

Doubling down on a solution for homelessness

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By Steve Duin | For The Oregonian

The sprawling rental home at the end of Southeast Dickerson Lane in Gladstone has 12 bedrooms, seven refrigerators, and a fierce survival ethic. “I’m a secular humanist but there’s something sacred about these houses,” Chandler Kerns, one of the residents, says. “You don’t get loaded in an Oxford House.”



Ardalee Dickerson – who takes understandable pride in the cul-de-sac that bears her family name – remembers the early rumors about the drunks and addicts who were moving into the house aside hers.

PHOTO: Chandler Kerns, at the Oxford House in Gladstone

“We weren’t thrilled,” Dickerson, 87, says, “and I went down to City Hall to complain.

“Then we found out what Oxford House is. My kids are so happy now that these boys are next door. Because, I’ll tell you, I am really old. And whenever I need help, the boys are there for me.”

There are just over a hundred Oxford Houses in the Portland metro area, and another 47 across the river in Clark County. They are self-governing – “irritatingly democratic,” Kerns says – self-sustaining, and sufficiently focused on self-preservation to give the boot to anyone who relapses.



PHOTO: Three of the seven refrigerators at the Oxford House in Gladstone.

With a little more encouragement from the state of Oregon, Jason Renaud believes, Oxford Houses might provide even more relief for the region’s homeless.

“Recovery residences are the most effective dollar philanthropy can spend on homelessness, addiction, mental illness and poverty,” says Renaud, who runs Mental Health Association of Portland. Oxford Houses in the city, he adds, “provide more clean and sober housing than Central City Concern and Home Forward combined.”

Oxford House was the brainchild of Paul Molloy, memorably introduced in a 1989 profile by Peter Carlson in *The Washington Post* magazine:

Paul Molloy – former associate Republican counsel to the House Energy and Commerce Committee, former Republican counsel to the Senate Commerce Committee, former corporate attorney, former drinker of two fifths of Canadian Club a day, former wife-beater, former mental patient, former street drunk – is now, at 51, a man driven by a grand vision: He wants to see thousands of self-supporting, self-governed homes for recovering alcoholics and addicts operating all over America.

The first Oxford House was a halfway house on Fiddler Lane in Silver Spring, Md. When Montgomery County moved to shut it down in 1975, says Molloy, now 82, “thirteen of us decided to run it, kind of like a college fraternity.”

They eliminated the curfews and the six-month residency limit that dumped so many in recovery back on the doorstep of the local bar. But the remaining rules were sacrosanct, Molloy says: You needed to be democratically self-run. You needed to pay your monthly share of the rent and bills on time. And with the help of random urinalysis, the group needed to vote out anyone who relapsed.

Self-reliance bred self-respect, Molloy discovered. “Everyone in the house took pride when we paid the rent. ‘We made it again this month!’” When the recovery frat survived six months with a surplus, they decided to rent a second Oxford House. By 1987, Molloy says, there were 13 in the DC area, and 80% of the residents who’d lived there over the years were still sober.

Molloy’s vision expanded dramatically in 1988 when he convinced an old friend, Rep. Ed Madigan, R-Ill., to slip a provision into an anti-drug bill that provided each state with \$100,000 in start-up funds to encourage self-supporting recovery housing.

Oxford Houses sprang up across the country, Molloy says, particularly in the four states – Oregon, Washington, Louisiana and North Carolina – where the directors of the state alcohol-and-drug treatment programs were in recovery themselves: “They bought into the notion that the inmates could run the asylum.”

Molloy now counts 2,792 Oxford Houses, 535 in Oregon and Washington. Men live in some of the homes, women in others. Many are parked in the best neighborhoods. “Once we get there,

the neighbors tend to like us,” Molloy says. “Heck, all drunks and druggies are con artists. If a neighbor doesn’t like you, you mow her lawn every week.”

Kerns, 52, moved into the Gladstone house in 2009. He has a long-running battle with anxiety and alcohol, highlighted, he said, by a stint at a Portland DoubleTree: “I was the beverage captain, and the inventory was in my office. A little sprite, a little Vodka, and you’d get your Dean Martin on.”

When he lost the job, Kerns didn’t have many options. “I’m not the kind of person who wants to learn the skills of living on the street,” he says.



PHOTO: Chandler Kerns in the Oxford House kitchen.

Oxford House spared him that. He warmed to the daily democracy, the relative quiet (some houses have a house band), the excess fridge space, his \$450 share of the monthly expenses, and Groucho, the cat that sleeps on his bed. He took a job at Cinema 21, served as an Oxford House chapter chairman, and grew increasingly confident in his public speaking.

He helped move Ardalee’s piano, and latched onto a calm that doesn’t require alcohol.

No, Groucho the cat doesn’t pay a share of the living expenses.

As Renaud notes, “Oxford House is just one model of residential recovery. There are 100 other models in Oregon, public and private.”

But this model – dramatically cheaper than low-income apartments – is providing shelter, community and order for hundreds of men and women whose addictions would otherwise relegate them to the streets.

And if Gov. Kate Brown and the Oregon Legislature can find \$4 million in one-time funding, Renaud believes that would be enough for the down payments and closing costs on another 70-80 houses, and beds for another 1,000 Oregonians in early recovery.

If that’s not argument enough, Governor, Paul Molloy would be happy to mow the Capitol Mall.

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