‘This is where the kids are’

Dickens wrote about delinquent kids. What do you think “Oliver!” is about? Bad boys have been around since Cain made the Bible, but big cities in an industrial age have made more of them, in both senses of the pun.

Today marks the 100th year of Cook County’s juvenile justice system, the first in the nation. It started because Jane Addams would NOT take no for an answer. It tries to treat kids differently from adults when they fall into trouble, giving today’s Cains a second chance before they turn hopeless and slay their brothers. Clumsy society trying to do the right thing.

And a guy named Dan Basill is looking for a joint near a bad neighborhood to continue a quarter-century’s work in keeping bad boys and girls out of that court system. Gentrification has caught up with him and his workers. He has two weeks to move out of his rented quarters in River North, and he wonders where he can go. Rents are high nearby for the space he wants; and he wants to stay nearby because it’s next to The Green, a mocking name from residents for the concrete slum they live in. The only thing green there is the cash exchanged by dope dealers in barren gangways.

Basill was an ad manager for Montgomery Ward Co. at its historic headquarters on the Near North Side when he came to town. Ward’s went bankrupt a couple of years ago and has reorganized itself, slowly.

For years, Ward’s let Basill have space for his Cabrini Connections program. CC teaches kids from the nearby institutionalized ghetto called Cabrini-Green how to read, write and figure and how to make something out of the rest of life.

Now two of Ward’s white buildings near Chicago and Halsted by the north branch of the river have been sold to developers. In case you haven’t heard, River North is booming.

The buildings will probably go condo. Everything else has. "We want to stay nearby, obviously," Dan says. "This is where the kids are." The neighborhood is gentrifying fast, and The Green will probably be gone by the time your 3-year-old is 21. But there’s a meantime. Thousands still live in The Green, still learn their other lessons there: How to cheat, steal and kill or be killed, how to slide and survive, how to hate and how to fear. Amazing to know a lot of these kids still yearn for something else and still go to tutor programs at the Connection and listen up to volunteers who tell them another bunch of truths.

Life outside the ghetto: Imagine there being such a thing and imagine showing such a thing to kids marked bad from birth. Imagine.

Enough of the sob story. You’ve heard it a million times anyway. Here’s the deal: Dan needs money, volunteers and a landlord with space — about 6,000 square feet near The Green.

His program is twofold. Part teaches about 100 kids a year, part teaches about 100 mentors — who’ll take the lessons back to programs throughout the city the suburbs and beyond. There are four full-time staffers. His program is incorporated as not-for-profit. They raise $400,000 a year, every year, for all costs, including equipment and the full-time salaries. Volunteers do it for free. CC is open five days a week.

Check out the program: The Web site is www.tutormentor.org. Dan is at (312) 467-2899. Go see his space at 844 N. Larrabee St., tell security it’s in location 4-3.

The Green, of course, is hopeless and will be torn down in the next decade. The city is growing again and will want the land. But the kids will be around longer than 10 years, at least the ones who don’t get killed by gangs or drugs. Like in Dickens’ days, they’re just some kids holding out a bowl and asking for “more” without any idea of where it will come from and what will be given.

Jane Addams, who started Hull House here, would understand. Her Hull House is a ghettoist monument in the middle of the campus sprawl of the University of Illinois at Chicago. But her real memorial lives on in the better-than-most, old Juvenile Court system — and in guys like Dan Basill, who explained his work in faltering words: "I’m a father. I have two children. In the future, I don’t want to wish I did something earlier for my kids."