

Living in public housing

by [John and Sylvia Ronsvalle](#) in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue

We were walking up to our third-floor apartment when an elderly neighbor opened her door. "I heard you come in last night," she said. We were distressed, and said we were sorry to have disturbed her. She shook her head at our apologies. "You don't disturb me. I just don't sleep well until I hear you come in at night, and know you're safe."

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When we moved into a public housing project in a high-crime area of Champaign, Illinois, almost two decades ago, the two of us had already been working in the community for eight years. Through empty tomb, inc., a Christian research and service agency, we studied national church-giving patterns. We also coordinated direct services for people in need, and worked in cooperation with local congregations.

But we were surprised at how much more we learned about need when we moved into public housing. We didn't know, for example, that people who live in this housing complex are just as frightened to be here as we are. Where had we picked up the attitude that people who live in such places don't mind their surroundings? We found that people are angry at the confusion that sometimes reigns in the complex. Yet one neighbor told us that she no longer called the police. The last time she called, she listened out her window for what would happen next. When the police officers came onto the property, she was horrified to hear her name and address announced over their radio as the person who had complained. After the incident, she lived in fear of retaliation and was determined not to be that vulnerable again.

Her fears are not unfounded. Another neighbor complained about a group of young men fighting in the courtyard, then came home from church a few days later to find the window of her first-floor apartment smashed and her television gone.

One study reveals that over half the suspects in crimes committed in public housing areas do not live there. As a result, it's difficult to develop accountable relationships

or friendships that might help the residents control their environment.

A number of factors influenced us in our decision to move into public housing. John Perkins, founder of Voice of Calvary Ministries, was one. Perkins talks of the "Three R's": relocation, reconciliation and redistribution. We visited Perkins and his wife, Vera Mae, in Mississippi in the mid-1970s, not long after we began empty tomb. We were impressed with how they lived out these principles. John Perkins had left a dangerous community in Mississippi at 16 (his brother had been shot and killed by a local sheriff); he and Vera Mae had a comfortable life in California. So it was not easy for them to answer what they saw as God's call to return to rural Mississippi. But they returned and established Voice of Calvary Ministries at great personal cost, including the long-term physical consequences of a severe beating John received at the hands of local authorities.

A friendship with local pastor W. H. Donaldson was another deciding factor. Bill Donaldson grew up in the early part of the century. He remembered the time his schoolteacher mother hid him and his brother in the coal bin. She feared her sons might be old enough to meet the needs of a lynch mob looking for a black man who had offended a white woman in town that day. Donaldson had to leave his family in Arkansas and move to St. Louis in order to find a high school that would accept a black student. And he told of the time he was carrying a log at a Depression-era work camp. He dropped his end, and the white man left holding the log swore at him. Bill swore back-it was before Jesus had gotten hold of his soul, he added. The work camp foreman came to his tent early that evening to warn Bill that the man at the other end of the log had a crowd getting ready to teach him manners for swearing back. The foreman planned to stick by him, but, as Bill explained to us with a smile, he didn't wait around to see if the foreman would keep his word.

We respected Bill as a thinker and a Christian leader. Because of his skin color, he had faced incredible struggles. He had no choice but to face these challenges. We, on the other hand, could choose. Because of our own circumstances, we could avoid the difficulties our poor neighbors faced. Yet we became convinced that we could not remain faithful to our calling unless we shared these difficulties.

So we applied to move into public housing, knowing there was a waiting list. It turned out that the management was trying to integrate the apartments. Since we were the only whites who had applied, we got bounced to the top of the list and moved in 30 days later.

There was no universal support for our decision. When our plans became clear, we began letting folks know as they came into empty tomb for help with food or clothing. One young girl announced, "My momma says you shouldn't do that. They'll bogart [intimidate] you and hurt you." There was a caste system among the poor, and we were moving to the lowest rung.

Well-meaning friends were caught off guard. On one occasion, when we explained our plans, someone responded, "Well I could never do that-people would think I was nuts." At least we knew where we stood.

It was not a very large ghetto by big-city standards. Three housing complexes, comprising 241 units, crowded together where Fourth Street ends at Bradley Avenue. In 1980 we moved into an apartment at Bradley Park. The five blocks directly south of the complex were known as the Oak-Ash area. Shotgun houses and shacks were scattered along this web of streets, and at its center was the fabled Blue Island Tavern.

Four years after we had moved to our apartment, a young man we knew went into that bar and started firing. Patrons responded with a hail of gunfire-12 to 15 shots, the police later said. The young man was hit in the chest and back, and died from a bullet in his head. It was difficult to know how many patrons opened fire, because the guns involved were not recovered. Weapons charges were not filed, said officials, because those who fired guns pointed out that their guns allowed them to defend themselves.

The Oak-Ash area was cleared a few years ago, and replaced with newer homes. The three public housing complexes at Fourth and Bradley remain.

We backed into the issue of sewers. Or rather, they backed into our apartment. On Palm Sunday 1981 we returned to find the carpet in our first-floor apartment flooded. Talking with management the next day, we found that the sanitary sewers had occasionally dumped toilet filth back onto apartment floors for 11 years.

The two of us were determined to do something. But when we contacted officials at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), they refused to fix the sewers under the buildings. HUD sent a letter to all the tenants, so our first-floor neighbor knew about our defeat. She stopped us and said she just wanted us to know that it was OK that we had failed. She was poor and could not walk well, and she was just thankful to have a first-floor apartment and not be in the street. If it

meant cleaning up backed-up sewage every so often, she really didn't mind.

After we had spent three years trying to get HUD's attention, the government fixed the sewers in eight of the ten buildings in the Bradley Park complex. Of course, it took petitions circulated in churches throughout Champaign and Urbana, a packed city council meeting, scores of letters, supportive coverage by the local newspaper and TV stations, involvement of both U.S. senators and the local congressman and two studies to establish that the sewer lines were laid flat rather than at an angle.

The astounding thing we learned is that HUD was able to neutralize any complaint by a tenant by saying, "It's the other tenants who are causing the problem." The president of the tenants' council and many others had heard this excuse again and again.

A HUD official in Chicago told us that he would not attempt to do anything about the sewers. "It's chicken grease. Those people eat more chicken in a week than you do in a year and just dump the grease down the drain. I'm not going to spend good money proving that." It did not alleviate our horror that the official was an African-American.

It was an equal-opportunity insensitivity. A European-American HUD official "fixed" the problem by replacing first-floor carpeting with tile so the sewage overflows would be easier to clean up.

We realized the isolation of the tenants at a church potluck where we spoke about the work of empty tomb. At dinner, an obviously accomplished professional woman made conversation. When asked what she did, she explained she was a local government official. We asked her if she'd heard about the sewer back-ups at the Bradley Park Apartments.

"Of course," she said confidently, and added, "It's the tenants." When one of us said in a small voice, "We're tenants, and we don't think it's us," her shocked look indicated that communication had moved to a different level. "What do you think it is?" she asked carefully. "We think something is wrong with the construction," we said.

The problem lies not only in the attitudes of those outside public housing. Perhaps equally destructive is the sense of inferiority that is internalized by the residents themselves. There may be a generational shift among younger people, but for many

people in their 30s or older, the damage is deep. They do not believe the systems in place work for them. A debilitating fatalism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some have defied this hopelessness, often as a result of their work experience in the broader community. Yet many of our neighbors bear deep wounds.

We often stop to visit Mrs. S. as she sits by the back door of her townhouse. One evening, two little boys came giggling and scampering toward us. "Here!" they announced. "We picked these for you!" We leaned over with cupped hands, and the two bearers of good tidings deposited a pile of marigold heads. We recognized the flowers as those that had been growing in the complex's Girl Scout flower garden. Having heard that picking the blossoms makes plants bloom more, we checked our impulse to talk of preserving the flowers, and instead shared their joy.

We returned home on another night and noticed a boy of about 14 standing at the walkway intersection wearing a full-length down coat. It was open at the front. We did not recognize him. As we approached, he slipped one arm out of the coat and down his side. We walked by and nodded. We continued toward the building door, and used our key to let ourselves in. Looking back, we saw that the boy's arm was back in his coat sleeve. "Do you know what I think he had under his coat?" one of us asked the other. "A shotgun."

Though we have not generally felt in great danger, crime is always present to some degree. Some nights, we lie awake listening to a man yell and pound at a locked townhouse door for hours. We identify with the helpless woman and children imprisoned inside. There are large dents in many of these metal doors. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry about another crime. A university student came to one of the local apartment buildings to buy marijuana and was robbed. He filed a police report. We imagined his logic-how dare these people rob me while I'm here doing business?! He evidently saw our homes as his drug shopping center.

Things got worse in the early 1990s. Crack gangs from Chicago moved into the complex. Strangers in long leather coats-apparently gang uniform-strolled through the complex, making the walk from the parking lot to our apartment feel hazardous. Young boys like the one in the down coat were posted at sidewalk intersections as lookouts; they whistled to warn of anyone approaching.

We heard about a neighbor returning to her apartment to find her door kicked in. Nothing was taken since the goal was to find an unoccupied apartment for drug

deals. Another neighbor physically confronted a stranger trying to force a gift of crack on her pre-teen niece. Then one night we smelled a piercing odor wafting into our apartment. Opening the door, we saw three young men sitting on the landing six stairs away, sharing a pipe. "Excuse me, but we don't gather in the halls here. You have to be in an apartment or go outside." They looked surprised at the little speech. It was only when we went back into our apartment and locked the door that we realized it might have been stupid to have gone into the hall in the first place.

Loud crowds gathered in the courtyard after the bars closed at 1 a.m., and kept up the noise until 3, 4 or 5 a.m. We asked the management people for help. They said the police saw the complex as private property and therefore not their responsibility. They also said they didn't have money for private security. We told them and anyone else who would listen that the complexes were out of control.

In April 1991, two police officers came to one of the complexes to arrest someone. Fifty to 60 people surrounded the officers to prevent the arrest. More police showed up. People kicked and punched the officers, and one man offered \$5 to anyone who would stab an officer. One policeman got a concussion, and another ended up with a torn knee ligament.

The complexes became the focus of communitywide attention. One headline read, "Crack has an address," referring to one of the buildings in the complex where we live. Another headline testified that "owner, neighbors aim to regain control of complex."

One of our neighbors was almost lost in the process. We were on good terms with this friendly young woman and her bright four-year-old son. Then her new boyfriend moved in, and brought a male friend with him. We fellow tenants were disturbed by the loud music and the running in the halls. Then the emergency lights were torn out of their holders, and the fire extinguisher foam was discharged all over the hallway. The apartment managers apparently traced the activity to our neighbor's new friends. In any event, she disappeared.

We saw her sometime later. She did not look well. And she would not meet our eyes to say hello. We guessed that her new boyfriend had introduced her to crack, and that she was supporting him. Recently, we saw her again, and she was friendly. She looked as though she had aged two decades, but she appeared to be out of her street-activity lifestyle.

The battle for the apartments continued. Another neighbor in our building was asked to sell drugs from her apartment. When she refused, five men kicked in her door and severely beat the man who lived with her.

To regain control of the complexes, the managers developed a "banned" list of "troublemakers." Police now arrest them as trespassers if they come to the complex. Families are split when boyfriends, brothers and uncles cannot visit. The procedure was tested in the courts. The U.S. Supreme Court denied a request to hear a challenge to the Illinois Supreme Court's decision to let the banning system stand.

Attorneys have pointed out the need to protect the rights of the individuals on the banned list. We respect those rights. Yet the view from our apartment convinced us that such rights do not exist in a vacuum. We regularly saw children waiting in the early morning hours for their school bus. They looked as tired as we felt. Kept awake by the loud noise in the courtyard all night, how could these children be expected to learn anything the next day? What's the balance between the rights of the banned individuals versus the right to have a decent, safe community? We don't know. But we can't help wondering how much debate there would be if these people had been gathering in neighborhoods where incomes were five or ten times higher than incomes here.

We write this reflection on the 18th anniversary of our move into public housing. The drama goes on. Because our rent is not subsidized, we believe that we are not required to tell the management our income. Previous managers agreed, and since 1994 we have not done so. According to what we read in the law and the HUD handbook, management can only charge us the maximum rent.

But a new manager, representing a national company, said we must tell him our income. We sent him the written basis for our understanding and asked him to send us the written basis for his request. He did not respond in writing but called instead, and said we must tell him our income. Again we asked for written documentation. He said, "We can choose not to renew your lease just because we don't want to." Then he did write a letter, saying that he was sending our case to the attorney with an "intent to terminate."

It's tiring, but we understand that the system should work, and we believed that the manager was mistaken. We had enough confidence to contact a sympathetic attorney. We know that rule of law, rather than an official's opinions, should prevail.

Perhaps if we followed through, the manager would follow the written rules next time with some other tenant.

Then we received a letter of apology from the property manager who had tried to evict us. His company's attorney, who would not return our lawyer's phone calls, had read a fax we sent containing the results of our reading of the Code of Federal Regulations. Apparently their own research had confirmed our understanding. The property manager wrote to say he "deeply" apologizes for "any inconvenience this may have caused you."

Since the local housing authority is taking over the complexes and plans to empty the buildings, it looks as if we will still have to move. But we're being relocated, not evicted—a small but important distinction. In San Francisco, people protest "economic cleansing" of neighborhoods. So far, we have not found a single one of our neighbors who is sad at the prospect of leaving this housing complex. Section 8 vouchers will allow them to relocate throughout Champaign-Urbana. We seem to be the only ones who were living here by choice.

We have mixed feelings about the breakup of our home and our neighborhood. It's hard to remember the days before we lived here, when we were frightened to deliver used furniture to this address. What's changed?

It's probably the people we've come to know and care about. Back in 1984, when the sewers were finally fixed, an enthusiastic supporter asked, "Are you going to move on to a new challenge now?" Our reply was, no, we just plan to live here. And that's all we've done. Sure, there have been frightening and noisy times that stand out. We cared and prayed about those difficult situations, and coped with them, just as our neighbors did. But mostly there's just been the living. We've laughed and sighed, talked in the courtyard on hot summer nights, and stooped to get hugs from enthusiastic three-year-olds.

That's the point. As John Perkins pointed out, when we follow Christ's example, people who are poor stop being statistics and start being our friends. We're going to miss our neighbors.