

Apartment deal becomes investment in people's lives

By LORRAINE ESPINOSA

Why would someone risk a couple million dollars to buy an inner city apartment complex when the previous three owners went bankrupt? Why would someone want a property overrun with gangs, violence and drugs, where most of the occupants were battered women and single moms with their children, all on welfare?

Three Christian men wanted and committed to such a property in southeast San Diego in 1994. Acquisitions and finance expert Estean Lenyou, developer Richard Tuthill, and consultant Rosey Grier (former football star turned minister), was purchased and is now known as Vista Grande Oasis.

"We bought the property because we believed God was calling us there," Lenyou explained. "We don't do this for the money. It's a ministry." They planned at first to use government funds but later decided against it so they wouldn't be restricted from preaching the Gospel. They believe Jesus Christ is the only answer.

Through their inner city ministry called "Christians in the 'Hood,'" they want to help adults and children get their lives back together, to give people back their pride, hope and dignity.

Lenyou, a robust 6-foot 4-inch African-American businessman, grew up a mile from the apartment complex. He was a tough kid involved in gangs and drugs, but when he earned an athletic scholarship and left for Long Beach State College, he vowed never to return. His knack for business enabled him to become a successful community land developer. "I was a millionaire in my 20s," he said. "I made a lot of money, worshipped it, and lost a lot of it."

Eleven years ago, Lenyou's life began to turn around when he and his wife, Karen, started attending Maranatha Chapel in Rancho Penasquitos. Six years ago he committed his life to Christ. "I can never really thank God enough for all He has done for me," Lenyou said. Today, he is home fellowship pastor at Maranatha, the new chairman of the Promise Keepers task force for San Diego, and serves on boards of several inner city ministries.

Lenyou and Grier met while serving together on one of those boards. It was Grier who encouraged Lenyou to return to the inner city and use his business knowledge of planning, development, building, management, and buying and selling property for God's purposes. Once a part of the problem, Lenyou took his first step of faith in kingdom business and became a part of the solution.

When the team took over the property 2 1/2 years ago, the neighborhood was in mayhem, a boiling pot of gangs, drug deals, and drive-by shootings. Trash flowed like a river through the complex, and a dump covered the vacant lot next door. Police responding to 1,300 calls a year were often pelted with rocks and bottles. There were no birds or grass or anyone who cared about the people who lived there.

Lenyou, Tuthill and Grier realized they had stepped into the middle of an all-out war. It was real spiritual warfare, the kind that requires wearing God's armor (described in Ephesians 6) 24 hours a day to survive. Already in place on the front line stood the resident manager, Grace Lundstrom, a 5-foot 4-inch-

100-pound dynamo who maintains she wears more than 35 hats. For two years, she fought the battle alone and prayed for a Christian businessman to buy the property.

The team began to clear out the drugs and clean up the property. They established rules that supported their "no drugs, no gangs, no violence, no compromise" standard. To provide a safe haven for children and battered women, they reported all law breakers to the police and Child Protective Services.

Like Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, the team encountered opposition from within and without. In the face of physical violence, threats, drive-by shootings, and vindictive people, they watched God begin to restore peace to his community.

They attribute their success to prayer, God's armor, the San Diego Police Department, and caring Christians. "Everything good on this property has come by God's mercy and grace through the power of prayer," Lundstrom said. "Spiritual warfare! We still get attacks,

'We still get attacks, but they're darts now instead of nukes.'

but they're darts now instead of nukes. The police have been invaluable. They're not afraid to come here. They send one squad car now instead of the 10 to 15 that came before."

Senior Pastor Ray Bentley, Lenyou's mentor, (who calls Lenyou the "Black Moses in the Inner City") and Maranatha Chapel volunteers provided prayer, support and hard work to transform the property. "Maranatha has become God's army here," Lenyou said. "They bring urban missionaries and give thousands of hours of volunteer work and resources. Pastor Ray gets behind them and this ministry personally. Last Christmas, they fed and adopted the entire 300-person community."

Other caring Christians established Bible studies, a neighborhood watch, a food bank and clothing exchange, children's activities, classes and support groups.

Today, Vista Grande Oasis is a peaceful community — clean, safe and secure, a place of refuge and hope. Fifty families (100 adults and 200 children) reside in the gated community where the spacious 4 bedroom, 2 bath apartments rent for less than other 3-bedroom apartments in the area. Tenants enjoy refurbished apartments with new carpeting and textured walls, a laundry room, off-street parking, playgrounds and a barbecue area. The dump next door has been converted into a beautiful park with a playground. Only one "violence" police call was reported last year.

The ministry is helping the residents to grow, to move from welfare to employment, to live a better life. They provide jobs in the complex to help tenants financially and to give them a commitment to their community. Michelle Trapp, a single mom, receives a rent reduction for helping to maintain the park. Even children are paid with cookies for picking up trash.

Christians who live, model and serve in the community are called "urban missionaries." Chico Hernandez, one of five pastors living and working there, is the maintenance supervisor and leads Bible studies and services in Spanish.

Lundstrom sees Vista Grande Oasis as a "place where people can come and get healed and re-enter the mainstream. Sometimes we are a hospital, an emer-

gency room, an operating room, a rehab center. Everyone has a special need."

Lundstrom listens for "phone calls from God" to plug hurting people into Christian resources. Two months ago,

she received one of those calls regarding Joe Koon. He needed transitional housing when he got out of prison. She welcomed Joe to Vista Grande where he now helps Chico with the maintenance. His blue eyes fill with tears when he shares what God is doing in his life. "I don't think I would have made it if God had not brought me here," he said. "God is in this house."

Lenyou says the ministry needs more businessmen and companies to share their vision, help establish more communities, and provide resources or money. He tells them, "We have a cancer here. Stop it in the inner city or deal with it in your own communities."

Tuthill adds, "I've been blessed and this is my way of giving back to the community. My challenge will be for other corporations and successful individuals to do the same."

Businesses are starting to catch their

vision. American Express Travel Services in Rancho Bernardo provided the basketball court and equipment for the community's new playground. The Hot Chem Department of Solar Turbines,

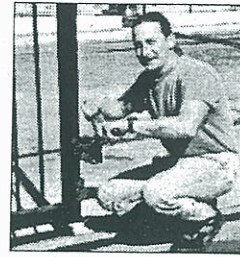
Sudberry Properties, Comps InfoSystems will come beside Maranatha Chapel in adopting the community's 50 families this Christmas.

The team is praying for other opportunities to help or take over another property, to duplicate what they are doing here in other parts of the county. Lenyou sees Vista

Grande Oasis as a prototype to impact San Diego and the nation. He also dreams of starting a sister church with Senior Pastor Ray Bentley of Maranatha in the South Bay that will focus on supporting our urban communities.

"Christians in the 'Hood'" continues to invest in people's lives. For more information, contact the ministry at Vista Grande Oasis, 264-3848.

Lorraine Espinosa of Bonita is a freelance writer.



Joe Koon, maintenance

Family finds God's love at Vista Grande Oasis

The Wilson family moved to Vista Grande Oasis about a year and a half ago. Debbie and Brian were experiencing financial problems, and it was an emotional time for them and their children, Tiffany and David, now 11 and 6.

Estean (Lenyou), his wife Karen, and Grace (Lundstrom) reached out and gave us hope that God would work in our situation," Debbie said. "They put their arms around us. If our checks didn't arrive on time, they made sure we had groceries. They allowed us to pay our rent late."

When the Wilsons moved into their duplex at the front of the property, they found drug dealers with cellular phones doing business in their front yard. Brian paved, cleaned up the yard, trimmed the overgrown hedges, and then went out and just sat and talked with them. Eventually the dealers left the area.

Last July, when David was diagnosed with a brain tumor, the Wilsons were amazed at the support they received from their new neighbors. "Grace, Estean and Karen came every week to the hospital," Debbie said. "They helped us get through the long months, just being a friend, being there."

Debbie describes a neighbor she had never met before David's hospitalization. "One lady named Gerry bought get well cards and had the residents sign them. Some enclosed money and we received over \$100 to help with gas. Gerry came to the hospital, helped me clean my house, gave me a ride when my car broke down, and organized a prayer group."

Tiffany likes living at Vista Grande Oasis because of "nice friends and caring people. When my brother was in the hospital, they didn't forget me. They gave me presents, too."

After four months in the hospital, David

returned home in early November. He lost all his motor control because of the surgery. He is regaining some function, but the doctors estimate it will take about two years to regain it all. He has had six weeks of radiation and will be on chemotherapy for another year.

"We never lived anywhere where we received so much support," Debbie said. "The love of Christ shows. It makes people want to be part of a community and serve and live closer to Christ because of Christians."

Debbie thanks God for His grace and His timing. When she thought she could not make it through another day, He gave her the strength and peace she needed. "God knew all along what was going to happen to us," she said, "and He set all the pieces in place. I missed school (she received her teaching credential in June) then David's tumor was diagnosed. God is so good."

At a recent Fall Festival held at the complex, Debbie took the opportunity to talk to the women who prayed for her family, give them hugs and thank them, and catch up on what God was doing in their lives.

The Wilsons are grateful for the love and support God provided during their difficult journey. They are happy to be part of such a loving community. "This is a wonderful place to minister, to be ministered to, and to grow," Debbie concluded.

— Lorraine Espinosa



Michelle Trapp, park maintenance



Debbie, Tiffany, David and Brian Wilson in no-compromise residence