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Tales of turmoil and persistence in a trailer park

Steve Apperson has been stuck in Blue Acres for 11 years and longs to live somewhere better — but he can't afford to get out

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On Ponderosa Street within view of Highway 63, cats roam from porch to porch, and roses decorate the yards in front of trailers in Blue Acres Mobile Home Park. In the middle of the park, firewood is

stacked up next to Steve Apperson's 12-by-70-foot home in Lot 60. Yellow and brown vines cover the front of his trailer and porch. A white wire sign that reads "Home Sweet Home" hangs from the tree.

Lot 60, which was used for prostitution before Apperson moved in, is now a safe house. People come to live there when they are in need of shelter. A young woman named Ashley arrived when she was pregnant because she had no other place to go. She came back with 1-year-old Dillon this year.

Apperson is just one of the many who call Blue Acres home. Children play while the cats sit perched on their favorite stoops. In the back of the park, the woods drop



off into a scenic lake that catches the waning glows of sunlight on most evenings. But in the background, the residents can hear the sound of what was once Regency Mobile Home Park being buried under construction.

The only units left in Regency and El Ray's Mobile Home Court are for the construction workers. The people left, and the land is cleared. Regency paints an eerie picture. Gray dust covers the once-colorful park. In late October, trailer-sized outlines lay in the dust along Ponderosa Street. It looked like a trailer graveyard.

Residents of mobile home parks in Columbia feel the constant threat of redevelopment. The inhabitants at Blue Acres are safe for now. They voted not to be included in city limits back in 2007 when most of the area was annexed.

On the other side of Highway 63, next to the "Welcome to Columbia" sign, there are two other trailer parks, Sunset and Ed's, which were annexed into the city in 2007. That land is now zoned for commercial use, which means it's worth a lot more and could earn more than the trailer park's revenue. Surprisingly, the parks are still open, and there is no known buyer for the land yet.

FIGHTING IS PART OF LIFE

To talk with the people who live in trailer parks is to listen to ordinary folks who are getting by in a town where student housing drives up most rental rates. The parks in Columbia help people who can't afford to keep up with developers' prices but don't necessarily qualify for affordable housing through the Columbia Housing Authority.

There are 25 trailer parks in Columbia. In comparison, the seven small towns surrounding Columbia have 13 all together. Despite the large number, trailer parks have been dwindling in the area. They are usually considered a liability to the police because of a multitudes of reported crimes.

In the past eight years, the Boone County Sheriff's Department has reported 127 violent incidents at Blue Acres, which include abuse, assault and gunshots. Those situations do not account for all of the minor violent encounters in the park, such as when Apperson's neighbor punched a small hole in his door in late October.

The constant commotion that often characterizes trailer parks was not a new concept to Apperson when he moved here.

Apperson, 54, can't work anymore because of a spinal injury suffered when he was run over by a tractor. He's missing his front teeth on the left side of his mouth from the accident, and his neck is still broken

Steve Apperson has lived in Blue Acres Mobile Home Park for 11 years. He treats his trailer like a safe house for those who are stranded.



Although some of his guests take advantage of him, Apperson still has faith in the people he takes in. He copes with the drama around him but ultimately wants to leave the trailer park in the future.

today. He gets Supplemental Security Insurance every month due to his injuries.

Apperson has lived in Blue Acres for 11 years. It's his third trailer park in Columbia, but he's kept his same unit. "It's like living in a wet cardboard box in a windy field," Apperson says, noting how often he fixes the insulation and other parts of his trailer.

Next to the porch, he paints and fixes a camper that he's selling to a neighbor. He bought the trailer 20 years ago, and the heavy use shows.

Apperson's girlfriend at the time, Ronda, brought him to Columbia in 1992 from Pasadena, Calif. He says his life in Pasadena was violent. He entered the public school system when he was in sixth grade in 1970, the same year the school district enforced racial integration. Apperson put up with the turmoil that engulfed the area during that time.

"It was a daily thing," he says. "You didn't go to school to learn; you go to school to protect your life, and you have to go to school."

When he was 15 years old — after being provoked, he says — he kned a police officer in the chest and broke the officer's ribs and punctured his lung.

That same year, Apperson moved into his first place. He and his 16-year-old brother, Scott, were emancipated from their father, who ran his house like the Army bases where he worked. They lived like two teenaged boys, throwing away the dishes and then buying more at yard sales.

Apperson's adult life started in that house. He got his 14-year-old girlfriend pregnant, and her mother dropped her off at his door. "She's your problem now," Apperson remembers her saying.

As time slowly pulled his youth away from him, Apperson's violent streaks subsided. His once rebellious nature is now directed at helping younger rebels. He says he's trying to move away from his old behavior, but it still surfaces sometimes.

One time, he broke an acoustic guitar by smashing it against an unwanted guest. He's fixed the guitar since then and covered it with nail polish and fuzzy psychedelic stickers. It's on his living room wall with part of his collection of refurbished guitars.

STILL A COMMUNITY

Regency was the most recent of four trailer parks in town that closed while Henry Pietrzak lived there. He's lived in Cedar Oaks, Walnut Hills and Lone Oaks. He was in Regency for 19 years before it shut down in February. Then he moved to Centralia.

Pietrzak has a jarring personality though he and Apperson have known each other for more than 10 years and have become good friends. Apperson was unfazed when Pietrzak walked into his trailer one evening waving a handgun and shouting. Apperson inspected the gun to check Pietrzak's claim that it was loaded. He wasn't bluffing.

An encounter with Pietrzak is not something the average person could easily forget. He has long, stringy white hair and a matching beard that reaches halfway to his navel. His eyes look right through you and in a thousand different directions at once. He says he's a veteran from the Southeast Asian conflict, the Cambodia campaign specifically. And his missions will never be declassified. He joined the U.S. Marine Corps because it sounded better than the alternative — 25 to 35 years in prison for killing the man who shot his pregnant girlfriend.

Although Pietrzak doesn't live nearby anymore, he kept his job picking up the garbage in Blue Acres. He says that he's been doing it so long that people would be upset if he suddenly stopped.

He drove a big green pickup truck with a garbage trailer around the corner to an old friend's house during a Wednesday afternoon's rounds. He got out to greet her.

"That's my girl," Pietrzak says. "No, that's my friend, but I call her my girl."

Her car grazed the truck a little bit when she pulled into her driveway, but no one seemed to notice. Pietrzak poked his head through her car window and pretended to give her a kiss.

Pietrzak often spends all night talking to old friends. His garbage duty keeps him involved in the park. His friend Benny Pearl helps him out on his rounds, and the two noticed that a lot of the children who live there were looking for something to do last summer. They let the kids help pick up the garbage. Pietrzak and Pearl say the kids loved it, especially because they gave each of them a few dollars every time they assisted.

One 8-year-old boy helped them every time and saved all of the money he made so that he could buy some new clothes when he went back to school. Pietrzak took a liking the kid. He predicts the boy will do great things because of his work ethic.

Pietrzak and Pearl had to stop letting the kids help before the summer ended on orders from the park owner.



Michelle Wilson, Colby Pearl, Henry Pietrzak and Benny Pearl collect trash in Blue Acres every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. All year they collect aluminum cans in the back of the truck to save up money to buy Christmas gifts for one child in the park.

FRIENDSHIP AND DRAMA

Because Pietrzak doesn't live in the park, he's able to stay out of most of the issues that his friends sometimes get dragged into. Apperson wants to get out of trailer parks mostly because of the drama that arises among people who live in them.

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he says. He doesn't even remember a lot of the people who stayed with him years ago. The first person was his girlfriend when he was 15, and the current tenant is Katie Crowe. She has lived with Apperson since Ashley moved out about a month ago.

Crowe, 32, lived with her family in the same trailer park before moving to Apperson's couch. Now she's applying to live in affordable housing. When new people come to live at Apperson's house, he sits them down and asks them what they want to do next and what their time frame is. He doesn't like when people who don't need the help stay with him.

"A lot of people just use me, rip me off," Apperson says. "But a lot of people do the right thing."

When Ashley lived with him, she had stopped chipping in for rent and would leave for days at a time with no explanation.

Apperson found out that she was trying to sell \$500 worth of

food stamps instead of using them for the baby formula and groceries that he bought for her and Dillon. He told her to find a new place to live.

Shelter at Apperson's place comes with rules and curfews, but the single-wide trailer with a bright red wood-burning stove feels more like a party house than a halfway house. A fishing pole hangs above his closet door. The walls in his room are covered with a few watches, a backscratcher and photographs of all kinds. In an antique book, he has pictures of some of his knickknacks, such as the brass bull on top of his TV. Guitars lean against the wall in one corner.

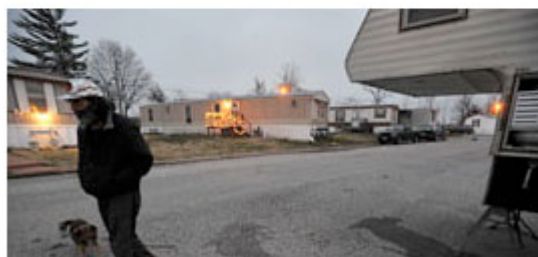
Crowe sits on Apperson's couch as a video of a Doors concert plays in the background. She says she hates the video because Apperson has watched it too many times. He plays his refurbished guitars along to the video. Jim Morrison's mug shots are mounted on polished wood behind the couch. Crowe talked about her recent breakup with the guy next door. His name is Kenny, but his friends call him Kid Rock because of his resemblance to the musician.

Apperson talks a lot about relationships among people, many who are in and out of jail. Just as Dillon's father started some trouble for Ashley when he got out of jail, Kenny's old girlfriend stirred up problems in the park when she got out. Since then, Apperson says there have been a lot of arguments in Kenny's trailer.

Because of the close proximity, people in trailer parks often become a community, even if they really don't like one another. But sometimes that forced interaction can cause serious problems.



Dave Spicer and Katie Crowe talk outside of Steve Apperson's trailer. Crowe is staying with Apperson off-and-on while she settles a dispute with her mother. She's applying to live in affordable housing, and Apperson is sympathetic to her situation.



On Oct. 26, Rusty Modglin was arrested on suspicion of possession with intent to distribute a controlled substance. Apperson and Pearl think he was framed. Apperson says Modglin didn't use meth.



MONEY IS TIGHT, BUT HOPES ARE HIGH

Apperson owns his trailer, but he still pays lot fees and utilities. When Delmic, Inc., bought the park, the residents started paying for water and electricity by amount used. The previous owner just had them each pay \$90 a month. New meters were installed in the park, and the rates went up. Apperson says one month he turned off his water while he was out of town and came home to a \$400 water bill.

Some tenants in the park entered into a dispute with Delbert Jacobs, the park owner, when they saw their water bills. The case is closed, and Jacobs is no longer involved with the water meters. But the bills have not significantly decreased.

Apperson deals with much. The washing machine in his trailer keeps breaking through the floor. The side door was knocked out by an angry guest. He covered it with a tarp and blue duct tape. He would fix the door, but he's hoping to move out soon with the lottery money he's trying to win.

The numbers 13-15-16-21-34-36 have won him millions of fake dollars in lottery scams multiple times. Organizations that call themselves the international lottery keep sending him notices saying that he's won, but they are always fakes. He doesn't send anything back in response to his bogus winnings, but he plays charity lotteries in which he has to donate small amounts to autism, veterans and a number of other causes in order to be eligible for the winnings.

He had said that he was going to stop playing if he didn't win anything by the end of the year. The next day, he won an all-inclusive Caribbean cruise. He will live like a king for the seven days and eight nights of the cruise, but it won't get him his dreams: a few acres of land and a new trailer where he can live out his days in peace.