

Just over three years ago, Labaux was addicted to drugs and lived with his abusive ex-boyfriend, the subject of his book, who nearly killed him in a fit of anger.

Labaux fled to the safety of his family home for a few months, but he was deeply depressed until he started helping build his tiny house, which he worked on for 410 hours.

“Working on my house saved my life,” he says. It’s been essential to his growth since then.

Homes are essential to a person’s wellbeing. But housing is expensive, especially in Eugene, where supply issues, a lack of diversity in home types, and rigid rent and ownership models make affording a place to live a challenge. Some local groups are trying to help.

THE HOUSING AFFORDABILITY CRISIS

Labaux’s house is affordable. It’s part of Emerald Village Eugene, a tiny house community built by SquareOne Villages, a Eugene organization that builds homes for people who would otherwise struggle to find a place to live.

But affordable houses like his are rare.

Median sale price for homes in the Eugene area is \$301,100, according to Zillow. From 2013 to 2017, home sale prices climbed \$213,000 to \$281,000.

Median household income, however, was only \$47,489 during this time, according to Census Bureau data. So, for the median earner, it was — and is — nearly impossible to afford the down payment on a home.

Others can’t even afford a rental agreement.

Median gross rent from 2013 to 2017 in Eugene was \$956, according to Census Bureau data. Median rent is now \$1,595, according to Zillow. Oregon’s minimum

for many. Others who can’t save money for a rental agreement are left on the street.

SquareOne project director Andrew Heben, who lives in a tiny home at Emerald Village, says housing affordability is the primary root of homelessness.

Many people believe that drug abuse and mental health issues cause homelessness, but Heben insists that these problems often stem from living on the street, not the other way around.

Hill agrees, noting that people often turn to drugs as a way to maintain a sliver of comfort when they don’t have a place to live.

“You cannot underestimate the value of housing and a place we would call home. It’s actually a very important part of our mental health, and our physical health,” Hill says.

THE HOUSING AFFORDABILITY CRISIS

But why is shelter—a basic human need—unaffordable in Eugene? Local and national housing policies are deeply flawed, architects and planners say. A major cause of housing unaffordability is a lack of diversity in the types and ownership models of homes in the U.S.

“The way we do housing in this country is insane,” says Jeff Albanese, SquareOne’s program director, speaking to future public policy planners at a class at the University of Oregon College of Design on May 22.

Eugene has very few types of homes. Most housing in the U.S. is built for the upper-middle class, says project director Heben. The options—large, single-family homes and student apartments—are unaffordable for many.

Rigid housing ownership and rent models are also a

The villagers pay \$250 to \$350 every month. Some of this money goes towards maintaining and improving the village, but \$50 goes into savings funds for the residents. This money helps people pay for new rentals if they choose to move out.

Essentially, they gain partial ownership of their house, which they can sell back when they leave.

The system, somewhere between renting and owning, maximizes benefits for the residents.

The houses are small but are designed to feel spacious. A commons area, which is near completion, will contain a communal kitchen, washer, dryer and meeting area. These shared facilities mitigate costs and promote a sense of community.

The residents largely manage their own affairs and decide who moves in when space opens up.

Heben says SquareOne is finding a template that could be replicated throughout the country. The organization is building another village in Cottage Grove, using a mix of private and public funds.

Heben is sharing his affordable housing toolbox with nonprofits all over the country. He’s also consulting for municipal governments, which are interested in building their own affordable villages.

OTHER LOCAL SOLUTIONS

SquareOne has been successful in providing affordable housing in Eugene, but it’s just one of many solutions.

CASA of Oregon’s Manufactured Housing Cooperative Development Center helps people living in mobile home communities to cooperatively buy their parks. This transforms people from tenants to owners, saving them money in the process; their mortgages are often lower than their previous rents.

Homes for Good, Lane County’s affordable housing program, is set to build the Commons on MLK, a fully supported 51-studio-apartment complex for the chronically homeless on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. This publicly funded project will cost \$13 million, but it targets people who regularly cost the city tax dollars by circling through jails and emergency rooms.

“The city is already spending more money than it would on housing by shuffling people around. You don’t need new money; you can just change how you use funds,” says Gail Parrish, who works for CASA.

THE ENTREPRENEUR

Back at EVE, Gilbert Hayes, a gray-haired man with a gentle voice, lives in a tiny home with his 8-year old dog, Sadie. A prominent sign hanging on the outside of the house reads “Gib’s Digs.”

He spent a few years bouncing between friends’ houses and a Winnebago before he found his way to EVE. Hill, the architect who built the house and became friends with Hayes while consulting with him about design details, says Hayes was glum during his time without an address.

But now Hayes laughs easily and is bursting with ideas to improve life for his community.

He and other villagers raised \$5,000 for EVE by selling clear plastic bags outside of Autzen Stadium before Ducks games. The bags are required to bring items into UO sporting events. Eve McClure, a volunteer for EVE, fronted the money for the bags. She bought them online and had SquareOne’s logo printed on them.

Hayes also gives small loans to help people living at EVE from funds he earned by returning glass bottles, and he has plenty of other business plans.

But the best thing he’s found at EVE is love. His partner is a woman who lives a few houses away in the village.

Hayes and Labaux are both flourishing, but most people who need affordable housing aren’t getting it. ■



GILBERT HAYES

wage stayed below \$10 an hour until July 2017 — a monthly wage of \$1,600 before taxes.

Minimum wage is now only 75 cents higher — meaning an income of \$1,720 per month. Assuming that getting a rental requires a deposit of one month’s rent, it would have cost \$1,912 to move in from 2013 to 2017. It would now cost \$3,190.

Even people with jobs may not earn enough to rent an average home.

Dan Hill is an architect and one of the founding members of SquareOne. He donates his time and talents to design affordable houses because he recognizes the gravity of the problem.

“It’s not just an affordability issue. I would say it’s an affordability crisis,” he says.

Expensive housing makes paying bills difficult

problem. To buy a house, people need to save enough money for large down payments. This makes buying impossible for low-income people. If they choose to rent, they lose hundreds or thousands of dollars every month — money that could be going toward buying a home.

SquareOne is one local group combating this homogeneity in housing. “I’m an advocate for creating more diversity in housing. I’ve chosen to pursue this one,” Heben says.

SQUAREONE VILLAGES

EVE, where Labaux lives, is SquareOne’s second project. It was all privately funded. Local architects such as Fifield and Hill designed and built the houses pro bono.