

No more kegger parties for nation's largest off-campus residence



Student assistants Rachel Wolfe, left, and Jeremy Noller, keep an eye on Knight's Crossing during a night's inspection of the apartment complex across the street from the University of Central Florida.

by Pamela J. Johnson
The Orlando Sentinel

In the nearly two years Jim Sudbay has lived at Knight's Crossing, his car has been broken into and its windshield shot out.

But that's not why he wants to move out of the nation's largest off-campus residence across from the University of Central Florida. The Valencia Community College stu-

dent will not renew his lease because he can no longer have keggers.

"The first year, I really liked it here," said Sudbay, sitting in his apartment beneath a poster that reads, "Do Not Disturb." The yellow poster looks like a road sign with a stick figure on its back sucking down a keg of beer through a rubber tube.

"Now we're not allowed to have kegs in our apartments, or parties at all," the sophomore said. "Resident assis-

Since August, when UCF took control of the 3,756-bed Knight's Crossing and Knight's Court, life has changed drastically for residents. Knight's Crossing had been considered a crime haven by nearby homeowners since the first phase opened in August 1997.

Now, only students are allowed to rent rooms. Orange County deputies have increased patrols. Carrying two-way radios, UCF-hired student residents patrol the grounds 24 hours a day. No kegs allowed. No parties.

The complex is phasing out students such as Sudbay, who are unhappy with the changes.

"If I wanted resident assistants, I would have moved into a dorm," Sudbay said.

In a \$158 million deal, the owner of the apartments and College Park Communities transferred control to UCF in August. UCF and College Park Communities now act as co-managers. A nonprofit subsidiary of the University of Central Florida Foundation Inc. issued bonds to finance the deal.

For years, homeowners had used Knight's Crossing as the poster child for off-campus crime. It's one of a dozen off-campus student residences in Orange County and adjacent Seminole County.

It wasn't just complaints of noise and other nuisance calls. Since 1997, a few rapes have been reported there each year. In 1998 alone, four rapes were reported at Knight's Crossing, according to Orange County sheriff's reports. Residents also reported home and auto burglaries, robberies and auto thefts at the complex.

During an expansion plan, homeowners packed Orange County Commission meetings, using the 2,158 calls for service in 2000 to sheriff's officials as a clear indication of the problem. Commissioners axed the expansion plan, which is being battled in the courts.

The complex, too, has a lion's share of resident critics who had dubbed Knight's Crossing as "the definition of hell on Earth."

"Stay away!" warned one student, who wrote on an apartment-rating Web site that she discovered the roommates assigned to her did drugs but she was locked into a year's lease. In each apartment, bedroom doors have bolt locks and bedrooms are leased individually. Often, students are matched with roommates who are strangers. A 12-month lease is mandatory.

Now, the reputation is changing. Noise complaints - now stopped by student assistants before deputies are called - have decreased significantly since the takeover, according to sheriff's statistics.

The type of crime appears to be shifting. More and more,

For example, in January 2001, there were several dozen nuisance calls, but no robberies. Last month, there were only a few nuisance calls, but three armed robberies and one attempted robbery.

Auto burglaries are also rising. Comparing 2000 with 2001, auto burglaries rose 132 percent from 19 to 44, according to sheriff's officials. The trend is continuing this academic year, officials said.

"We still get a few loud parties out there, but they have dropped drastically since August," said sheriff's detective David Padron, who is assigned to the Knight's Crossing area. "We get mostly auto burglaries. And everybody we have ever arrested out there for car or home burglaries has lived elsewhere."

At the entrance to Knight's Crossing, visitors are now greeted by a wide black banner that declares in white letters, "UCF Affiliated Housing."

Around midnight recently, the complex was quiet. Only a few students had called about maintenance problems. On the chilly night, two student assistants began their circuitous inspection around the buildings.

While they made their rounds, a few pizza delivery trucks passed slowly around the parking lot. Students rushed to their apartments, some lugging books.

Then one student assistant ran from a darkened hallway. "Ahhhh," yelled UCF sophomore Rachel Wolfe. "I think someone just sprayed me with a fire hydrant!"

The prankster was nowhere to be found. That was the biggest incident at the complex that night.

Still, some neighbors are not convinced that things have improved.

"I don't believe it's true," said Sue Eberle at her Riverwalk home, a few hundred yards from Knight's Crossing. "You don't put the density of a city in such a small area. The community cannot handle it."

Eberle and other neighbors fought bitterly to prevent the complex from expanding. They have now turned their focus to another proposed student housing project at McCullough and Old Lockwood roads.

Last week, hundreds of homeowners crowded into a Seminole County Commission meeting to protest. After listening to testimony for hours, commissioners delayed their vote until Feb. 26.

That other complexes are now in the hot seat doesn't bother Miles Orth, regional vice president of College Park Communities.

"We've worked really, really hard to improve the image at Knight's Crossing," Orth said. "I think we're making progress."

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