



Gunnison Country TIMES

NEWS: GVH housing
coordinator makes an
impact, A5



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Gunnison's first sober living house opens

Offers rooms for up
to nine residents in
recovery

Abby Harrison

Times Staff Writer

Last week, Mary Beth Kelley stooped down on the hardwood floor, rubbing polyurethane into original oak, concealed for decades beneath a carpet. Around her was a flurry of friends from church and county employees, who spent many 10-hour days painting walls and moving furniture to bring Gunnison's first-ever sober living house to life.

Sober living **A6**



RACE YOU TO THE BOTTOM: Picking up speed on his sled, Joey Martinez took advantage of the fresh snow in Gunnison on Monday, Jan. 15. Only a few locals braved the wind on the slopes of the "green monster," the hill behind Western Colorado University's football field. (Photo by Bella Biondini)

Sober living

from A1

After years of leading the effort to create a sober living home in Gunnison, Kelley welcomed its first resident just last week. The new home, located in the Palisade neighborhood on the northwest corner of town, offers a supportive environment for men seeking sobriety from drugs and alcohol. Although a local nonprofit will own the communal living space, the day-to-day operation is managed by Oxford House, a sober living organization that has homes across the Western Slope.

"I don't think it's a matter of heart or will," Kelley said. "It's a matter of the economic situation we're in and the fact that this is a ski community where substance abuse is a serious issue."

For years, the amount of resources available for those in substance abuse recovery has steadily grown in the Gunnison Valley through the work of locals, nonprofits and Gunnison County. Many of those initiatives have coalesced into the

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Mary Beth Kelley
Gunnison Sanctuary Housing

county's GRASP Consortium, a group devoted to the prevention, treatment, and recovery of substance use disorder.

A report from last year, compiled by county employees John Powell and Cole Cooper, revealed that the valley was in desperate need of a sober living home. The valley's only sober living facility had been New Adam's House in Crested Butte. But the home, operated by the Oh Be Joyful Church, closed in the early 2000s.

The need is clear, as Cooper and Powell estimate that up to 500 people in the valley are in recovery. Now, after years of Narcan distribution (a life-saving drug that stops the effects of an overdose) and community workshops, locals in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction have access to safe and supportive living space.

A home for all

Oxford Houses are "self-supporting," democratically-run homes where each resident has an equal voice, said Oxford House's outreach worker Phil Bohannon. Each person takes

on a different role: managing rent, coordinating chores, facilitating meetings with the regional chapter and interviewing potential roommates.

"The sense of community and belonging is where Oxford House flourishes, because the opposite of addiction is connection," Bohannon said. "People have a lack of connection when they're in their addictions, so getting them involved in the community and making them feel part of something bigger than themselves really helps."

Oxford House welcomes anyone who's working on their recovery from addiction or alcoholism, Bohannon said. They can arrive from treatment centers, from being homeless or simply from another living situation where they didn't receive enough support. The only requirement is that residents move in sober, pass weekly urine tests coordinated by Oxford House and are in an active recovery program — therapy, intensive outpatient treatment or even a mindfulness program.

Although the space can offer a bed to nine people, it's likely to house between six and eight most of the time, Bohannon said. This way, that ninth bed can be for emergencies. Three have already moved into the upstairs space. The downstairs is still under renovation, but Bohannon is already interviewing potential residents and hopes to fill those beds promptly.

Residents can access additional resources from GRASP. The coalition is unable to use its limited budget for capital projects or direct support like offering therapy, but staff can connect people in recovery with resources that exist around the valley, said coordinator Kyle Tibbett. The group also has a small grant pool available for basic needs, or emergency food and housing situations.

"More than anything, GRASP is in a supportive role," Tibbett said. "We're stoked that this is now a resource in our community. It's been a need for such a long time."

A leap of faith

For Kelley, the sober living home has been years in the making. She lost her son, Paden Castles Kelley, to an overdose in 2019 after several successful years of sobriety. Since then, she's devoted much of her life to making sure that other locals struggling with substance use have access to the life-saving resources they need.

With help from fellow churchgoer Edward Howard, Kelley started nonprofit Gunnison Sanctuary Housing, which will own the sober living home. What started as a request to her local congregation at Bethany Baptist Church has grown into nearly \$120,000 donated to the nonprofit — a combination of support from locals, the church and the Endner Fund, available through the Community Foundation of the Gunnison Valley.

Kelley and her husband, Scott, have kept an eye on the market for a little over a year, waiting to see if a suitable home



Phil Bohannon, Oxford House's outreach coordinator for the Western Slope, helps prepare the house for its first residents. (Photos by Abby Harrison)



Mary Beth Kelley sorts through odds and ends while volunteers clean the home.

in their price range would go up for sale. But when the house in the Palisades neighborhood appeared, the nonprofit didn't have enough money to make the purchase. So, Kelley and her husband put a contract on the \$515,000 house to secure it until donations caught up.

"It's a little bit of a leap of faith, but everything we've done in this project has been a leap of faith, to be honest," Kelley said. "And when we needed something, what we needed showed up."

Days after purchasing the home, Kelley received a call from the Foundation, informing her that the Endner Fund could fill the gap for a downpayment. The nonprofit now has

enough to cover the cost of the initial purchase, but Kelley and Howard still need to finance ongoing renovations, and eventually pay off the house in cash. That way, rent money may eventually be used to purchase another home in the future.

All furniture in the house was either donated, found at a thrift store or purchased for a great deal on Facebook marketplace. For a week, volunteers filtered in and out of the over 60-year-old home, putting art on the walls and adding hangers to closets.

"There has been so much tremendous help and outpouring of help and support for this house," Bohannon said. "It's been amazing. It touched my

heart big time."

Gunnison Sanctuary Housing's mission includes the goal of providing affordable housing for others in need, whether that be people that are being abused in their current living situation or pregnant women who need a place to stay. Although this home is just for men, Kelley said the goal is to open one for women, as soon as finances allow.

To get help or learn more, email Kelley at marybethkelley.cb@gmail.com.

(Abby Harrison can be contacted at 970.641.1414 or abby@gunnisontimes.com.)