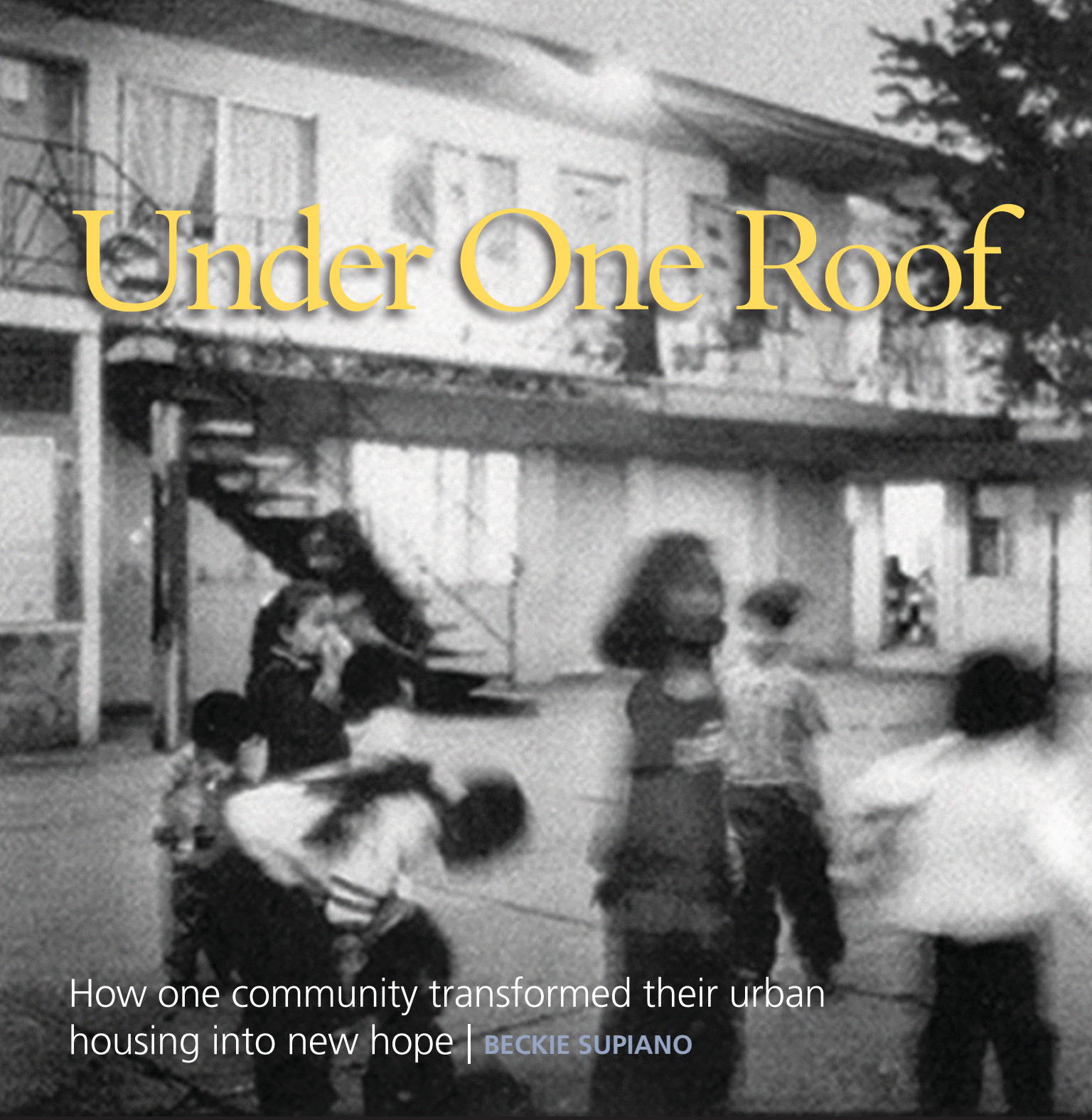

Under One Roof

How one community transformed their urban housing into new hope | BECKIE SUPIANO

Today Dan Schmitz is the pastor of New Hope Covenant Church in Oakland, California. He leads a congregation deeply connected to its local community and committed to meeting the needs of its neighbors. Schmitz has invested his life in Oakland for years, but neither the neighborhood nor the church was in his original plans.

It all began in 1989. Schmitz was just looking for a place to live for a while before going overseas as a missionary. He was attending First Covenant Church in Oakland, and he wanted an apartment "in a really urban, multicultural environment," he recalls. So he moved into Oak Park Apartments. He had no idea how much his—and his fellow tenants'—lives would be changed as a result.

The building was indeed multicultural. Living there were a large group of Mexican immigrants, as well as Cambodian refugees who had fled their country after losing loved ones under the Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s. The Kongs were typical residents: a Cambodian couple who shared a one-bedroom apartment with their five children. They all slept on straw mats in the living room, says daughter Keo Kong, now twenty-six. "Growing up, I also remember we were always sick all the time," she says. With so many people in such a small space, they kept passing germs back and forth to each other.

A third group of tenants were young Christians, many just out of college. They had found the building through a network of volunteers and interns at Harbor House, a Christian nonprofit organization started in 1972 by Olive Freeman, who was a schoolteacher and a member of First Covenant Church in Oakland. Harbor House emphasizes holistic ministry as a means of providing opportunities for people to fulfill their potential, and volunteers are encouraged to live in the area—in places such as Oak Park Apartments. "When we live where we minister, we feel firsthand the need of the community," says Mary Biasotti, Harbor House's director of economic development.

The building was in disrepair. The roof leaked, and apartments were home to rodents, insects, and mold. Yet despite these conditions and his plans to go overseas, Schmitz found himself increasingly involved in his building. It was, he says, as if God were encouraging him to stay in Oakland. "As I lived in Oak Park and things started to happen, there was more there—each step of the way it felt like a new level of commitment, something to finish," he says.

In the summer of 1992, Russell Jeung, a PhD candidate in sociology, moved in with Schmitz. He had found the building through Harbor House and planned to stay for the summer.

"This different sense of what it means to be a Christian, how much of our lives we give—that is a big part of what got us here and kept us here."

Both Jeung and Schmitz taught English to building residents.

Eventually Jeung was so affected by his experiences with the residents of Oak Park that he switched his dissertation topic from Christian nonprofit organizations to the area's youth. He also ended up staying in the building for ten years, long after completing his degree.

Cambodian children on the stairs at Oak Park

"A bunch of us had a similar type of vision for the inner city," explains Carlos Flores, who joined Schmitz and Jeung in the building when he finished college. "There were five to ten people working for the same things."

Alice Wu-Cardona moved into the building in 1995, after a staff member from InterVarsity challenged her in her senior year at the University of California Berkeley to go where she was needed as a neighbor and a friend, not just a professional. As a result, Wu-Cardona moved into Oak Park with two friends. Though the building was in disrepair, "It was good for us to recognize that this is how a lot of the world lives," she says.

Along with the other Christian residents, Schmitz and Jeung formed relationships with their neighbors. They also did community organizing work on issues like welfare reform and policing concerns. These young Christians were forging connections that would lead them in a direction no one could have guessed.

The lawsuit

In the late 1990s, the condition of the building worsened during some severe rainstorms. So much water was running into people's apartments that one woman had eight five-gallon buckets that she had to empty several times a day. Another had a plastic tarp nailed to the ceiling, creating a valley in the middle so the water could run out the window.

At the same time, the building's landlord decided to raise the rent. These events catalyzed what happened next, Schmitz says.

The young Christian residents decided to take a stand. They consulted a lawyer. Their initial plan was to pursue action themselves, without involving the other tenants, remembers Jeung. However, their lawyer suggested that they would have a better case if the other tenants participated.

That participation would come with risks. Most of the residents were not familiar with their rights and were concerned about what might happen to them. Not all of the residents spoke English, many were on welfare, and some of the Mexican immigrants were undocumented.

In addition, the rent at Oak Park was still lower than most of the other neighborhood buildings—this was

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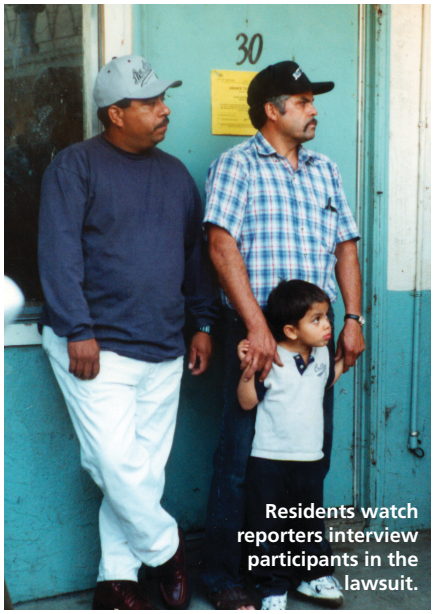
the height of the dot-com boom, and the area was gentrifying. If the tenants brought a lawsuit and failed, they could well end up with nowhere else to go.

Keo Kong was a teenager when the lawsuit was filed, and she remembers that her parents were frightened. "They didn't really know what they'd gotten themselves into, and they needed money from the government," Kong remembers.

Despite the residents' hesitations, Schmitz and Jeung had very strong relationships with everyone in the building. Families like the Kongs went to meetings with the organizers and learned what they could do. In the end, forty-four of the building's fifty-two families participated in the lawsuit. "They trusted us. I think that we were all in it together gave them some courage," Jeung says. Their lawyer was amazed



Residents watch reporters interview participants in the lawsuit.

by the number of families that participated, saying it was the best representation of tenants he had seen in twenty years of handling similar cases.

The group attempted to negotiate with the landlord before filing the suit in 1997, but that effort failed.

To make matters more complicated, the building was deemed a slum property during the course of the lawsuit, and residents had to obtain special permission from the city to continue to live there. The city fined the building's owner $1,000 a day after the slum property designation. Eventually the owner decided to sell the property.

"The thing I remember the most is, at a certain point in the lawsuit the building was condemned and the landlord filed bankruptcy. We thought we'd destroyed the community," Jeung says. But they persevered. The case took three years to resolve, but in 2000 a decision was made.

The award

The tenants were awarded a $1 million settlement, an amount far exceeding their expectations. Each family received between $6,000 and $8,000, according to the length of time they had lived at Oak Park. One resident used her settlement money to begin a college fund for her children. Others were able to purchase their own homes.

Lynette Jung Lee, executive director of East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC), gives credit for the victory to Oak Park's Christian community. "The organizers played such a tremendous role in living with and organizing the immigrants and other poor residents," she says.

After the settlement, the building was designated as permanent affordable housing. EBALDC partnered with another nonprofit to purchase the building, and the Affordable Housing Association made emergency repairs to the roof, plumbing, and heating. They renovated the whole building, transforming fifty-six one-bedroom apartments into thirty-five three- and four-bedroom units, partly to accommodate the large families of many tenants. Many of the residents were able to move back into the building after the renovation. The work Schmitz and Jeung had done to build the community paid off, and priority was given to the original tenants.


News conferences publicized the community's struggle for adequate living conditions.

Kong, her parents, and four siblings moved from a mold-infested one-bedroom apartment to a renovated four-bedroom apartment with two bathrooms, with only a slight increase in rent. "We were excited, we got to sleep in our own room," Kong says, referring to the bedroom she then shared with just one sister. It was a big change from sleeping in the living room with her whole family.

Mixed blessings

While the community celebrated the enormous improvements to the Oak Park Apartments, there were some consequences the young Christians had not foreseen. Once Oak Park was designated "affordable housing," they had to move out because their income levels now rendered them ineligible to live there. Residents had to earn less than 60 percent of the community's median income to qualify.

Wu-Cardona, who had a background in city planning, worked hard with Schmitz and Jeung to ensure that

other Oak Park residents could stay in the building. She and her husband, however, had anticipated the changes in residency requirements and moved to a house in the neighborhood. Schmitz and Jeung had to leave the building as well. They each still live within a few blocks of their former apartment.

Though they are still involved with the tenants, and have watched kids they used to tutor grow up and have children of their own, it is not the same as living under the same roof, Wu-Cardona says. "We're not there. We feel a lack of connection—we can't just open the door and have kids spill in." Fellow resident Carlos Flores agrees. Ministry got harder once the young Christians moved out, he says.

New management has made Oak Park cleaner, safer, and more organized; it also enforced new rules for the building's residents—something Schmitz says many were unprepared to handle. For example, the Cambodian refugees were accustomed to celebrating their New Year with a big, long party. New rules would restrict them from the kind of festivities they used to enjoy.

Another unintended consequence has been increased isolation, Jeung says. When the building was redone, families who had shared a one-bedroom apartment suddenly found themselves with much more space. As a result, "People retreat to private spaces and don't have as much community interaction," says Jeung. What was on one hand a true blessing has also challenged the sense of togetherness which cramped tenants previously shared. The benefits of affordable living came at a price, which the young Christians, in their well-intentioned goal to improve the situation, did not foresee.

New birth, new hope

As the community gradually adjusted to new living conditions, a new church was born. The young Christians donated their settlement money, which, together with generous assistance from Berkeley Covenant Church, helped to purchase an abandoned house near the Oak Park Apartments. In 2003, New Hope Covenant Church dedicated its first building; Schmitz was the lead pastor.

Five years later, the church has outgrown that building and now holds services in the facility of a neighborhood nonprofit group; the original building continues to function as a preschool, tutoring center, and apartments for church members.

New Hope has spurred a "reverse migration," Schmitz says, where people join the church and then move into the neighborhood. He explains that people move into the neighborhood as missionaries, wanting to work with immigrants and refugees. New Hope's members "long to be a part of something that makes a difference in the lives of people," Schmitz explains.

One adult resident involved in the church is Kong, who became involved in a discipleship group Wu-Cardona and others led at Oak Park when she was younger. Even after marrying and moving out of the building, Kong has stayed connected. Like Schmitz, Wu-Cardona wants to reach more of the Oak Park residents. "I still really long for [God's] kingdom to come," she says. "I long for these families to know him in a way that doesn't just look like a middle-class lifestyle."

The lawsuit and its aftermath have been a learning experience for Schmitz. It shaped his perception of the challenges faced by immigrants and refugees adapting to American culture. It helped him see the obstacles to organizing a community in which people lack the resources to lead themselves.

Through all the ups and downs, the community of Oak Park has deeply affected the faith of the Christians who lived there. "For me this is a testimony of God saving a community and bringing justice through the government, the media, and community organizing," Jeung says. Schmitz, Jeung, Wu-Cardona, Flores, and others are no longer recent college graduates. Many have children of their own, and all have the experience of having helped transform a community. The presence of New Hope signals their ongoing connection to the neighborhood.

Schmitz says, "The life of Jesus in the gospels wasn't seen in the institutional church. This different sense of what it means to be a Christian, how much of our lives we give—that is a big part of what got us here and kept us here." ❑

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Oak Park in the midst of renovation: the old building (left), reconstructed apartments (middle), New Hope Covenant Church (right).