

**SQUATTERS, from page 8**

because although there are many communities that are impacted by homelessness in general, in this housing crisis in particular we feel that the black community, and the numbers will bear this out, is disproportionately impacted both in homelessness and in the larger housing crisis. The black community has been deliberately and systematically denied access to land, and denied control of land. That's in terms of land, but in a broad social sense, we've been denied access to power, and the power of control over our own affairs. That is a significant component to the problem, and therefore a significant component to the solution.

**C.K.:** You make it a point to talk to neighbors in a community before you move people in, and you also work with the families to integrate them into the community. Why do you think that it is important not just to house people, but to also create that larger community?

**M.R.:** We're really operating on at least three different levels. One is that we are trying to help the individuals and the individual families. The second is we want to help the broader community. We think the community is strengthened by having families in homes rather than having them sit vacant, by having good neighbors rather than by having bad neighbors, and by having some sense of cohesion in the neighborhood. We think that moving people in next door to someone without letting them know, even if we don't fully tell them what's going on, is disrespectful. And one of the things that we require is that the families we move in be good neighbors. We tell them, when you see your neighbors in the morning, say good morning. You see them in the afternoon, say good afternoon. If they say you're too loud, you need to quiet down. We have these rules that will help the tenants that we move in to be good neighbors.

The third level is that we're trying to build a movement that is able to happen in a geographical area much wider than Miami, and will have an impact much greater than the individual families that we move in. In order to do that, the initial phases of the movement have to be very clear, very crisp and not have any confusing messages about them. ... We want there to be only one issue, and that issue is that you have a family who has a right to and deserves housing. So we want them to be good neighbors because we feel that not only

helps the individual family, but it also helps the community that they are moving into, and it helps build a broader movement by keeping messages very clear.

**C.K.:** Would you recommend for people to squat on their own?

**M.R.:** People need to do what they need to do to get housing, and they do that. Squatting right now in the U.S. is absolutely rampant and it's primarily, overwhelmingly, happening by people doing this on their own. That's clear and there is no denying that.

With that said, I don't think that squatting itself is the most dignified way of dealing with the problem of lack of housing, and I don't think it's a long-term society-wide solution. The long-term solution is of course to elevate housing to the level of human right society-wide. The only way it is going to be dealt with society-wide is by there being a society wide discussion/clash/struggle around this issue. It could happen with individuals acting individually, but I don't think that is how social change is made, however. Social change is made by people joining organizations, being part of organizations, and then as members of organizations acting as a group fighting for the particular things that they believe in.

**C.K.:** You recognize that what you are doing is illegal. What steps do you take to ensure families have the longest possible amount of staying time in a location?

**M.R.:** The U.S. is signatory to no less than seven treaties which define housing as a human right, including the declaration of human rights. So, at least on the policy side, on the big international law side, this should be completely and totally legal, but it hasn't filtered down yet to the local level. So, while there are specific laws outlawing squatting, there are specific laws which you could argue don't do that. There just hasn't been a reconciliation between the two.

In terms of having people extend their longevity there, we have certain guidelines around the homes that we move people into, both the homes and the families. And the two guidelines are supposed to work together, and we think that this is one of the ways that we can maximize their stay. The homes, for example, have to be in good condition, they have to have the capacity for electricity and running water. And the other benefit to having the family act as good neighbors, is that neighbors will want them to stay and will fight for them to stay.

In the two cases in which we have been very public with the families that are there,

we think that the main reason they have stayed is not because of our great political work, but because there has been no neighbor who has come out and said, I want these people out of there.

There's a whole range of reasons why we'd move someone into a home, and a significant number of those reasons have to do with the ability of them to stay there for a long period of time.

**C.K.:** Describe some of the different families, to put a face on some of the people that you are helping.

**M.R.:** Sure. We have one young lady who went to a political rally. She had a dual masters and the only thing missing for her to get her PhD was her dissertation, which was finished, but she just couldn't pay for another semester of school. Extremely smart, obviously, very bright, very political, and just fell on a series of unfortunate events which completely undermined and destroyed her financial life. So, she was homeless and very frustrated, given the fact that she was so smart and so independent and had been used to being so independent.

The moment that I remember most about her is that when we moved her. We were there with media, and she said, "The guy just asked me where I am going to sleep." We were in the master bedroom, and she said, "I said I was going to sleep in here," and she pointed to the walk-in closet. I was completely shocked. We had discussed this many times, you're moving here, we're giving you a key and etc, so I said, "Come with me for a second," and we went out to the front door. The guy was just changing the lock and I took the keys and I gave them to her and I said, "You know, we want you to walk in the front door. I know what the law says, but we feel that this is your house." And for the first time she realized, she wasn't going to be sneaking in the back door in the middle of the night. She is going to be walking in the front door, and I think it dawned on her that for the first time in a while she doesn't have to live under really degrading circumstances, even though obviously squatting has its own inherent issues. I feel like at that moment a part of her own humanity was reawakened that had died while she was living on the streets and

in the shelters. She wept quietly at the idea of having keys, and she spent the rest of the time just jingling the keys.

**C.K.:** How do you prepare the families that you work with for the possibility of being arrested and the possibility of being separated from their kids?

**M.R.:** I think that the biggest responsibility that we have is to be honest with them and allow them to make their own decisions. We have had a number of families come up to us and ask us for help, and when we explain to them exactly what we do and what the potentials are, who never called us back. Obviously we'd like to help those families, but the important thing is that we don't put them in a position where suddenly they are in a whirlwind they didn't realize they'd be in. We are brutally honest with them, both about what the prospects are and also where we've been, that no one has been arrested and etc. But we are very clear with them and we let them know what some of the possibilities are, which include arrest, which include getting all kinds of trumped

up charges, which include losing their children in the instances that they do have children.

There are very serious potentials, at the same time the most likely scenario really is that the police would tell them to leave and they wouldn't arrest them. If they arrested them the most likely charge would be trespassing, which would be a misdemeanor, which then would not endanger them and their children.

**C.K.:** Having just visited Dignity Village, do you have any thoughts on the recent proliferation of tent cities across America?

**M.R.:** We said when Umoja Village was up in Oct of 2006 to April of 2007, that we would start finding shanty towns and tent cities all over the country, and in 10 years it would be commonplace, but probably in five years you would find them everywhere. It looks like we are beating the 5-year estimate.

We're in a moment where the conditions are clearly declining very rapidly, but people's ideas of what the U.S. is still remains in this past period.

**"She said, 'The guy just asked me where I am going to sleep.' We were in the master bedroom, and she said, 'I said I was going to sleep in here,' and she pointed to the walk-in closet. I was completely shocked."**



**Bouquet of Hope**

Rose Haven provides supportive assistance in regaining dignity and stability to women and children who are experiencing the trauma of abuse, loss of a home or other life disruptive challenges.

## Benefit for Rose Haven

This very special night will include a seated dinner, dance performance by the Oregon Ballet Theatre and feature concert by internationally acclaimed violinist, Aaron Meyer. Adding to an ambiance already rich with color and personality, as the set of the Fête de la Fleur. Featuring breathtaking displays by competing artists, this unique competition will showcase Portland's finest floral artists.

\$65 per person | \$600 for a table of 10  
**Register online at [www.bouquetofhope.com](http://www.bouquetofhope.com)**  
[info@bouquetofhope.com](mailto:info@bouquetofhope.com) | 503.226.2377

**What:** Bouquet of Hope  
**When:** Saturday, May 9th  
**Time:** 5:00 pm  
**Where:** LUXE Autohaus 410 NE 17th Avenue (corner of NE 17th and Glisan)  
**Parking:** Complimentary parking at lot on NE 18th and Hoyt





## Mother Nature's

Earth Friendly Baby Products

Large selection of cloth diapers & wraps, natural baby & mama care products, baby slings & carriers, organic cotton baby clothes, wooden toys,

2627 SE Clinton St.  
 503-230-7077