

Squatters' rights in the age of foreclosure

Max Rameau is leading the movement that pairs homeless people with empty houses

BY CASSANDRA KOSLEN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

As the current economy leaves many in a lurch, a handful of advocacy groups across the nation are taking it upon themselves to solve the latest surge in homelessness by helping people locate and move in to foreclosed homes as squatters. One such group, Take Back The Land in Miami-Dade, Fla., is receiving attention nationwide for openly championing this cause in their new campaign, Take Back The Housing.

Max Rameau, the group's director, says that being conspicuous is what sets Take Back The Land apart. It is primarily a land control group, with a specific focus on empowering the black community.

As more people become frustrated with the surge in homelessness, the lack of affordable housing and the ironic prevalence of empty homes, many previously held stigmas about squatting are softening. In a New York Times article, a national organizer likened the practice of organized squatting that is growing in popularity to "a modern-day underground railroad."

Take Back The Land gained attention by moving the Trody family back into their own home of 22 years after it was lost to the bank in a credit scam. Rameau was also a founder of the Umjoa Village, a shantytown in Miami that was lost to a fire in April, 2007. Recently, Rameau lectured at PSU, discussing different social solutions to homelessness that we all can be a part of.

Cassandra Koslen: Obviously by doing this you are also making a statement, how much does the statement play into as well as the reality that there are so many people who need to be housed?

Max Rameau: We have too many vacant houses, at the exact same time as we have too many people that need places to stay. This is like a bizarro world, in many ways. And then of course what the government does in response is to give

billions of dollars to the people who have all these empty houses, rather than giving the same amount of money or some other kind of support to the people who don't have any houses. It makes no sense in many ways, and I think demonstrates what some of the limits of what this economic system is, and how unjust it is. This strategy has always

"People are saying, 'I need a house,' and across the street from them there is an empty house. The contradiction has always existed, it just hasn't been exposed."

exposed. So I think we're able to do that, and in that sense, yes.

C.K.: You've been getting a lot of media attention lately, have you been getting more response from the community?

M.R.: We're getting supportive responses from people who live in these areas, and we're getting supportive responses from people who think housing is a human right.

existed, but it would not have always been effective in its implementation. Right now it is, given the crisis. People are saying, 'I need a house,' and across the street from them there is an empty house. So, that is a huge social contradiction. The contradiction has always existed it just hasn't been

One day I was in the office and the phone rang, and there was a lady on the other end, and she said, "There's a house that's next door to me that's been vacant now for almost two years, the grass is up to my knees, I'm getting sick and tired of this." I said, "Ma'am do you know where you're

black-for-black organization, and you've said you speak to neighbors and potential tenants before a move in. To be blunt, how does race factor into your selection process, in terms of both neighborhoods and families?"

M.R.: Fundamentally, we are a land



PHOTO BY CASSANDRA KOSLEN

calling?" And she said, "This is Take Back the Land, right? You guys move people into places? Well, we need to move somebody in here, and mow the lawn!" So she was demanding that we move somebody in, a white lady in a white neighborhood, and we mainly do work in the black community. So, I think she understood the value of having someone in the place both in terms of what it does physically, but also for the stability of the neighborhood.

C.K.: Take Back the Land is primarily a

organization. We're not a homeless organization; we're not a housing organization; we are a land organization. On top of that, we're a land organization specifically dealing with land control in the black community, and the black community's right to control land in the black community. We talk about that openly and clearly, even though most of the media focuses on homelessness or housing. We feel that the race component is important

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