

MINUTES

East Bay Cooperative Housing Coalition event Cloyne Court Cooperative, September 17, 2017

How Housing Cooperatives Benefit the Larger Community

The lively event was held at Cloyne Court Cooperative, a Berkeley Students Cooperative (BSC) housing co-op, and was hosted by Joshua Erdtsieck, BSC's Vice President of External Affairs and a student at UC Berkeley. It was attended by fifteen people from many cooperative living communities in the East Bay, including Addison Court, Berkeley Cohousing, Brown Shingle Collective, Ninth Street Co-op, Savo Island Co-op, all in Berkeley and Atchison Village Co-op in Richmond. Also attending were representatives of Hibiscus Commons, a group of elder women working to develop a senior co-op/cohousing community, and representatives of Beloved Community Land Trust, a group of Pacific School of Religion and Graduate Theological Union graduate students working to buy their student housing buildings through a land trust.

The theme of the event was "How Housing Cooperatives Benefit the Larger Community." Our host for this event was Joshua Erdtsieck, Berkeley Students Cooperative's Vice President of External Affairs and a student at UC Berkeley and co-op resident. Joshua made an excellent presentation and explained that BSC was founded during the great depression in the 1930's to provide affordable housing for students who otherwise could not afford to attend college. BSC is the oldest and largest student co-op in the US, with a total of 1200 housing units. Because there is such a need for affordable housing, BSC has a very long waiting list, but they give priority to students with low incomes, students who are the first generation in their families to attend college, to undocumented immigrants, and those deemed in the most need. The cost of living in a BSC co-op is approximately \$6500 for the entire school year, including rent, three meals a day, and all utilities. In comparison, living in a UC Berkeley dormitory costs over \$20,000 a year, more than three times as much as the co-ops! The main reason for this cost difference is that instead of hiring more staff, each co-op resident puts in five hours a week in work shifts. This includes cleaning the buildings, working in the kitchen cooking meals or washing dishes, doing maintenance, property management, landscaping and yard work, or other tasks to operate the property. Central to the success of the co-ops is a high level of organization, thorough orientation of new residents, and intensive training, teaching residents how to take care of the buildings and keep costs down. Supervision and coordination are key to keeping things running smoothly.

Joshua talked about his experience as a house manager for a 140-resident co-op, saying, "Where else could a 20-year-old student get that type of training and experience?" House managers receive free rent because the job requires 20 hours a week of work. He says he moved into the co-ops knowing nothing about co-ops and was living there only because of financial need, but through living and working in the co-op, he has become a strong advocate for the cooperative housing model. And as a vice-president of BSC, he has a very high level of responsibility and expertise for a college student, as he is an officer in a non-profit corporation with an \$11 million annual budget. BSC residents have the opportunity to develop property management skills, leadership skills, and other management skills through their involvement in BSC.

In addition to five hours a week work shifts, each co-op resident is required to do five hours per semester in *Home Improvement Hours*. This includes tasks like doing repairs, painting murals, building a trellis in the garden or improving the buildings in other ways. They have developed an exciting new program to expand the definition of Home Improvement Hours to *Community Service Hours* to encourage residents to volunteer in the outside community. For instance, co-op residents have used their hours to participate in a massive clean-up of Strawberry Creek in Strawberry Canyon just above the Berkeley campus. Others have been involved in neighborhood beautification projects, cleaning up litter and other such projects.

A new part of the Community Service Hours is called *Helping Berkeley Seniors in their Homes*. BSC matches co-op members with elders who need help in their homes. Co-op residents help seniors do maintenance, painting, installing or checking smoke alarms, doing repairs and helping them with yard work and other tasks that have become difficult for them to do themselves. They also assist seniors with problems with their computers and cell phones, a very much needed service! BSC recently made a presentation about this project to the Redwood Gardens Senior Co-op in Berkeley, and they were especially excited about having student co-op residents help senior co-op residents. BSC just received a grant from the UC Chancellor's office to buy tools to use for helping seniors.

They have expanded this program to include residents of the fraternities and sororities. Between the 1200 BSC residents and the fraternity and sorority houses, they now have a total pool of 5000 students to recruit volunteers to help seniors, as well as other community service projects. Joshua explained, "We want to spread the co-op spirit, and give back to the community."

There were a lot of questions and comments for Joshua about BSC. Mary Carleton from Berkeley Cohousing asked about how BSC deals with drug use and drinking in the co-ops. Joshua explained that many years ago, there were a few BSC co-ops with some problems with excessive drinking and drugs, but that BSC has worked very hard to create a safe and healthy environment. They educate their residents through peer-to-peer orientations and trainings, including harm reduction workshops so that if residents do drink or use drugs, they know the dangers and can protect themselves, and know how to respond in an emergency. He also said that BSC has created a culture of consent and that there is a strong tradition of "no peer pressure," so there is not pressure to drink or use drugs. He says that UC has recognized BSC co-ops as "the safest place to party." He cited an amazing statistic from the Berkeley Police as an indicator of their success: The police have to send an ambulance to the BSC co-ops an average of three to four times per semester, while they have to send an ambulance to the sorority houses an average of 50 times per semester, and to the fraternity houses an average of 70 times per semester.

Jane Stillwater from Savo Island Co-op said she that with so many thousands of students living in Berkeley Students Cooperatives over the years and experiencing the benefits of cooperative living, it is surprising that we do not have many more co-ops across the nation. Others responded that there are many obstacles to creating co-ops, including the high cost of real estate and many regulatory obstacles. One person said that cooperatives go against the grain of the capitalist idea of buying real estate to make a profit, and most people see buying a home as an investment to accumulate wealth rather than wanting to create permanently-affordable housing.

Kathy Labriola from Ninth Street Co-op made a presentation about how Limited Equity Housing Cooperatives benefit the community. She said that every resident in her co-op volunteers time in community organizations, non-profits or political activism work. She believes that having very low rents is a key reason that everyone volunteers a lot of time in the community. "Living in a co-op and having permanently affordable housing provides the gift of having the time, energy and incentive to want to give back to the community. Since our housing costs are so low, we don't have to work 40, 50, or even 60 hours a week just to be able to pay rent." When they bought the property, they had to raise their own rents 50%, but now the rents are ridiculously low: \$600 for a large one-bedroom apt with a yard and a garage, while everyone around us is paying \$2500 (or more) a month rent for a comparable apartment.

Ninth Street Co-op's rents are low for three reasons:

- They bought the property in 1986 when real estate was much cheaper, before the recent cycle of insane inflation of real estate prices.
- They made the decision to incorporate as an LEHC and to voluntarily limit the increased equity each household could accumulate to 2% a year.
- They do the landscaping and outdoor work and a lot the basic maintenance themselves rather than having to pay someone else to do it all.

Kathy gave some examples of residents' involvement in doing work in the community. "I used to work 30 hours a week in the hospital and volunteer 15 hours a week at the Free Clinic. People would always ask me, why don't you just work full-time in the hospital and make a lot more money. I told them since I am lucky enough to live in a co-op, I don't need to make more money, I can afford to volunteer my time. I was able to go into private practice doing counseling at very low fees for people who cannot afford mental health services. Most therapists are charging at least \$100 an hour for counseling, and I'd have to charge \$100 an hour, too, if I didn't live in a co-op and if I had to pay market rate rent."

She described another co-op member moved in 9 years ago. She had been working at the same job for over thirty years and wanted to retire but up until then, she felt she could not retire because her housing costs were too high. Since her rent at the co-op is so low, she was able to afford to retire. Since then, she has been volunteering at a church a few blocks from the co-op, teaching English to day laborers and she volunteers making free lunches to deliver to the day laborers at various locations where they gather to look for jobs.

Another resident, who moved into Ninth Street co-op ten years ago, was working in a shelter for women who are survivors of domestic violence, and she was paid very low wages. She was dedicated to her work but her pay was so low that she could not afford rent. She lived in temporary sublets and other unstable living situations. She was happy to move into the co-op so she could continue doing work she believed in and have decent, stable housing. And because her rent is so low, she could afford to work part-time, go to school and get her social work degree.

As we prepared to wrap up, there was an announcement from Debbie and Dru, who is a student at Pacific School of Religion (PSR) and Graduate Theological Union (GTU). The school is located just a few blocks north of the UC Berkeley campus and is currently celebrating its 150th anniversary. They asked for support in preserving affordable housing for PSR and GTU students. Many students live in apartment buildings owned by PSR, and are currently in danger of losing

their housing as PSR is considering selling the buildings to a private landlord. Debbie & Dru and many other students are working with Bay Area Community Land Trust to try to buy the buildings and create permanently-affordable housing for students through forming the Beloved Community Land Trust. They have a petition on Change.org and asked everyone to go on-line and sign the petition. It can be found at polr.me/belovedcommhousing and we encourage everyone to support them by signing the petition.

Rick Lewis from Bay Area Community Land Trust asked if another co-op would host and organize the next EBCHC event in January or February, and Ingrid Stephen from Atchison Village volunteered to ask her co-op if the event could be held there.