

# Young Christians seek community among the poor

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GRESHAM, Ore. (RNS)—In the two years since David Kneprath and Josh Guisinger moved into the rough-and-tumble Barberry Village complex, about a dozen young Christian men and women have made Barberry Village their home.

Their goal: Create a sense of community in a chaotic neighborhood overrun with drugs, prostitution and gangs.

Their work mirrors, in some ways, the “new monasticism” movement, in which Christians move into urban or rural areas to work with the poor.

David Kneprath (left) and Tyrone Wing (right) live at the rough-and-tumble Barberry Village in Gresham, Ore., as part what they call “intentional living” among the poor. (RNS Photo)

It’s not an easy way to live. Some neighbors have been suspicious. Safety is an ongoing concern. And some of these urban missionaries have burned out on a project that can be a 24-hour-a-day burden.

Yet they’ve been so successful that other complex owners have asked them to replicate their efforts. Congregations have volunteered their services. A woman from Virginia is moving to the Portland area so she can do similar work in another neighborhood.

Now, at least once a month, churches cook meals for the residents at Barberry Village. In early August, children were invited to a three-day Bible camp.

Guisinger and Kneprath and their friends also helped people move. They've thrown birthday parties for neighbors. And they cleaned up one woman's flooded apartment.

Police officers still are dispatched to Barberry Village on a regular basis, sometimes more than once a day. But many neighbors say the complex is safer, friendlier and better for children. A former manager called the young men and women a "godsend."

"I hope they continue to do this," said Eugenia Swartout, who lives at the complex with her family. "It gives us some safety and security knowing there are kind people out here and not just bad guys."

In the beginning, it was just a group of guys sitting around and talking about their faith. Kneprath and Guisinger were buddies in their early 20s, looking to create a ministry that went beyond church walls.

They didn't want to dabble, though. They wanted to dive in, 24/7.

With guidance from a nonprofit called [Compassion Connect](#), they moved with friends into an apartment, putting two sets of bunk beds in one room and using the other two bedrooms as an office and a closet.

Still, they remained outsiders who could live in almost any neighborhood they chose. They had to strike a delicate balance; they didn't want to come on too strong and alienate their neighbors.



David Knepprath, center, sings with other members of the Clear Creek Community Church and residents at the Barberry Village apartments in Gresham. Two years ago, Knepprath and three friends moved into the low-income apartment complex so they could work with their new neighbors. (Benjamin Brink/The Oregonian)

So, while they were open about their Christianity, they didn't plunge into conversations about their faith. Nor did they move in acting as if they could solve the social ills at Barberry Village.

"Our perspective from the start was that we're not here with all the solutions, or even thinking we know all the problems," said Knepprath, who has since moved out but remains active in the ministry.

Guisinger hasn't been bothered by the crime. He previously worked in street ministry and, when he was a kid, his parents invited in strangers who needed help. Living among the poor, however, was something he'd never experienced.

"I wondered if I would be able to relate," he said. "I grew up in a wealthy family. I never lacked a meal or insurance or anything like that."

Knepprath lived at the complex after he got married but moved recently to

be closer to his job. Guisinger and his friend Jared Simons now have two new roommates. Even after nearly two years, Guisinger has no plans to move.

Instead of staying holed up in their apartments, neighbors now go outside and get to know one another. They invite each other over for dinner. It's more like a neighborhood than an anonymous apartment complex.

Jesse Danner, a former heroin and cocaine addict who's been clean for three years, arrived in April 2009 with his wife and their children.

He was worried about moving into the complex, given its reputation. But he met Kneprath and Guisinger when they invited his family for a community meal. Later, Danner's wife started going to church and was baptized on a camping trip. Now Danner goes to church, too.

One day last October, Kneprath came over and asked Danner for some help with a computer. They walked across the parking lot to a friend's place. But Kneprath didn't really need help.

"They actually threw a birthday party for me," Danner said. "It's the only one I've ever had."