

## Fairway: Sixty Guys Sharing a Christian Men's Housing Coop at Purdue University

I first heard about the Fairway men's housing coop last October from Kody Sisler. The Nurturing Communities Gathering participants were on a guided tour of the Jesus People USA community in Uptown Chicago. Meanwhile, Kody and several of his friends from Fairway just happened to be visiting JPUSA at the same time and fell in step with our tour group. Kody and I were surprised to discover that Reba Place Fellowship and the Fairway Christian housing coop both were founded in 1957, and we'd never heard of each other. So before we said goodbye I was already inspired to visit West Lafayette, Indiana, and see with my own eyes this intentional



community of sixty college guys with thickly overlapping lives.

I arrived at Fairway House in the middle of a snow-storm on February 4, 2015, just as night was falling. From the outside, the three-story brick building with a colonnaded front porch looked like one more frat house to my eyes. I entered through the dining room and soon was met by Kody with a few of his friends. There was still time before dinner for a tour of the coop. Kody, chair of outreach ministries and philanthropy events for Fairview House, spoke with a

lot of enthusiasm about all the task teams and committees by which sixty guys basically run the place. Like every community they have sign-up charts and schedules for rotating chores -- maintenance, meal preparation and clean-up, worship services, event coordination, and much more. Freshmen, according to tradition, have two chores a week while Sophomores and Juniors one, and Seniors who have a heavier load to finish their degrees, get to coast at home to the finish line.

Apparently no mothers or dieticians are involved in the menu planning -- our dinner featured lots of pork chops, a big pot of baked beans, and canned peach slices. No salads or vegetables anywhere in sight. But for dessert we were consoled with ice cream and monster brownies with plenty of goo inside. The cooks may not know about cholesterol but they do know what guys like to eat.

I asked, "What do you share in common? How does your schedule run?" I learned they eat all their meals in the dining



hall, beginning with prayer. They belong to small groups that meet weekly, and have mentor partners. Wednesday evenings are house devotions, and there is a weekly meeting for business and fellowship.

I was surprised by the building layout that had no private bedrooms. To conserve space, everyone sleeps in one of two thirty-person bunk rooms, where the lights are always out and silence is observed. Each morning one person is on task to quietly wake the sleepers according to the time each one has requested on an ingenious “Wake Board” of personal tokens hung on hooks for every fifteen minutes between 6:00 and 9:00 am.

So where do they study? Each community member belongs to a study room of four or five young men with their own couches, desks and personalized decorations. The coop structure of shared meals and responsibilities saves each of the guys at Fairview about \$7,000 a year in living expenses -- a huge help with college debts.



common culture, often attending each other's events.

The community has been in continuous operation for fifty-eight years, in part because of a strong on-going interest in Fairway from alumni who keep visiting, who sit on a board that oversees long-term decisions, and who send their sons to carry on the family tradition. But the week-to-week operations are very much in the hands of the men in the house, who have a strong investment in the community and the events it hosts.

Fairway offers a way for college students with the same Christian mindset to unite in making their years meaningful. This encourages a personal focus on academics and upholding the historic reputation of doing well in their studies. Fairway has consistently been the men's house with the highest GPA on campus, and ranked 7<sup>th</sup> last year in all of Purdue University's groups.

It's obvious that these young men take their walk with Jesus and their studies very seriously. They also have lots of fun together on sports teams, and generally encourage each other in non-stupid directions. During their college years, the coop members make a pledge to drink no alcohol in the county, which creates an alternative culture from the binge-drinking crowd on campus. They enjoy hosting “dry parties” at which hundreds may show up. On campus there is similar Christian women's housing coop with which they share a

After dinner, Kody and a few friends met with me to talk about the other intentional communities I've been visiting. Except for JPUSA, they were generally unaware of the wider intentional Christian community movement, of New Monasticism, or other networks like L'Arche, Catholic Workers, or the Bruderhof. In terms of their evangelical and non-denominational roots, they saw themselves on the radical edge.



Kody and his friends agreed that this intentional community experience has had a huge transforming effect on their lives as Christians. Most of them are in the sciences or engineering departments, but some have changed their focus to Christian ministry because of their experiences in household leadership.

When I asked if they ever thought about this way of life in community as a vocation for the rest of their days, they blinked and said, no one had ever suggested this option to them. I promised to send them an invitation to the Ohio Valley River Valley Catholic Worker and Christian Community Gathering set for May 15-17, hosted by folks in the Bloomington Indiana Radical Christian Catholic Worker. I encouraged them to send a car-load to join us if possible, and to imagine this way of community as a potential life-time calling.

After a few goodbye hugs, I drove home through the night with a few new friendships on my mind, wondering what kinds of mustard-seeds God might nourish for the kingdom's sake.