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CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

Church members forsake the suburbs to put down roots and plant gardens in a struggling urban neighborhood

Jason Fields of The Urban Farming Guys (in the green shirt) leads visitors on a tour of the Lykins Neighborhood. The tour, held the second Saturday of each month, gives visitors a look at how residents have transformed blighted properties into a thriving community garden.

Jason and Candy Fields' backyard in the Lykins neighborhood — one of the most blighted areas in Kansas City — is a patchwork quilt of urban farming ventures.

There are a vegetable garden fertilized with nutrient-rich fish waste and a lush swath of bamboo stalks waiting to be dried and used to stake tomato plants or to build a tree house or a lightweight bicycle.

Towering sunflowers wear paper grocery sacks draped over their heads, an effort to keep the birds away so the mature seeds can be roasted, then eaten as a snack. There's a playhouse-turned-chicken coop for heritage breed hens.

BY JILL WENDHOLT SILVA ■ PHOTOS BY JILL TOYOSHIBA

Jason and Candy Fields net tilapia from the aquaponics system in their backyard. The tanks, which take up about as much space as an average living room, hold 1,000 fish.

On the driveway, tilapia swim in an aquaponics system fashioned from recycled, food-grade plastic drums that takes up as much space as an average living room. Fragrant basil grows in rock beds above the drums, cleaning the water for the fish while the nutrient-rich fish waste fertilizes the basil, all without the use of soil.

Nearby, duckweed grows in kiddie wading pools. The inexpensive, high-protein, easy-to-grow food for fish resembles green pond scum. A biodigester constructed from more plastic drums converts 800 pounds of restaurant and household food scraps into methane that could heat a greenhouse.

Word of these innovative, low-tech farming experiments has traveled rapidly through local food circles. One steamy weekend in late June, almost 300 people milled around the "Myrtle Plot" at the corner of 12th and Myrtle streets. The plot was a featured stop on the Urban Farms and Garden Tour sponsored by Cultivate Kansas City, a nonprofit that helps people learn how to grow food in urban settings.

Much of that grassroots popularity is a result of social media. Using his iPhone, Jason Fields routinely posts cleverly produced how-to or slice-of-life videos to www.theurbanfarmingguys.com. More than 8,000 people "like" the website and Facebook page, and their "Farmin' in the Hood" video has gotten 47,000 views on YouTube since its debut last spring.

The idealistic newlyweds decided to ditch their comfortable suburban lifestyle, if not their sense of humor, in 2008. Only half-joking, they recall how they worried that the drug-dealing squatter came with the foreclosed property they bought for $21,000.

After investing another $40,000 and four months of hard labor, they have turned the burned-out, graffiti-clad shell of a house into a home for their young and growing family, which includes Candy's 17-year-old daughter, Raven, and the couple's two sons, Titus, 2 ½, and Asher, 1.

Resident Sandy Morrison helps neighborhood kids make birthday hats as part of the 934 Art program, a weekly art class held in the church basement.

The remodeled 1890s Victorian sits on a half-acre of land bordered by a white picket fence. Across the street, the abandoned lot is overgrown with weeds several feet tall, and the blasted bark on the trunk of a tree that shades the home is a result of a stray bullet shot from a car speeding through the neighborhood in the dark of night.

"It's not a good investment," Jason Fields says of their move to Lykins, "but it's not necessarily a bad one, *if* this is where you want to live."

Urban homesteaders

More than 20 suburban families have moved into Lykins, a pie-shaped piece of land that runs through the northeastern edge of 64127, a ZIP code synonymous with urban blight and sky-high crime rates. The 5,610 Lykins residents live between Independence Avenue and Truman Road, Benton Boulevard to Hardesty Avenue. Half the residents are Hispanic, according to 2010 Census data.

These urban homesteaders are mostly white 20- to 40-somethings. Most also are members of the Rock, a nondenominational Christian church founded in 1999 with loosely affiliated networks of house churches in Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Wyoming, Texas, Ohio, Michigan and North Carolina.

The Rock's mission is to "plant" house churches throughout the inner city so members can live in and work with the communities they are trying to serve. On the face of it, their tactics for revitalizing a racially mixed, economically depressed neighborhood are simple: walk the neighborhood streets, make eye contact and open your heart.

"The biggest problem in this neighborhood is fear," Jason Fields says. "There's a spirit of hope and community when you decide not to hide from this and own it. ... Something happens when you're in something together. You meet people you wouldn't have met otherwise, and it turns into really deep friendships."

So far, those friendships mostly have been with other church members, but a new community garden is turning out to be fertile ground for getting to know neighbors.

Most Rock members have bought homes in a five-block area. The church has bought buildings once owned by the Catholic diocese, including a handsome red brick church built in the 1920s and a convent that has been remodeled into a home for the Rock's 32-year-old lead pastor, Ryan Kubicina, and his family.

Since the congregation members prefer to gather in homes to worship, the church structure at 934 Norton Ave. is a convenient neighborhood gathering place for everything from art classes to association meetings.

Rock Solid Urban Impact, a charitable nonprofit headed by the Rock founder Tim Johns that focuses on the needs of urban youth, owns

URBAN FARM FRONTIER

More than 20 families have purchased single-family homes in one of Kansas City's most distressed neighborhoods. Among the neighbors' goals is to create a sustainable and self-sufficient living model that incorporates housing, farming and other food production. This diagram showcases the many ways each family has transformed its city backyard to provide for itself and others. Check with your city's ordinances to see whether these farm practices are permitted in your neighborhood.

the dilapidated school built next door to the church in the 1950s. The school's restored gym is a venue for youth wrestling matches, and there are plans to renovate the other rooms to serve as a community center and possibly a coffeehouse or farmers market.

Next to the school, the nonprofit bought 13 vacant lots. The heavily wooded property had become a hang-out for drug dealers and prostitutes. But earlier this spring, community members worked together to remove trash, trees and other debris to open up space for 12-by-4-foot raised garden plots.

Jason Fields went door-to-door asking timid residents — some who spoke Spanish and others who hadn't had the courage to answer the door to a stranger in years — if they were interested in taking care of a free plot. A few families agreed to join in.

"Our hope is that this model becomes way bigger than the church," he says.

The Urban Farming Guys

Candy Fields stands inside a hoop house made of arched PVC pipes and plywood covered with plastic sheeting that intensifies the sun's rays. Within minutes she is drenched with sweat, but her voice remains cheerful as Jason points his iPhone, which is rigged with a single-reflex lens, to shoot a video.

"Candy, what are we doing here today?" he coaches.

"We are harvesting sweet basil. You find it in every Italian dish," she says, pointing to the herbs that grow from rock beds above the fish farm. "This is sweet basil. The lemon basil is around the corner. And this basil has a licorice flavor ... you can use them on ... peaches ...?

"Awww, start over!" she says, giggling at her flub. "I'm just going to say it tastes like licorice because I haven't used it before."

When the basil clip wraps, Jason and Candy catch a half dozen of the 1,000 tilapia. Jason Fields and Stan Butler, a friend and now neighbor, started exploring sustainable technologies four years ago and formed Urban Farming Guys last spring. They ventured into urban fish farming almost by accident.

"I was just looking for other methods of providing for each other," says Butler, a rock band dropout who works as a computer software developer. "At first we had no plans. We just wanted to see what the fish would do."

The fish grow to market value in eight to 10 months. For now, they are harvested for personal use, but Fields and Butler would like to scale up to 10,000 fish and sell them live to local Asian food markets. The pair figure selling live fish is a creative way to skirt the expense of a processing plant.

Jason Fields' only previous agriculture-related experience was as the owner of a successful lawn-care business that he recently sold. Butler recently moved his family into Lykins and

Church members arrive to help unload a couple dozen pieces of Sheet-rock into Kyle Van Kirk's new home. Kyle's dad, Bill Van Kirk (left), is helping his 21-year-old son rehab a home the son bought for $12,000.

agrees most of what he and Fields know about urban farming has been gleaned from information on the Internet.

Like a couple of self-styled MacGyvers, they often adapt the tools needed to fit their limited budgets. For instance, one 10-minute video offers step-by-step instructions on how to fit a vortex filter into a 55-gallon, food-grade plastic drum to clean the fish waste from the tank water. A vortex filter retails for about $4,000. The guys' do-it-yourself version? About $100.

"Guys were doing this sort of stuff back in the '80s when there were still rotary phones," Butler says, "but it wasn't as easy to share information until the advent of social media."

Youth movement

At 9 a.m. and 9 p.m., Zoe the goat is ready for milking.

In a backyard a block east of the Fieldses' home, the two oldest Kubicina children, Caleb, 10, and Elizabeth, 8, coax Zoe to her homemade milking stand.

As Zoe nibbles contently on Purina Goat Chow, Caleb guides her neck into a PVC pipe stanchion to steady her head, while Elizabeth deftly fastens Velcro straps around her back legs to prevent kicking. Elizabeth gives the udder a swipe of iodine for cleanliness, and soon her small hands are extracting a steady stream of milk that hits the stainless steel pan with a tinny ring.

Kortni Kubicina chose the Nigerian dwarf breed because the milk is sweeter and contains more fat, which makes it an especially good choice for cheese and ice cream. Since she is feeding young children, Kubicina lightly pasteurizes the milk to 140 degrees.

"I actually think the kids drink way more milk than they used to," she says.

Kubicina never imagined herself living in Lykins. She wanted to be a career woman, and she wasn't so sure about adding kids to the mix. Now she lives in a converted convent, raises goats and home-schools her five children, ages 2 to 10. The "Kubis," as the family is affectionately known, were the first family to give Lykins a go.

"It was hard to be the first one," Kubicina recalls. "But once we were here, I had a surprising amount of peace. Nothing is as scary as it seems. We love it. This is our home."

Flashback to 2002, when the couple arrived with 3-month-old Caleb, and Lykins was "still a war zone." Back then, single guys came to live in Lykins. But with the 2008 real estate crash, young families started to make the leap of faith: "We have a lot of young families on a pretty tight budget who were put in proximity to walk out a vision," Ryan Kubicina says.

Rock members have tried to be sensitive to existing community dynamics, aware that the influx of outsiders might be viewed with suspicion. To reassure their neighbors, Rock community members helped to vote a long-time resident in as president of the neighborhood association, taking lesser positions for themselves. And Rock Solid Urban Impact encourages a range of partnerships that will reach beyond the church.

Brothers Asher Fields, 1, and Titus Fields, 2, play with neighborhood friends Annabelle Arnold, 2, and her sister Maggie Arnold, 1, in the sandbox as residents work at the community garden.

Members of the Rock, a non-denomational Christian ministry, prefer to worship in homes. On a Wednesday night, Jason and Candy Fields gather members of their house church in the home of Paul and Camilla Barrett.

When they're not donating their time to work on urban farm projects, Rock members earn money in a variety of jobs, such as computer programmers, architects and schoolteachers. They do not tithe, and services do not include an offeratory, which might interrupt the flow. Instead there's a box at the back of the church for donations. There's also a "Change the World" button on theurbanfarmingguys.com, and Jason Fields' next goal is to begin applying for grants to help create paying urban agriculture jobs for neighborhood youth.

They were recently awarded 20 fruit trees through a grant sponsored by the Missouri Department of Agriculture, and they're currently soliciting online votes for a crowd-sourced grant from www.givingoflife.com for $50,000.

"A lot of kids join gangs because nobody showed them how to make money. We've done a lot with nothing," he says. "A couple of shots in the arm, and we're off and running with the farm."

Moving day

On moving day, Dan and Jamie Gidman are surrounded by an army of Rock members who quickly unload the moving truck and spirit their belongings to the correct rooms.

Between moving van drop-offs, Jason Fields takes a call for help from Kyle Van Kirk. He needs to unload some drywall. The army heads down the street. Twenty minutes later they have lifted 24 sheets of drywall through the second-story sliding glass door of a home he bought for $12,000.

"We're like the Amish raising barns," Jason Fields says. "If you get enough people together, you can really knock it out."

Van Kirk is 21 and unmarried. He's rehabbing his first house with his dad, Bill Van Kirk, a Rock member who lives and runs a business in Olathe. Kyle has never rehabbed a house, so he winds up spending a lot of time standing around watching others show him construction basics.

Meanwhile, the Gidmans lucked into a lovingly restored $94,000 turn-of-the-century two-story with a charming built-in buffet, lovely high-gloss wood floors and a distinctive cobalt ceramic tile fireplace.

Their four-bedroom house is bigger than they need for now, but Jamie Gidman is eager to become a stay-at-home mom. Whittier Elementary is across the street from the Gidman house, but she intends to home-school. Most families say they are reluctant to send their children to the Kansas City public schools because of low graduation rates. The 2010 Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education puts the district graduation rate at 64.4 percent, compared to 85.7 percent for the state.

It's no coincidence that the majority of "sold" signs in Lykins bear the name of Realtor Laura Field. Field lives in the neighborhood and is a church member.

"If you want to make an impact, you have to move into the community," she says. "But we're not moving in to take over. It's not 'Here comes

the cavalry, now everybody do what we say.' Nobody has that mentality."

The Lykins Neighborhood Association meets the third Monday of the month in the stone basement of the church. Willie Hough, a 12-year resident, is the association president. Jason Fields is her vice president.

A no-nonsense woman, Hough keeps the agenda moving, all the while taking notes on her yellow legal pad. The agenda includes a crime and graffiti report and a discussion about ongoing problems with local thieves who steal metal from air conditioning units and sell it to a nearby scrap yard. There's an announcement about block watch training and an update on the community garden. Councilman Scott Wagner stops by to ask for support to shut down a proposed packaged liquor store.

Hough fosters 12 children with severe disabilities. She is not one to give up, even when the neighborhood gets tough: "There's too much at stake for us to quit."

Long-time Lykins resident Ron Heldstab, a former association president, thinks it's time for the older residents to hand the reins to a new generation. "I thank God for these young Christian kids. ... There was a little tension, and everyone was a little leery at first," he admits, "but we've become good friends."

Sixty-year-old Richard G. Ramirez carries his Bible in a leather case to the meeting, but he is not a Rock member. Ramirez likes the energy that his new neighbors bring to the table, adding their ideas to a strong foundation that he says was already in place.

"What I'm seeing is growth. You had 40 years of people who did the best they could," he says. "Now we've got new blood joining with the long-time residents of the neighborhood. I really believe you're seeing a group of people that together are the new patriots in taking the first steps for the lord, like in the 1700s."

House church

Despite the random gunshots, Candy Fields has never been afraid to live in Lykins: "When God calls you somewhere, he'll protect you."

At 43, Fields looks a decade younger than her actual age. In her 20s and early 30s, she lived in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and England, often in rough neighborhoods with gang activity.

She did drugs. She got tattoos. She wore combat boots.

She divorced her first husband when Raven, now a senior at Kansas City Christian School in Prairie Village, was a toddler. They moved to Spring Hill in Johnson County, where she got help from family raising her daughter. But the help also enabled her to continue partying and doing drugs, until one day she bottomed out and checked herself into a 30-day rehab program.

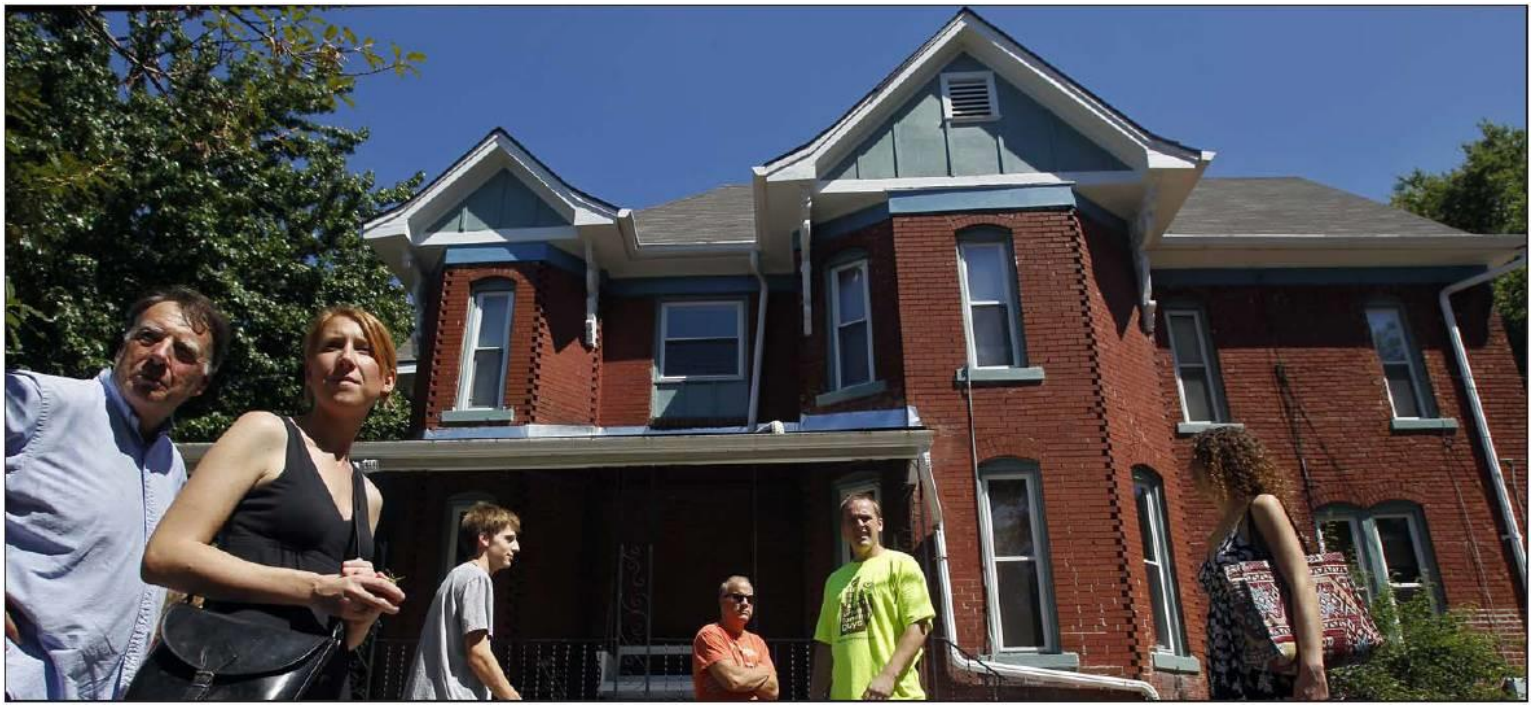
"I met God in rehab," she says.

Candy went on to become a dental assistant. She joined the Methodist church. Then one day someone invited her to a house church.

Jason, 30, is definitely the more conservative of the two — and a "sneaker wearer," Candy Fields adds with a huge grin. He grew up in Raytown in a family that "had morals but didn't attend church."

He was a good student in high school, and he

Jason and Candy Fields record video on an iPhone with lens attachments. The video shows the varieties of basil they have growing as part of their aquaponics system.



Jason Fields (second from right), an Urban Farming Guy, leads a tour through the Lykins neighborhood. The group stands in front of Fields' rehabbed home, a former drug house.

was voted "best looking" by the class, a title that bummed him out because he wanted to win "best partier." After gradation, he headed to the University of Missouri-Kansas City to party, studying intermittently.

The lawn-care business he started when he was 13 had not only bought him a car at 16, it had also taught him that money makes more money. Jason orchestrated extravagant bashes, spending $1,500 upfront, then selling tickets and making a profit. "But at the end of the day, I would wander off, and I would just have these moments with God," he says.

As those moments became more frequent, he stopped partying and started reading the Bible. For eight months he lived like a hermit after work so he could read it cover to cover. "The Bible was way more vibrant and colorful than church," he says.

Jason began to think about moving to the inner city to work with kids. One day while hanging out at the Broadway Café in Westport, he overheard the founder of the Rock discussing a move to make his ministry more responsive to urban youth.

A month later, Jason rented a room and moved into Lykins to be a part of a house church. He lived in Lykins for about a year in 2005. He continued working in the neighborhood while living elsewhere, all the while looking to buy a house in Lykins with a big garage to store all his lawn-care equipment.

He and Candy found what they were looking for in 2008.

Nourishing souls

Jason and Candy Fields met at house church, and these days they are house church leaders.

Members of the Rock meet in homes, just as Jesus did with his disciples. There are currently five house churches in Lykins that meet on Wednesday nights.

One summer night, church members gather at Paul and Camilla Barrett's stately old home off Independence Avenue and Benton Boulevard. The front door leads guests directly into the living room, where babies and toddlers play. The Fieldses' toddler boys, Titus and Asher, dive into the fray as a baby boy pulls himself up on the coffee table and starts to teethe on the edge.

For an hour or so the adults fill their plates with food from the kitchen and enjoy a potluck and fellowship. When it's time to worship, guitar cases are positioned at the entrance to the double staircase so the children don't wander off. Stan Butler's wife, Dana, strums her guitar and sings in a clear voice the refrain: "Allelujah for the Lord, God Almighty." She is accompanied by Jackie Golden of Grandview, who bows fanciful harmonies on the violin.

At one point Candy Fields rises from the living room recliner and crosses the room to stand closer to the musicians. She sways back and forth, her hands extended heavenward. All around the room, eyes are pressed closed, bodies sway. The singing continues for almost two hours, with interludes for prayer and discussion.

All the while, the babies and young children play in the background. Asher crawls onto his father's lap, and thumbs the pages of a well-worn Bible, while Titus sits in the recliner waving his toes in time with the music.

Jason and Candy Fields make leadership look easy. But Jason says that even though they are having the time of their lives, they pray several times a day, both alone and in small groups, so they don't lose their way.

"We can't really survive without what we call some juice from heaven," he says later. "We need God like we need food. We have a lot on our plate."

Common ground

Sandy Morrison walks a block from her house to the community gardens. The novice gardener stands under a walnut tree for shade and surveys the grizzled plots. The corn has shriveled, the herbs need trimming and pests have invaded.

"We're on quite a learning curve," she says.

Morrison and her husband, Joe, used to live in a 4,000-square-foot home in Liberty near William Jewell College. She had mostly raised their seven children and retired from teaching art at a Christian school. Still, she wasn't ready to sit on the front porch and rock herself into old age.

Morrison is 59, and although she had grown up in a small town and attended Lutheran church, she was immediately attracted to the youthful spirit of the Rock and its urban ministry.

"You don't have time to sit down. We are a community, and you're involved with each other. That's why I had a heart to move here," she says. "I've been in church my whole life. It always seemed to be a corporation, and the pastor the CEO. It's not that way here. It's hard to describe, but you can really sense when things happen, and you know God is leading."

It took her husband time to get used to the idea of uprooting, and she admits her grown children had concerns. "You do have to think about safety," she says. "I did have the police come and tell me how to make my home more secure when we first moved in."

Morrison has quickly become a grandmother figure for many of the children in the church and neighborhood. She's also teaching art again. On a Thursday evening, 14 children from the neighborhood show up at an arts-and-crafts class. The project of the day: making birthday party hats to celebrate Tommie's birthday. The shy girl with the Pebbles ponytail and shoes two sizes too big sets to work coloring her paper cone so she can make its crowning touch: a yarn pom-pom.

Two brothers from the neighborhood, Israel and Anthony, start to giggle while using Scotch tape to affix yarn beards to their chins. The week before, they made papier-mâché volcanoes, using one of two methods to make them erupt: either Diet Coke and Mentos or good old-fashioned baking soda and vinegar.

"I like to do things that little boys like," Morrison says with a satisfied grin.

Jason Fields, Kyle Van Kirk and Chris Pirman, a Rock member who lives next door to the Fieldses, spread out between the tables and work with the children. Morrison likes to have male role models for the boys who don't have fathers at home.

Fernando, a shy 9-year-old who lives across the street from the church, colors with crayons. His 16-year-old sister, Mayra, brought him to the class. She fiddles with her cellphone.

Fields and Van Kirk try to strike up a conversation by asking Mayra how her quinceneara ceremony went. She perks up slightly and on her phone pulls up a picture of the formal white dress she wore for the traditional Hispanic party celebrating her entrance into womanhood at 15.

"Hey, can I have a quinceneara?" Van Kirk jokes.

"You can," Mayra drawls slightly, "but it's kind of weird for a guy to have one."

"Yeah, I know that. I *know* that! What about you Fernando? Are you just going to throw your own party?" Van Kirk continues.

Fernando smiles shyly and continues to color.

Roll call

From the sidewalk, little Titus Fields looks up at the towering uniformed police officers.

"Want to be a police officer when you grow up?" Candy Fields asks him.

He nods his blond head "yes," so she hoists him up on her hip where he can more easily admire their shiny badges.

Sgt. Chris Price and seven uniformed officers from East Patrol Division gather outside the church. Price has decided to start the shift in Lykins with a "roll call" briefing, an effort to develop better face-to-face community relations.

"We want to create a better bond, so we don't think you're all bad and you don't think we're all bad," he tells the 40 or so Lykins residents who take a seat on the cement steps of the church at 6 p.m. one Sunday. "We've had barriers for a long time, and we want to break that down."

The East Patrol is one of the busiest in the city. That means vandalism calls often get lost in the race to deal with more violent crimes. Days earlier, Jason Fields recorded a video on his iPhone as two guys hauled a metal grease trap away from the abandoned Chinese-Mexican buffet on 12th Street. Meanwhile, scrap metalers have stolen the siding and gutters from homes while the occupants were at work.

"The thieves didn't even seem to care I was filming. I just ran at them repeating their license plate number," Jason Fields says.

These are the days when the frustration gets to these urban homesteaders, and it would certainly be easier to high-tail it back to the suburbs.

"The learning curve is steep, but everyone keeps going because there is no sideline," Ryan Kubicina says. "All of our chips are at the center of the table. Our kids' lives are at stake. We need to do something about the vacant lots, the illegal drugs. We need healthy, organic food. We have a common purpose, and we want to unite the people around us."

So they work to re-form a Boy Scout troop, they cover over gang graffiti and they pull weeds in a community garden. It may seem like small stuff, but they pray the payoff will be big.

In the Lykins neighborhood, violent and serious crime, including homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault and burglary, has plummeted 21 percent since 2008.

"You don't go into a neighborhood that doesn't care and see a garden," Price observes after the meeting. "The farming portion of what they're doing brings everyone together in community, and these kinds of things help."

As Jason Fields walks through the community garden, he points to new graffiti that has appeared on the backside of the school's brick wall.

No one seems to know just who sprayed a sun's rays peeking through a cloud, the word "hope" rising above it.

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Kansas City Police Department officers invited the Lykins community members to a roll call meeting. Crime in the area has dropped 21 percent since 2008.

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A photo gallery and video of the Lykins project