

Sex criminal taken in, then driven out

By Allen G. Breed, Associated Press

DANVILLE - Nate Sims' story is about an ex-con seeking a second chance, a neighborhood losing its innocence and a couple testing their faith. But it doesn't have a storybook ending.

After 20 years in prison, Sims returned in late July to Danville, the quaint college town where he had settled as a teen-ager. Within days, his picture was in the local newspaper; next to it were the phrases "sex offender" and "high risk." He had been convicted of rape and sodomy.

He immediately lost his new job at a packaging plant and was soon living out of his rattletrap car. Under Kentucky's newly enacted Megan's Law, named for a 7-year-old New Jersey girl murdered by a released molester living in her neighborhood, Sims was arrested for not being at the address he'd reported to parole officials.

Then suddenly everything changed.

Instead of a jail cell, the 52-year-old Sims found himself living in a \$150,000 house in upscale Riverview Estates, with a couple who trusted him enough to give him a bed across the hall from their children's playroom.

"I was in shock," Sims said recently in a voice that seemed too soft to have come from his 6-foot-4 frame. "I ain't never had anyone lift a hand for me."

Mark and Tammy LaPalme explained that they were "baby Christians," out to test their newfound, born-again faith. They decided to open their five-bedroom home to someone needing shelter. "I mean, we feel like God's blessed us in so many ways," said Mark LaPalme, 38, a gangly man with an earnest voice. "We've been so selfish with it up to now."

One day on television, Tammy LaPalme saw a tall man running from a camera crew. She recognized him from a newspaper article headlined: "Boyle (County) registers first high-risk sex offender."

"It felt like a sign from God," Mark LaPalme said.

He and his wife asked themselves the question printed on a pink and yellow cloth bracelet that she wears: What Would Jesus Do?

Sims moved in on Aug. 12.

"I told Mark and Tammy, 'I hope you all know what you're getting

into,' " Sims recalled last week as he sat at their dining room table.

Everything happened so fast that the LaPalmes never bothered to inform their neighbors. They didn't have to. Bright yellow fliers soon appeared everywhere in Riverview - in newspaper boxes, on street lights, even stapled to the leaves of bushes. "!!BEWARE!! Sex Offender at Mark & Tammy LaPalme residence," they said, giving the address and phone number.

Letters started coming. An anonymous writer complained: "You say to 'Love thy neighbor,' but you are demonstrating a total disregard for our feelings, our fears, and our safety. That's not my idea of a good 'neighbor.' "

Streets normally filled with twilight walkers and kids on bicycles were suddenly desolate.

People who never locked their doors started shuttering up at night and looking into alarm systems.

An elderly resident began patrolling the neighborhood on his red scooter, squawking into a walkie-talkie when a strange car entered the subdivision.

One man was spotted with a pistol in his back pocket.

"It was thrust upon us big-time," said Cynthia Ellsworth, who lives a few doors down from the LaPalmes.

"I think the people here have reacted as normally as people anywhere would have."

The LaPalmes responded by pulling down the notification leaflets and replacing them with white fliers of their own.

"Let he who is without sin cast the first stone!" the sheets said, quoting Bible verses on forgiveness and brotherly love.

Attorney Bruce Petrie, a neighbor who describes himself as born again, was not swayed: "My understanding of my Christian duty is first to my family."

Neighbor Jill Lee's college-age daughter began calling on a cell phone to be escorted from her car to the house and her 8-year-old son was placed under virtual house arrest.

"Any change he would have left over from lunch, he would say, 'Do you think we could give this to that man so he can go live somewhere else and I can go visit my friends again'? " Mrs. Lee said. "It was very sad."

Neighborhood kids stopped visiting the LaPalmes' children - daughter Sydney, 8, and son Tyler, 7. One neighbor came by LaPalme's car lot in nearby Harrodsburg to complain that he'd ruined his chances of selling his home.

"You've moved a nuclear waste dump right next to me," he told LaPalme.

Neighbors began checking up on LaPalme and found that he had been charged with forging a registration document on a used car, a case he is fighting. They whisper to a reporter about the deputy who came last month and confiscated cars on LaPalme's lot because of bounced checks.

LaPalme, who said he and his wife were converted on their car lot by a born-again customer, Wayne Aldridge, who was also a former sex offender, believe they simply followed in Christ's footsteps.

"All we've gotten so far from it has been persecution," LaPalme said.

As for Sims, he said he has done his time and just wants to move on.

In 1978, he pleaded guilty to raping and sodomizing a woman during a break-in near Louisville. Sims squinched his eyes tight and said he can't explain the crime.

" 'Cause I never did anything like this before," he said.

"I'd always just been a thief."

Sims had a property-crimes record going back to age 15, and he had been in and out of prison twice following the rape conviction - for theft and burglary while on parole in 1986 and '93.

Sims briefly took part in a sex offender treatment program three years ago but was kicked out, he said, dismissing it as "a joke."

During a risk-assessment hearing before his release, prosecutor Sandy McLeod told the judge that Sims has "serious psychopathic tendencies ... the highest risk that the evaluator has ever seen."

Neighbors couldn't believe the LaPalmes would expose their children to such risks. Mark LaPalme said the family was not fearful.

"There's been a peace that's come over us," he said.

And neighbors, too, began tentatively making peace with the situation. Last week, a few resumed their evening walks, and others held a neighborhood meeting to discuss how the law on released sex offenders might be refined.

Then, as suddenly as he had arrived, Sims left the neighborhood.

Returning to the LaPalmes' house Monday after his first day at a new job cleaning uniforms, he found a camera crew from the syndicated television show "Extra" waiting for him. He packed his bags and fled without even saying good-bye.

"They drove him out of here," Mark LaPalme said of his neighbors. "They didn't want him in this neighborhood. They didn't want him in this town. And that's what they accomplished."

But Mrs. Ellsworth said nobody won anything here. Especially not Sims, who said he was just looking for another chance: "We don't know how to give him a chance. What are we supposed to do? Just ... lock our doors?"