

Plaza Academy head refuses to let school close without a fight

By Mary Sanchez

staff writer

Gary Seabaugh was out after three strikes in Vietnam.

He weathered rocket fragments in his hands and face, mortar fire lodging in his back and legs, and a carbine bullet piercing his shoulder.

Three strikes, three Purple Hearts and a Silver Star brought Seabaugh back to the United States.

Twenty-one years later, Seabaugh is

again down two strikes.

The private alternative high school he has headed for 11 years is out of money. An eviction notice has been issued. The creditors are lining up.

But Seabaugh, now 43, won't be sent packing.

"I think of what I went through in Vietnam and this is nothing," the child psychologist said. "I'll make it through

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this."

The 19 students of The Plaza Academy fill the top floor of the Community Christian Church annex, 32 E. 46th St. Church officials, prompted by \$6,000 in unpaid rent, asked the academy to move out by Nov. 1.

"We really came close to closing it down a couple weeks ago, but the parents came through," said Duane P. Kennedy, social studies teacher.

An emergency meeting for parents was called when the payroll couldn't be met several weeks ago. Parents wrote \$20,000 in checks and pledged to give another \$20,000, saving the school from going under—at least for the immediate future.

More tuition-paying students would rescue the school permanently. In past years 90 percent

of the budget was covered by the \$4,500 annual tuition paid by each student, Seabaugh said.

That system worked fine when enrollment was at 60 or higher. Seabaugh said his worst mistake was assuming the enrollment would keep growing. Over the past several years the school literally has graduated its revenue.

Seabaugh said he needs about 50 students to enroll. The school accumulates about \$15,750 in debts every month.

"I can do a lot of things, but I can't pull money out of the air," said Seabaugh, a 1964 graduate of Shawnee Mission East High School.

He hopes other schools' failures will become his lifejacket.

Students usually come to the academy after they either fail

or get fed up with their regular school. Recently more prospective students have come to the school as they begin looking for other options. Seabaugh said he is hopeful enough students will enroll to keep the school afloat.

Andy Boasberg left the Shawnee Mission public school system to enter the academy after his grades began falling. His father, Howard Boasberg, said the interest academy teachers took in his son made the difference. Andy is now a freshman at a Florida college.

"They take the time to work with the students, which builds self-esteem, which lets them know they can do it," Boasberg said. "I would hate to see it go down the tubes. We need a Plaza Academy in this area."

Other parents, many mem-

bers of a board trying to raise funds by soliciting businesses and foundations, said they at first were taken back by the unstructured atmosphere at the school, but later were won over by their teen-agers' success.

Students call teachers by their first names. No bells ring between classes. Teens are expected to monitor their own time. Some leave the building during lunch for a trip to a nearby fast-food restaurant, others linger on the stairwell smoking cigarettes.

The relaxed atmosphere is the key to success for many students.

Halli Berk, a junior at the school, said she hated going to school at Shawnee Mission South, where she felt other students looked down on her.

"They just made me feel terrible about myself," Halli said.

Other academy students said they were unchallenged by public school, or felt labeled by teachers.

At the academy students are graded on attendance, punctuality, lessons done and percent correct.

And parents also are schooled. They receive counseling along with the teens, who come from schools across the metropolitan area.

"Parents are conditioned to expect poor behavior from their kids," Seabaugh said. "I have to teach them how to stop beating their kids over the head with their failures."

"This place is designed to teach these kids they are exceptional," he said.