on August 16, Schmidt said that those affidavits "alleged that there was criminal activity, abuse and mismanagement at the home." At a press conference held the day after the McLellan report came out, Schmidt said, "For nearly two decades Bosco has been a sacred rogue elephant which no social-services minister



has had the courage to either train or destroy. . . . In hindsight, Bosco should have been shut down in the 1970s."

With Schmidt ordering yet another investigation of the Regina homes, Larre gave a press conference at which he faced down his detractors. "I want to tell you from the bottom of my heart that I categorically deny that I have ever abused any of the youngsters at Bosco Homes in any way," said the priest. "I have to tell you that I have done a lot of soul-searching. I have gone through the very depths of my conscience and I feel totally at peace with that. Peace with myself and with my God."

Although by mid-August I'd been working on this story for five months, Father Larre refused to talk to me. I'm related by marriage to Virginia Jedlic, whom he blamed for his troubles. But he did agree to tell his side of the story to an editor from *Saturday Night*. He stressed that his conscience was clear, but he added that he had made mistakes. He said that the kids attacked him, but admitted that he was rarely afraid, that he sometimes deliberately frightened them: "I never believed in fear because fear only works in the short run, it only works when you're bigger, and it only works when you're there. . . . But you know, when it comes to controlling youngsters you only have fear and love to work with. There's really nothing else." And when love failed to control a child, he tried fear.

Big Valley Jamboree, launched by Larre and Kaal in 1983, is now worth an estimated $10-million a year to Saskatchewan's economy

Father Lucien Larre was born in 1932 near the town of St Walburg, Saskatchewan. The youngest child of thirteen, his world was one of horse-drawn sleighs, church picnics, and baseball. Though there were family tragedies as well. His father, Jean Baptiste, died when Larre was only three months old. Larre himself was stricken with polio at the age of five. Until he was seven, he was forced to keep to his bed, his mother gently massaging his limbs for hours on end. "I was on my back for two years," he said, "and I had a lot of time to think. I knew I wanted to grow up to help kids in trouble, and I thought I wanted to be a medical doctor." When he arose, his brothers took him hunting and canoeing to rebuild his strength. He grew into a powerfully built young man, perhaps in compensation for the shortened leg and built-up shoe he now wears.

The Larre family was close; the brothers even had their own hockey team and baseball team. As the St Walburg local history book tells it, "Times were tough in the early years, but the Larre boys were an enterprising lot." Even so, there were darker depths to the impoverished rural family. Larre says that his brother Peter was often severely depressed, and had bouts in which he would huddle in a corner of the house crying, considering suicide. Sometimes they had to take him to the local asylum. His brother's boyhood trouble was "the worst suffering I've ever seen." Larre decided then that he wouldn't be a doctor but that "some day I'll do something about that."

Lucien went off to the seminary in nearby Battleford, where he took a bachelor's degree in philosophy. In 1958 he was ordained as an Oblate, an order he later left to become a diocesan priest in Regina. Following ordination he studied at the universities of Alberta and Ottawa, coming away with M.A.s in guidance and counselling and in comparative religion.

After a teaching stint in Alberta, he returned to Saskatchewan in 1967 to work as a guidance counsellor at Miller High School, one of Regina's separate schools. Special-education teacher Mel Kartusch remembers Larre as a jolly, soft-spoken man loved by everyone. But he occasionally revealed incredible flashes of temper. Once some members of the local Apollos motorcycle gang arrived at a school dance. "Larre just went wild," Kartusch says. "Hammered the hell out of them. I couldn't believe it." Larre, claims Kartusch, "used to brag about his strength all the time. And he was big, his upper body was massive."

At Miller, Larre also met a social studies teacher, Gus Rozycki (who, in March, 1988, was appointed Bosco's superintendent of children's services in Edmonton). Larre loved music and together he and Rozycki created a ninety-member choir called the Miller Rovers. "Father became all-consumed with the choir," says Kartusch. Throughout the late 1960s Larre raised funds, organized chocolate-bar drives, took the choir to Europe. Then he began to speak to Kartusch of his next ambition: to provide special care for the "lost" kids who wandered into his guidance office, kids, he said later, who reminded him of his brother Peter. He and Kartusch began to drive around Regina looking for the first treatment home. "Our dream," says Larre, "was to give them the professional care of a psych ward but . . . in a family setting, so that they could live on ordinary streets and ride their bikes."

"WHEN IT COMES TO CONTROLLING YOUNGSTERS, YOU ONLY HAVE FEAR AND LOVE TO WORK WITH"

In 1971 Larre found a house on Hill Avenue, a middle-class, bungalow-lined street in west Regina. Larre would later name the home Bosco 1, after St John Bosco, a nineteenth-century Italian priest who cared for and taught abandoned children. Like Father Larre, Bosco grew up poor and established his homes for children through his own efforts; he became known as a great fund-raiser. Among Bosco's teachings on child care: "As far as possible avoid punishment . . . try to gain love before inspiring fear."

Larre still had to figure out how to buy the house. He hoped the Catholic Church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or the provincial government would provide the cash, but both refused. Years later, Larre would tell a *Regina Women's Guide* reporter that the government thought the proposed home was a duplication of services, while the Church simply didn't want to get involved. His solution, he said, was to offer a 1964 Pontiac owned by the Oblates as collateral for a bank loan. Larre got his money and, in the bargain, the first of his many colourful anecdotes: "He [the bank manager] really gave us a loan on a car that didn't belong to me!"

The upshot was that Larre succeeded in establishing a home for the care of troubled teenagers without the sanction of government or church. Kartusch drifted out of his orbit and into the demands of his own teaching career, but Larre found other help. Mary McGuire, a sister of St Joseph from a Pembroke, Ontario, convent, is often noted in the Bosco literature as co-founder. A teacher of nursing at Regina's former Grey Nuns hospital, McGuire received permission from her mother house to help at Bosco 1. Later other Pembroke sisters would join the venture, but in the early years it was Sister Mary who was drawn closest to the Father. In the new family they created, Father Larre was the dad and Sister Mary the mum.

Father Larre and Sister Mary moved into Bosco 1 on June 21, 1971. Referrals from psychiatrists and psychologists came so quickly the home could not accommodate them; for the first while Father Larre slept dorm-style with the boys in the family room and Sister Mary bunked with the girls in the master bedroom. The crowding was soon relieved by additions which were built onto the bungalow, with the kids hired on as labourers under the government's Winter Works job-creation programme. They signed over their pay-cheques and left all aspects of their survival to Father Larre. (Later, Bosco 2 was bought across the street and the girls moved in there.) It was a rollicking, free-spirited family. Father Larre didn't lock the door at night, and the kids, who then were mostly over sixteen, were free to come and go. "We could stay out to three in the morning if we wanted to," one remembers. Sometimes the Father lost his temper, but even if the kids were a little afraid of his strength they were also impressed by it.

In 1972 Larre's venture was successfully registered as a charitable nonprofit society, with a board composed of the Father, Sister Mary, two other sisters of St Joseph, and a few lay volunteers. The goal of the Bosco Society for Disturbed Adolescents was to treat emotionally disturbed teenagers in a group-home setting, to raise funds, and to open more Bosco homes as the need arose. Father Larre also got the provincial department of health to license Bosco as a psychiatric home. Bosco finally started to get referrals and per diems from Social Services, which could hardly ignore a treatment programme at a time when there were few options for such kids outside of the hospital psychiatric wards. The new kids entered an unrestrained atmosphere of hanging out, having fun, boys and girls together. Though Larre and McGuire lived on the premises – their bedrooms were in a part of the house known as "the back" – the older teenagers flaunted their promiscuity and wild behaviour. Some of the girls got pregnant. Through it all, Father Larre clung to his idea of what care for the teenagers should be: "We operated just as a home . . . we just ran as a family. To those kids I was their dad. When we went on holidays we took them with us. They were our children; we were their parents."

Larre hired an old friend, Mel Kartusch, as administrator of the homes, but Kartusch lost his faith in the priest's leadership

In December of 1972, McGuire and Larre loaded up two carloads of kids and headed for Disneyland. They stopped over in Las Vegas, where one lad remembers nights of wandering the boulevards and swilling beer with a friend. He also remembers the emotional outbursts of both Larre and the kids, exacerbated by exhausting nonstop driving stints.

There was canoeing on the Churchill River, as well. To get ready for one such trip Father Larre borrowed a .303 hunting rifle from a friend. The gun went back to Bosco where, on Easter Sunday, 1973, a teenaged resident named Patrick Glover took it and shot himself in the head. Larre still talks about the shooting with horror and vividness. He obviously liked Glover: "He was fun to be with. He told stories, would chat, would always laugh." At Bosco they thought he was a drug abuser, not a potential suicide. That evening, they had had "a beautiful dinner" and had sung a few songs. "When we heard the shot everyone was upstairs. And that shot was below us," says Larre. "The bedrooms were below. So there was this big shot and silence."

Into that silence drops the story of John Kahnapace, a fourteen-year-old who arrived at Bosco 1 on April 22, 1973. As he puts it, "As I was pulling in, Patty Glover was pulling out." All Father Larre can remember of Kahnapace now is that he was a "big boy" who didn't stay very long. He disputes most of what Kahnapace has to say about his stay at Bosco, and especially the following: that Kahnapace was directed to sleep in Glover's room and that Kahnapace was shown to the room before all the gore of the death had been cleaned up. Larre himself tried to clean up the room that night, but couldn't finish: "It had a certain smell to it," he says. Kahnapace also remembers that the room "had an unusual smell in it." Larre says that no kids were billeted in Patrick Glover's room for months after the suicide because they were too spooked by it – they used it for storage instead. But Kahnapace, who was at Bosco for only six months, distinctly remembers sleeping in the room, and so does his roommate.

The roommate also remembers that Kahnapace was one of the smarter kids at the home and that there was a lot of friction between him and Father Larre. Kahnapace had been in a foster home in Grayson, Saskatchewan, where life had been violent and cruel, but where he'd known what to expect – that he'd get hit. At Bosco he wasn't so sure what the score was.

Then one of Mary McGuire's relatives came to visit – Kahnapace thinks he was a brother or a nephew "from college down east." The man's college ring went missing and Kahnapace stood accused. Father Larre had promised his door was open to troubled souls any time, day or night. So, unable to sleep, Kahnapace went to "the back" to speak with Larre. At the doorway

to McGuire's room Kahnapace paused, thinking he heard Father Larre inside. "The floor was bad, it squeaked, and I thought if I walked away they would hear it. So I knocked and went in."

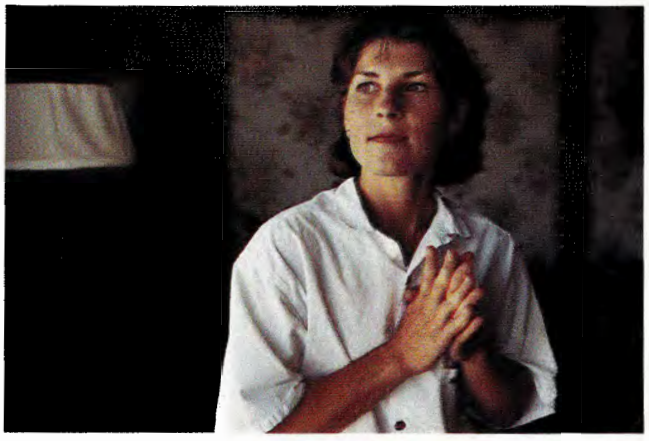
He remembers that Father Larre was in his bathrobe and Sister Mary, who was then suffering a great deal from multiple sclerosis, was on her bed, her wheelchair beside it. Larre told Kahnapace to sit in the wheelchair. The priest then began to strangle the boy, demanding that he confess to the theft. Kahnapace says that for the next half-hour he was choked and revived, choked and revived. Larre's voice floated in and out, accusing, harsh. Sister Mary sat on the bed watching. Kahnapace remembers having the strange thought that if he died, Larre would forfeit Kahnapace's social-services cheques. ("Up until that point in my life, all I was to people was a dollar sign," he explains.)

After that, Kahnapace vowed to keep his peace and survive. But when Larre went after him six months later, he grabbed a poker and defended himself. Then the fifteen-year-old dropped the poker and walked out of the Bosco home for good.

Larre cannot remember the stolen ring or the incident in the back (and Mary McGuire will not talk to the media about any aspect of her time at Bosco). He doesn't remember Kahnapace threatening him with a poker, though he says that "it was possible." But on one thing he is clear: "I never, never, choked a kid until they were unconscious. . . . I know that sometimes they would have been frightened because I held them very tight, but I always made sure that they were breathing because I didn't want to take a dead kid to the hospital because I had choked him." He might have held kids tight when they were violent or when he was trying to restrain them from cursing at him or the sisters. But, he says, "I made darn sure they were breathing and I was talking to them while I was choking them, and I would say things like 'Will you please stop hitting if I let you go?'. . . I have to say that I'm sure not perfect. . . . But I was blessed with a few things. One is that I feel very secure and confident inside, and I was never afraid of my kids, whether they were dangerous or not."

In the early years at Bosco, there's no doubt that Father Larre was where the buck stopped as far as discipline (and most other things) went. There were times when he was stressed to the limit. "We never had enough money to do what we were doing," he remembers. "Worse than that we were very short of staff. Like one time we had twenty-one kids and there were five of us." Ex-staff have said that the kids only rarely attacked them, but when they did it was Larre who stepped in. Larre even had a strategy: with his left leg damaged by polio he couldn't maintain his balance standing up if someone took a punch at him or he swung back at them. He'd fall over if he tried to kick back when being kicked. The best he could do was grab the kid and hold tight. He also used his temper. Sometimes, he says, he did lose it, but more often he deployed it deliberately. "I would pretend I was very angry. . . . I would really lay it on the line with some of my tough kids. I would try to frighten them, because that's. . . . the only thing you could do until somebody got through to them." The trouble with discipline, of course, is that it can be perceived differently by the person administering it and the person on the receiving end. A case in point is Garth N. Garver's; his are allegations that definitely don't surprise Father Larre because Garver has been making them ever since he left Bosco in 1974.

Joan Borys became the spokesperson for a neighbourhood group worried that the staff was overworked and the kids undersupervised



Garver arrived at Bosco on an October Monday in 1973; John Kahnapace remembers him as a boy "with knock-knees and glasses" and cerebral palsy who was "helpless to defend himself." He was a psychiatric referral; he had been sexually abused by his father's hired hand at the age of ten and had attempted suicide five times in the previous eight months. A psychologist had diagnosed him as a "chronic manipulator." A few of the Bosco kids showed Garver around. He remembers seeing the swimming pool, the wall-to-wall carpet, and the colour TV, and being impressed. He also realized that there was probably nowhere else for him to go.

Garver was extremely bright and also religious, belonging to an offshoot of the Mormon Church called the Reorganized Latter-day Saints. He loved to engage the Father in long religious chats, but some of his other verbal outpourings, says Larre, drove staff and children up the wall. Much of the talk was about sex, though Larre stressed that all Garver did was talk. To the priest, he was an anomaly. He wasn't a delinquent, and he wasn't psychotic. The boy "wouldn't come and live on earth with the rest of us, you know, where we had to make our beds and clean up after ourselves and things like that. Whenever you wanted to do something practical and useful, he wanted to discuss religion and philosophy."

Larre says he wasn't told of Garver's history of sexual abuse, and he couldn't understand his strange behaviour. To Larre it was all an attention-getting "stage production." Though Garver talked about suicide, Larre didn't think he seemed depressed; the priest came to believe that Garver was only pretending to have a problem. When, in a fit of anger over being teased about his cerebral palsy, Garver deliberately broke his own glasses, he was taken to the back to be disciplined by the Father. "We got into a tussle," says Father Larre, "and I finally slapped him."

"I never hurt him," says Larre, "but it was amazing what it did. It just sort of brought him to reality. Finally here was one person who wouldn't stand for this nonsense. . . . His bizarre behaviour stopped. It was amazing."

Garver chalks up the change in his behaviour to his adopting a "policy of obedience" based on fear. And the fear was inspired by more than a slap: Garver claims that in the "tussle" he was also choked by Larre, choked to unconsciousness. "Have I deliberately broken my glasses since?" he asks. "No. However I have attempted suicide since and, for what it's worth, I think I would have eventually outgrown the period of breaking my glasses anyways."

Pressed about the allegations, Father Larre says, "The more Garth repeats a story, the more glamorous it becomes. So he takes an incident fifteen years ago and he talks about this thing, and I personally

don't think he's lying either. It's not the same as lying. . . . It's always this horrible need to get people's attention."

In Larre's first three years, from 1971 to 1974, he'd been able to add Bosco 2 and Bosco 3, on Hill Avenue and nearby Argyle Street, and keep them filled; the department of social services had come to rely greatly on Bosco Homes as a place of last resort. The per diem negotiated with Bosco was high, but sometimes there was nowhere else to turn. When Barbara Byers, a young government social worker employed in the city of Yorkton, was desperately seeking a place for a disturbed teenager, she discovered Bosco Homes, and considered it "a real life-saver."

Byers met Father Larre when she came to visit the girl she had brought to the Regina home. Then she moved to the city to take a degree in social work at the university. In late 1974 Byers was invited to her client's baptism; she got talking to Father Larre, who asked her to work the two and a half months of her practicum at Bosco. She agreed and started full time in the spring of 1975. When the practicum was done, Byers took a job in the personnel department of Social Services and stayed on at Bosco as a volunteer, living there nights as a supervisor of one of the houses.

By the end of that summer, they'd opened Bosco 4, and she, Father Larre, Mary McGuire, and two sisters of St Joseph, were overseeing roughly thirty kids. They also had the help of Don McGuire, Mary's brother, and Roy Franklin, who was married to Larre's niece Claire. But the priest was realizing that love and prayer and the kind of discipline and treatment he and his volunteers could offer wasn't enough to help the kids; in 1976 he hired his first trained psychologists.

For a young social-work graduare like Byers, Bosco was challenging and fun. She sat up for late-night drinking sessions with Larre and the sisters ("Back then, all of us, except for one of the sisters, could really drink," she recalls). Larre would entertain them with stories of his shrewdness. He had succeeded in cajoling several neighbours into selling out, adding three full duplexes on nearby Pasqua Street ro his growing collection of homes. "He laughed about how he outwitted the Church, various congregations, the government, donors, whoever else," says Byers. But as Byers matured and began relying less on Larre and more on the psychologists for advice, she says she came into conflict with the Father. "He always reserved the right to interfere." She saw him as inconsisrent with the kids, and began to think that some of his therapies were cruel.

Once he called a meeting of all thirty kids in the sunken living room of Bosco 1. He pulled four or five into the centre of the floor, says Byers, and "verbally assaulted them" for over an hour, revealing much they may have told the priest in confidence. Larre suspected the kids of using and dealing drugs in the homes. The meeting ended with the priest doling out handfuls of unidentified pills. If the kids were willing to buy drugs from strangers on the street, then surely they should be willing to take drugs from him, he said. The kids sat inside the circle of onlookers, unable to leave the room until they had swallowed the pills. When Byers later asked the Father what the pills were, he told her they were nothing harmful, just sugar pills.

Larre remembers that session well; to him it was rough but efficacious justice. "Now I'm not dealing with altar boys, okay? These are really tough kids, eh. And it's the tough ones that were handling the drugs and they were hurting the weaker ones. . . . So I gave them a bad time. I really got after them to take those drugs. It was cruel. It was hard. But at the time we felt as a staff it was necessary. And by God it worked."

Byers wasn't amazed so much at the scenario's success as at the way Father Larre "psychologically took them apart like a jigsaw puzzle." Then one day, she says, he used the same techniques on her. He sat with her in the front seat of a car parked on the street outside one of the houses; Mary McGuire and a resident of Byers's house sat in the back. For two hours Larre questioned her professional and personal capabilities, yelled at her. One of the charges stung so badly that it sticks out in her mind. The boy in the back seat had a crush on Byers, and Larre said she was encouraging it. She also remembers the feelings: humiliation, uncertainty, insecurity, physical fear. "I somehow thought that if I went for the door I'd be really sorry." In retrospect, she says, "I'm really glad I was working with the psychologist with this boy, because I think if I hadn't I would have been susceptible to [Larre's] allegations. I would have questioned myself, like the rape victim who questions if she wore improper clothes." If she, an adult and a social worker, couldn't stand up to this kind of treatment, she wondered, how did the kids take it?

Larre says, "It's funny, it must have been a pretty tense moment because I still remember sitting in the car with her." He says that he was acting in the interests of the boy and at the suggestion of the boy's psychologist: the boy's crush on Byers was so strong that he would not form a therapeutic bond with anyone else. "She thought I was accusing her of seducing him . . . . I never, ever, thought that." Could he have accused her in front of the boy? "I might have done that. I never meant that. . . . If I did it in front of a youngster it was definitely a mistake." Byers says that she decided to leave Bosco almost as soon as she got out of that car; she might have walked out right then, but she needed some time to find a place of her own to live. Larre also remembers the aftermath: "I remember she left with bad feelings towards me. . . . I must have hurt her badly because I couldn't get through to her after that."

"HOW IS FATHER LARRE A PROPHET FOR US AND OUR COMMUNITY?" THE ANSWER IS UP IN THE AIR

After she left Byers began to think of other things she'd seen at Bosco, of kids who had emerged from the back with bruises. A year after she quit she went to Social Services with another ex-staff member to lay out her concerns about the treatment programme. But she had no proof of anything specific that the department could act on.

She still recalls being angry when she read the newspaper in 1978 that named Larre Citizen of the Year. "When I left there, who would believe Barb Byers, social worker, department of social services, against Father Larre, Catholic priest, founder of Bosco Homes, Citizen of the Year?" In 1988, Barb Byers was elected president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour. She has a different kind of profile now.

By 1980, the professionalization of Bosco Homes was almost complete. Once Larre began to hire expert staff it became hard to keep unpaid volunteers happy. One of the last recruits was Ria Kaal, who stepped into the shoes of Sister Mary (who had gone off to the Illinois School of Professional Psychologists in Chicago and had drifted away from the Bosco connection). Kaal, a convent dropout, had joined Larre in 1977 at the age of twenty-six. Her energy and ambition matched Larre's, and they soon became a team, later frequently travelling together in a telephone-equipped Oldsmobile with the licence RIA 1.

Larre had moved out of the homes because he was often away on lucrative speaking engagements and his absences "became too difficult for the kids." He was still occasionally consulted about discipline. Rodney Spork, who entered Bosco in November, 1980, remembers having great respect for the Father as the head of the programme. He also remembers Larre once bloodying his nose and breaking his glasses. Another time, he was told to sit cross-legged on the floor while Larre, seated in a chair, kicked him repeatedly in the thigh. "With the incidents with Father," Spork says, "I just took it as punishment." He did sneak out of the house at night with a friend and once kicked a nun in the leg. In his view he deserved punishment, but he says Larre "overstepped his bounds."

Bosco Homes seemed headed on an unstoppable path of expansion. Larre purchased a northern camp, Camp Grizzly, at Deschambault Lake, and the Lazy-B Ranch, just north of Regina. The ranch was never licensed as a treatment centre, but supporters loved the image of troubled city kids in a healthy, outdoor setting. Referrals to Bosco Homes came from social services departments in other western provinces and the Yukon, as well as from Saskatchewan's department of Indian and native affairs. But there was never enough money from government per diems to pay for all the services Larre offered the kids, or for the education and upgrading expenses he'd taken over on behalf of some of the staff, who were now mostly salaried.

Bosco needed something big, and in 1983 Larre came up with it. The priest had always loved country music; Kaal helped Larre organize the first Big Valley Jamboree, the annual fund-raiser that would soon allow Larre to stand shoulder to shoulder with his country-music idols before an audience of thousands. That same year Larre received the Order of Canada.

But the first Jamboree was a failure that cost Bosco over $100,000. Larre heard about some federal money that had been earmarked for developing tourism in the Craven valley, and went after $1.5-million of it. The noises from Ottawa were initially good, and on that basis Larre committed to building grandstand facilities, a racetrack, and concession booths – and signed contracrs in advance with cowboys for the next year's chuck-wagon races to be held at another Bosco event, the Big Valley Round-Up. Then the federal government backed out. All it wanted to do was promote tourism – it didn't want to be associated with a group that was also involved with the treatmenr of troubled children. Creditors were waiting for their money – tradespeople who weren't going ro be persuaded to donate their services. The reputation Larre had built over the years was on the line. The Father turned from the federal government to the provincial government in the hope that the Jamboree could be saved.

The provincial government, however, was under siege from a group called the Concerned Citizens Committee of Lakeview and Normandy Heights. By 1984 Bosco was big business, trying to get even bigger, and it was run largely out of eighteen residences it owned in the original neighbourhood. Seven of those homes were group homes, bringing up to fifty kids into the neighbourhood.

Joan Borys, a home-based child-care worker who had lived on Pasqua Street for eleven years, was one of several neighbours who became worried about the homes. There was a raft of petty and not-so-petty crimes, committed by the kids. Borys's own son was set upon in a local park and had his jacket ripped off – two Bosco boys were charged and convicred of threatening with illegal weapons in that incident. Borys says that when she and others approached Bosco, they were usually told "it wasn't our kids." Borys says neighbours also worried that the staff was overworked and the kids were undersupervised, and grumbled abour the traffic Bosco brought into the local srreets. But Larre, Borys says, was "flippant" and unwilling ro listen to outside opinions. As a result, sixty-five local families donated twenty dollars each to start the citizens' group. Father Larre describes the ensuing conflict as "a real smear campaign."

Concerned Citizens successfully lobbied for a bylaw that would set limits on the concentration of such homes in any Regina neighbourhood. Also the group began pushing for a community board that would make Bosco more open and accountable to the public. Then something happened that for Borys changed the tenor of the fight. A native girl from the homes confided to Borys that she had been raped twice while at Bosco. "The last thing I wanted," says Borys, "was to have to deal with allegations such as these."

She felt compelled to help, and took the girl's story to the referring agency, Indian and Native Affairs, to find out if the department knew whar had happened. The response from the staffer she spoke to amounted to "Yeah, I can believe it." Borys pushed and pushed and finally the girl was moved into a foster home. The irony, Borys says, was that after she visited the new home, she wasn't sure rhe girl was better off than she had been at Bosco. "We do need places rhat serve the needs Bosco is supposed to serve. There are just not many places for kids like these."

Meanwhile, former residents of Bosco, including Garth Garver, had come to the group with other allegations, which the group passed on ro the government. It was enough to persuade Social Services to place a two-month moratorium on referrals, beginning in April, 1984. During those months, George Blacklaws, a department official, investigated the allegations by drawing them to rhe artention of Father Larre and other members of the staff. Larre told Blacklaws rhat sometimes tempers were lost "on the spur of the moment." These were small "incidents of frustration" that could be blown out of proportion, and he was truly sorry that they had ever happened. Blacklaws remembers that Larre's explanations left him satisfied.

Blacklaws was concerned, however, about the quality of the treatment programme at Bosco. He thought that no-one was monitoring the children's progress, and recommended that social workers be given better access to the kids. He also wondered about the logic of starting the Big Valley Jamboree: why did Bosco need a music festival that was going to take a long time to make money? Finally, Blacklaws noted that the programme was on a break-neck path of expansion for no apparent reason. It was getting too big, he said, and everything was in the hands of Larre, a man Blacklaws described as "heading for burnout."

Larre says that he has never been close to burnout, but that he was sure being thrown some curves. The federal feasibility study on Big Valley had also queried the need for the events: "One would have to question 'what's in it for Bosco Homes?' Clearly, even at this level and with the additional capital expenditure required, very little. However there is something in it for the Province of Saskatchewan." Tourist dollars, of course.

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Valley could become a big draw.
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Larre, who had run things pretty
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5, Larre managed to recruit a com-
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und itself in a bit of a quandary. "It
heir fault," says Larre. "They had
lines. They didn't know what their
was, and it caused confusion and
lings and eventually there was a
truggle."

Homes board received the govern-
ment per diems for the children, but couldn't solicit money directly from the public — that was Bosco Society's job. If the Homes board couldn't meet the costs of the treatment programme it had to ask Bosco Society to cover the shortfalls as the need arose, an approach the ombudsman's report was to describe as "cap in hand."

Cap in hand might have worked if both the Homes board and the executive director, Mel Kartusch, had kept their faith in Father Larre. But Kartusch and board chairperson Virginia Jedlic both began to feel that a lot of money was being raised in the name of troubled kids that wasn't coming to the treatment programme. Kartusch found it particularly offensive that the Father and Ria Kaal seemed to be living solely at the expense of a charitable organization. He took to examining their credit-card receipts. Over a period of three years, Larre's and Kaal's expenses were running an average of just over $6,000 a month — not counting their enRoute and gas-company cards — all paid through Bosco Society and Big Valley. Eli Fluter explains, "Well, if you have people who are working for you who have no income or very little income, most expenses end up being company expenses, [in this case] Society expenses."

It was for a time hard to tell which revenues and expenses went with which organization — something the auditors, Peat Marwick, complained about at the end of every year. The basic problem was that Father Larre himself was hard-pressed to describe where Bosco ended and he started. Eli Fluter expresses the kernel of the problem best: "People expect more from a non-profit [organization] than they do from regular business. [What] I would take as normal practice, the public doesn't. . . ." Meanwhile, the Homes board was having a touch-and-go time meeting the treatment programme's monthly expenses, and wondering why — lottery and donation revenues were on the rise.

In September, 1987, the Bosco auditors, reminded all concerned in a management letter that, "Currently Bosco Homes does not own the group homes which house their students. . . . We suggest that title to the group homes be transferred to Bosco Homes Inc., since the corporation is sole user of these homes." After a $50,000 shortfall that left it temporarily unable to meet the December, 1987, payroll, the Bosco Homes board finally decided to push the issue. On January 5, 1988, the board sent a letter to the chairman of the Bosco Society board, Dave Tkachuk, requesting a guaranteed monthly budget and the transfer of the houses, Camp Grizzly, and the Saskatchewan ranch to Bosco Homes Inc. Tkachuk resented the tone of the letter and the non-negotiable nature of the demands: "I thought if I wrote a rather brusque letter and cut their funds off, that would certainly gain their attention." What Tkachuk wrote was, "There will be no further cash delivered to Bosco Homes in Regina until your attitude towards us is conducted in a civilized and Christian manner."

Bosco Homes managed to creep along until April, paying their staff but unable to send on to Revenue Canada the required payroll deductions. The board soon owed $97,000 in taxes on approximately forty employees, and were forced to go back to Bosco Society for help. In a letter dated April 14, 1988, the Society lawyer, Robert McCrank, wrote: "We regret that your current cash shortfall has become so severe. Since your current shortfall represents employee deductions owed to Revenue Canada, for which your directors are personally responsible, substantial penalties will be payable."

The Society, however, offered to pay off the debt if the Homes board met three conditions: the Society would have the right to appoint the majority of the board; the Society would continue to own the residences and other facilities; and "Since the ability of Bosco Society to raise funds is dependent on its public image, the Directors and Officers must undertake to avoid any public discussion of these matters." The executive director, Mel Kartusch, and then the entire Homes board resigned.

Tkachuk and Father Larre quickly put together a board and called a staff meeting — which by all accounts didn't go well. The ombudsman's report describes the scene: "Father Larre proceeded to deny allegations of personal misconduct, child abuse, theft, and mismanagement. While some of the staff knew him personally, others only knew him by reputation, and few if any had any idea that these were issues." Father Larre's frank talk "left most staff speechless and stunned."

The staff had also caught some of the former board's independent spirit. Some members approached the interim board with the idea that they should run the homes by committee, and that Bosco Society's role would be solely to provide the treatment programme with money. But, as Tkachuk said later, "It was Father Larre's programme and he had a right to a say." In June of 1988, the treatment director, Father Bill Mahoney, and twenty-eight child-care workers handed in their resignations. The rest of the staff followed by the end of the year. The new Bosco Homes Regina board was left to recruit new staff as quickly as it could, and deal with kids who felt aban-

doned. The comment made by ombudsman McLellan on the whole situation is apt: "To an outsider this [fight] seems somewhat bizarre, given that the group homes for the children were/are the raison d'être for the whole Bosco operation."

Dave Tkachuk, chairman of Bosco Society, interviewed over a year after those mass resignations, said, "I know lots of organizations in Canada who have gone through this. It's not an unusual occurrence. It was a bad divorce." He and Father Larre and the rest of the Bosco group are still feeling the repercussions. The Friday after the ombudsman's report was released, focusing Saskatchewan's attention on the question of whether children in the Bosco homes had suffered excessive physical discipline, "The Journal" aired an item prepared by a "fifth estate" team on the controversy. Former Bosco boys described incidents in which they said Larre had abused them – charges the priest repeatedly denied.

Tkachuk's comparison to a bad divorce is apt: children have been caught in this power struggle, the troubled teenagers Bosco was created to help. Not the hundreds of kids who passed successfully through the homes, but the ones whose experiences there, for whatever reason, still haunt them. After the resignations of board and staff, kids began to come forward to Virginia Jedlic, who began to collect the affidavits she eventually turned over to Grant Schmidt. Not content to rest there, Jedlic took those same documents, and released them to "the fifth estate." A set was also shown to me. On national TV, on August 20, Eric Malling held copies of those affidavits on his lap while interviewing Father Larre, even read aloud from one. Virginia Jedlic's discreet investigation, in the heat of the battle, had become something far different. She regarded those personal affidavits as public documents.

Bosco Society was also handing out former staff members' and residents' names to the media. On the list given to *Saturday Night* there were many people who spoke in support of Father Larre, but no-one we located was actually in the homes at the time of the incidents described in this story. They could only express a general shock, disbelief, and anger over allegations of abuse. Cheryl Thibault, who was at Bosco for a year in the late 1970s, summed up the feeling: "I never even heard the Father raise his voice! Abuse, it's not something you can keep secret." But another former resident from the list (who does not wish to be named) clearly remembered raised voices and screams from behind closed doors. His reaction: "I'm just glad it wasn't me."

Society officials themselves were on the offensive. In interviews Edmonton superintendent Gus Rozycki felt no compunction about delving into the past offences and psychological profiles of the residents who had gone public. "These people have dirty laundry to be aired," he said. Dave Tkachuk also warned, "You can't make those claims without leaving yourself open and taking all the consequences that come with it. All of them." As chairman of the Society he was heading his own investigation: "We'll build up reports on everybody and we'll do the best we can to answer the questions." On September 14, 1989, the provincial government decided that it had investigated enough. Grant Schmidt announced that Social Services would entrust no more of its wards to the care of Bosco Homes. But sympathy for "Father's kids" hasn't found much of a place to thrive in the hearts of those fighting to care for them. Caught in the middle are people, some of them still quite young, who have left the Bosco family and finally wanted to tell someone why. They are embroiled in Father Larre's war, which is now not so much a battle against teenaged psychiatric disorders as it is an attempt to preserve the priest's own disordered empire. ~

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