

Cleveland's Rock

Not long ago boarded-up businesses filled Cleveland's downtown Slavic Village, which led the nation in foreclosures and became a national symbol of the recession. Now a church is taking back the area to not only give it a new face, but to offer hope to a dying community.

Slavic Village, a prime ethnic neighborhood near the heart of Cleveland, is a tattered version of its former self. Streets once thriving with family businesses and scurrying foot traffic to shops and restaurants have fallen silent.

The historic neighborhood, named for what once was its predominantly European residential makeup, led the entire nation in foreclosures at the height of the financial plunge in 2008. Boarded-up houses and empty shells of shoe repair shops, local grills and specialty stores stand inauspiciously among the still-occupied homes in decline.

Cleveland once boasted the sixth-largest population in the United States but has since gone the way of the rust belt—losing jobs and residents. More than 500,000 have fled the city since its heyday years, slashing the population by one-third. Increased outsourcing in the automotive and heavy manufacturing industries have left ghost-like abandoned factories looming in every direction of the city's landscape.

Slavic Village posed the biggest challenge to the city's affluence. In the aftermath of the economic downturn, crime in the area soared 382 percent, with gangs and drug dealers taking widespread control. Unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse left a wake of hopelessness and despair.

"As Slavic Village goes, so goes Cleveland," declared Cleveland's prominent newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*. Slavic Village's city councilman, Anthony Brancatelli, made a more telling prediction: "If Cleveland can't save Slavic Village,

it can't save itself."

Yet Cleveland is also a city where God is at work. The foreboding dilemma became a challenge to Steve Witt, senior leader of Bethel Cleveland, and Jeremy Salupo, a radical young man in his congregation. The two had been strategizing how they could take a distressed area of the city and flip it into God's success story. Bethel's mission to bring city transformation sprung into action.

"I had been looking at a different part of the city for our initial launch," Witt says. "But Jeremy's persistence and the newspaper's prediction convinced me that Slavic Village was the right choice."

Salupo harbored no doubts either. "What better neighborhood for the Lord to show up than the one making the worst headlines in the country for being in dire straits. It makes sense," he says.

Salupo became the heart and wheels to make the quest a reality. Following the Lance Wallnau model of the Seven Mountain spheres of influence, he named fellow congregants as captains responsible for each cultural "mountain" or sphere. A teacher was slotted for education, an associate pastor over religion, a contractor over business and so forth. They established a 10-year plan of how to serve local businesses in the area and influence the school system. They planned how to become involved in the political process and infiltrate the business world. They went to work.

Yet it quickly became apparent to Salupo that the group's success and credibility as a bedrock of community was limited unless they were actually a part of the neighborhood.

"We wanted to possess the land, to make it ours," he says. "If you really are going to establish the kingdom of God in a lasting way, you can't just stop by, minister and leave. It became apparent that we had to live there."

Living in the Renovation

Relocating to Slavic Village at that time was a move most might have considered dangerous and unappealing, yet Salupo took the plunge and moved there in 2009, buying a home in the heart of both the area and the recession.

The move began a small but still evident snowball effect. Salupo's purchase revived construction of a small area of new homes abandoned by the builder. With no sales in several years, the development was seen as a failed experiment. The ripple effect that followed Salupo's purchase resulted in the full build-out and sale of the homes. Today, only one new house remains available.

It also prompted other Bethel members to get on board. More than 20 now live in the Slavic community. None receive missions support, but rather work regular jobs or go to school.

"It feels like those of us who have moved down here are missionaries to our own city," Salupo says. "A lot of Christians dream about going to Africa or China, but we have found the Lord is moving just as powerfully in Cleveland. He has called us here."

Witt gushes with pride about the entire team from his church: "The fire in this team is amazing. They're totally sold out. They're intent on seeing the city revived in more ways than one, and they're willing to exchange their daily conveniences for a greater purpose. In the midst of it, they're being incredibly blessed as well."

A young medical professional, Angela Locke made her decision to move to Slavic Village after she heard testimonies about what God was doing for the locals and for the team.

"It felt like a foreign land when I first moved, but now it's my family," Locke says. "I've lived many places and never

known my neighbors. That has changed. I walk down the street and it feels like a scene from *Cheers*—everybody knows your name. Unknown faces have become friends and neighbors.”

Police Praise

As the team’s numbers increased and their efforts multiplied, it has propelled an increase in outreach, influence and respect. The Bethel group has been recognized by local businessmen, neighbors and political leaders.

“The impact made by this group of young people has been outstanding,” says Ben Stefanski, a prominent Cleveland businessman. “What amazed me most is that they actually moved here. That has changed the whole dynamic and feel of the neighborhood. During a very negative time for the Village, they’ve brought many positives. There are a lot of people who are very impressed by what they have done.”

Kathi Barth, a mother who was concerned about her children’s move a year ago to take part in the Slavic Village transformation, says even Cleveland police are abuzz with praise. At a fortuitous moment, she queried a police officer picking up materials by her office.

“I told the officer I was really nervous about my kids living in Slavic Village because it’s known as such a dangerous place,” Barth says. “I didn’t tell him any other details. The officer told me not to be nervous. He said a fellow policeman who patrols the beat informed him that the area is ‘really changing a lot now.’

“He said, ‘Believe it or not, a group of around 20 to 25 people from some church moved there, and since that time, violence is going down, the problems are going down and the gangs are moving out. It’s getting a lot better.’ That report really made me happy, especially because I know exactly what ‘church team’ he was talking about. You can’t get a more realistic assessment about a neighborhood than from policemen

who are involved there every day.”

Deep Impact

The near-tangible change in the Village’s atmosphere isn’t just because of structural renovations, but because residents are coming to life again. Every Friday night neighbors who live near or below poverty level come to a weekly meal hosted by the Bethel community. Some residents live without heat or electricity because they can’t afford it, yet they’re committed to keeping their houses and are grateful for any help they receive.

It didn’t take long for these and other neighbors to warm up to Salupo and his friends, and the hot-food gatherings are a testament to this. The team offers prayer at the end of each meeting, and stories of answered prayer abound weekly—from the jobless gaining employment to a middle-aged illiterate getting his driver’s license for the first time. Many people have received salvation or rededicated their lives to the Lord; others have been healed.

Oliver Snow is particularly grateful he stumbled upon the group at a life-or-death moment of his own. He found God in the process.

“I was on the very edge of doing something stupid because I had lost everything,” Snow says. “I had ... a lot of things happen to me that were bad. If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t be here today to talk about it. These are God-given people and I’m thankful for every one of them.”

Zack Barton, the team member most instrumental in helping Snow, has seen big changes in the people who attend Bethel’s weekly outreaches.

“When some of the people first came to our dinners, I thought they looked like zombies because of the vacant stares and depression on their faces,” Barton says. “Now there is actual

joy; the people are engaged, and *they* want to be the ones helping out the new visitors. It's amazing what happens when people find out there is a God who really loves them and that we really do care. It changes everything."

Increasing numbers of residents attend the larger outreaches hosted by the group. Those include the yearly Christmas drive, where the Bethel team distributed more than 500 stockings in 2011. Children received warm hats, gloves, toys and candy, while the adults enjoyed small gifts. Neighbors waited in line for up to an hour in freezing temperatures to claim their stockings.

The Bethel group rents a formerly empty building now used in every outreach. Two separate spaces allow entrance through one side for distribution, and exit through the other, where hands-on prayer and prophecy are always offered. The building doubles as a neighborhood art studio and dedicated prayer room the rest of the time.

The spring outreach is becoming as popular as the Christmas drive. Partnered with Cleveland's "Walk and Roll" bike, hike and skateboard event, the occasion draws droves of residents with warmer weather, cotton candy, chicken and music. Games and bounce houses host more than 1,000 children. The Bethel team shares a brief evangelistic message with the picnic crowd and offers a prayer tent nearby.

In the fall, hundreds of children receive book bags loaded with school supplies. These and other ongoing ministries to the area continue to connect the Bethel team to more Village residents in need.

Business Makeover

Not all of the outreaches are so obvious, however. Behind the scenes, Bethel members serve local businesses by cleaning up exteriors and painting. Others help distribute recycled appliances or furniture to families in need. Some simply lend

a compassionate ear or pray for a neighbor on the sidewalk.

Overall, the bigger picture for Slavic Village looks promising. Dilapidated buildings are being cleared, making way for new enterprise. A \$6 million grant is slated to repave the streets and give the business area a much-needed makeover. Investors and restaurateurs are implementing plans.

One entrepreneur, Christian Ostenson, is opening a local bistro. He became interested in Slavic Village through a friend who is an area native. Enamored with the district, he sees great potential to highlight existing structures such as the historic Polish shrine church, St. Stanislaus, once visited by John Paul II before he became the pope. It boasts a private school and a splendid football field.

Ostenson foresees drawing in students and church families, as well a new clientele from the suburbs: "We're hoping to bring in a new set of people that wouldn't normally frequent this area. They might come for the sights but stay for a meal. We're going to have three decks outside, as well as local art for sale on the walls. We want people to linger and enjoy the ambiance of the Village, and maybe buy a painting to take home the feel of it as well."

Dr. Rick Rzepka, a dentist, owns a successful practice across the street from the Bethel team's Elevate! art gallery and prayer room. He owns several properties in the Village and helps out the Bethel team with their facility's rent. Though Rzepka doesn't live in the area, but rather visits his two satellite offices, he says things in Slavic Village truly have changed.

"My other office is 20 miles away. It is nothing like here," he says. "You just work, lock up and leave. Here, I'm involved. Just a few years back, the neighborhood was pretty scary. There was hardly anyone on the sidewalks. If you did pass someone, they would never look you in the eye or greet

you. Now, things look better and people are out walking everywhere. They actually say hello.”

A friendly atmosphere is a new reality fully embraced by longtime resident Deborah Patterson. “There was such a problem before with gangs and drug houses,” she says. “Now I see very few left. I know I feel safer. I’m happy the Bethel Cleveland people are here. Their presence has made the most difference. It’s the best thing that’s happened to the community since I moved here in 1976.”

Transformation of this magnitude takes time and cooperation from others. Witt acknowledges the continuing challenge, but says Bethel is committed to Slavic Village for the long haul.

“Certainly we’re not the only ones doing ministry in Cleveland,” he says. “There are so many other ministries in this big city that have compelling testimonies. They have served tirelessly for years and years. Their persistence is humbling. We want to encourage them and partner with them in any way we can. It will take us all working together to make the biggest impact.”

New Blood

That work—especially for those who live in the area—can be tiring at times. Yet one way the Slavic Village team plans to stay refreshed is by employing students from their church’s new School of Supernatural Ministry. An affiliate of the Bethel Redding School of Supernatural Ministry in Redding, Calif., the school’s association with the Bill Johnson-led church is proving a powerful conduit. The new blood pouring through the school provides enthusiastic new volunteers and ministry teams for the Village outreaches.

“We just finished our first year,” Witt says. “Our students served in six outreaches per week—and not just in Slavic Village. What better combination could you have than supernatural students serving, loving and praying, yielding a

steady flow of energizing testimonies? As they become transformed, they become transformation agents.”

Witt is hopeful the Slavic Village model will be used as a template for other “invasions,” both nationally and globally. Though Bethel Cleveland is only one church, their radical commitment to seeing their city transformed is obviously catching the attention of those far beyond city boundaries.

Bessie Watson Rhoades *is a freelance writer who relocated to Cleveland with her husband for the expressed purpose of helping bring revival.*

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: Watch a brief documentary highlighting the impact of an evangelism movement currently continuing in Slavic Village at