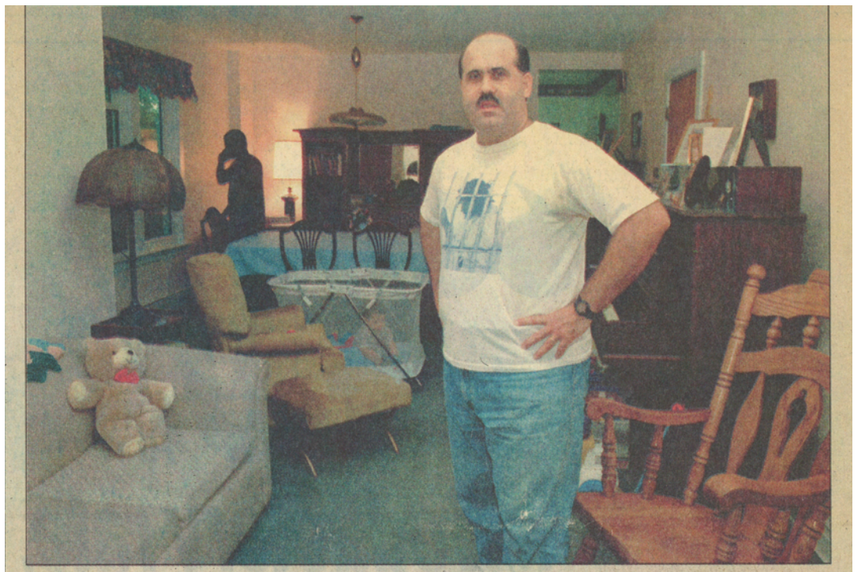

Manny Mill stands front and center in the debate over Koinonia House, a home for Christian ex-convicts that opened several years ago in a Wheaton neighborhood. Daily Herald Photo/Bev Horne

The Manny behind Koinonia

Ex-con tries to win over foes of home

By Vicki Speer
Daily Herald Staff Writer 9-6-94

Manuel Mill always wanted more.

He gained prosperity and influence as a mayor's aide in New Jersey, as a show business promoter, and as the owner of an insurance agency.

But it never was enough.

"I mean, people want more," Mill said. "If you have one home, you want two homes. If you have three homes, you want four. If you have one car, you want two cars or a better car.

"I was no exception; I was the same way."

Fueled by his desire for more, Mill got involved in an ill-fated scheme to defraud a bank. He spent years on the run from the FBI before surrendering and spending time in prison, where he says he found God.

Now he is trying to help others go straight.

But tumult continues to dog his steps, even in his role as director of Koinonia House, a Wheaton home for former inmates who have embraced Christianity.

It threatens to erupt this week as residents and Mill undoubtedly will square off as a new agreement for the halfway house is reviewed by the city council.

Koinonia House

The house at 818 E. Indiana St., Wheaton, has been a focal point of criticism since it opened several years ago. And the firestorm shows no sign of easing.

Spurred by complaints from residents who didn't want a house for ex-convicts in their neighborhood, the city sought to license it as a group home. That led Koinonia House of DuPage County Inc. to file a federal lawsuit earlier this year, claiming the proposed licensing requirement violated the residents' religious freedoms.

Now it appears the legal battle may be over without ever reaching the courtroom. Mill and city officials say they have reached an agreement that will allow Koinonia House to continue operating.

But while Mill and the city both say they're happy, some of Koinonia House's neighbors clearly are not.

They say they will voice their objections tonight when the city council is scheduled to consider the pact.

If the deal is approved, it will represent a major victory for Mill, who through all the legal and moral wrangling has come to symbolize Koinonia House.

"It's kind of hard to separate his character and the group's character," said Indiana Street resident Scott R. Hellen, a leader of the

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KOINONIA: Home's founder says he kept his promises

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residents who oppose the home. "They're one and the same."

A matter of trust

Members of Citizens for a Safe Community do not trust Mill or his Koinonia House organization.

Hellen says that distrust stems from the earliest days of the project, when residents had to learn about Mill's plans through indirect means.

Subsequent meetings with Mill and Koinonia House representatives did little to reassure neighbors, Hellen says.

And they became even more nervous when plans for the site seemed to be in a continual state of flux.

Hellen claims Mill initially told residents the building would house up to 14 Christian ex-convicts who would live without supervision.

Instead, Mill lives in the house with his wife, two children, and no more than three ex-convicts at a time.

"It's our opinion that he's making it up as he goes along — and that's one of our concerns," Hellen said.

Moreover, residents say Mill and Koinonia House officials have ignored their concerns.

Hellen, for example, said neighbors specifically asked to meet each new tenant before they arrive. Instead, he said, neighbors learn about new arrivals only by watching them move in.

"He was convicted of being a con artist, and still is," Hellen said of Mill. "He's conning the city and the residents."

A complicated life

Manuel "Manny" Mill's life and character appear as complicated as the battle over Koinonia House.

He was born in Havana, Cuba. When he was 14, his family fled to Spain. They came to America in 1972, eventually settling in Union City, N.J.

He studied psychology at Seton Hall University and served as an aide to the Union City mayor. He also sold insurance and promoted dances and shows.

In a move that Mill says still haunts him, he dropped out of school in 1979 without receiving a degree.

"I went four years in school and I majored in baseball," he said.

He moved to Florida in the early 1980s and opened an insurance agency.

Koinonia House opponent Scott Hellen pages through some of the files and news clippings he has collected about the home for ex-convicts. Daily Herald Photo/Ed Lee

That is where he became a white-collar criminal.

A wrong turn

It started when an old acquaintance asked Mill to help him in a scam.

The man gave Mill five forged checks totaling $175,000. Mill's job was to find a Florida bank and a contact and to use the checks to open an account.

Mill's cut was $50,000.

"I thought that I was doing the perfect crime," Mill said.

He wasn't.

With the FBI on his trail, Mill and his then-wife, Cecilia, fled in August 1984 to Puerto Rico. They kept running, first to the Dominican Republic, then to Colombia and Venezuela.

In Venezuela, Mill says, he opened a restaurant "and basically started myself over."

He lived there for two years, a relatively happy and prosperous man fulfilling a longtime goal to operate a "nice, luxurious Cuban restaurant."

The surrender

Then came the telephone call that changed his life.

It was from his father, who finally learned that the FBI was hunting for his son.

"He says, 'Manny, I know what you have done. I know why you're there. I know that you are facing 55 years behind bars,' " Manny said.

"I got really nervous because I have always had terrific respect for my father. And I didn't want to let him down. At that point, I just kept quiet.

"So he said, 'Manny, let me ask you a simple question: If I die today, can you come to my funeral and to my wake?' "

"And I said, 'No, I cannot, because the FBI is looking for me,' " Mill said.

Mill's parents persuaded him to return to the United States and surrender.

He was convicted of interstate transportation of forged checks and sentenced to three years in prison.

He served less than two years and was released in April 1988 from a federal prison camp in Montgomery, Pa.

During his time in prison, Mill began studying the Bible and becoming involved in the church.

"The change was a drastic change, from hating God to loving God, from loving sin to hating sin, from wanting to do the wrong thing to wanting to do the right thing," Mill said.

Mill came to Wheaton College through the newly established Charles W. Colson Scholarship program — minus Cecilia, who had divorced him while he was in prison.

He met his current wife, Barbara, in Jerusalem in 1989. They were married Jan. 6, 1990.

Mill received a bachelor's degree from Wheaton College in biblical and theological studies in December 1989 and a master's degree in theological studies in May 1991. He also was ordained a minister through the Baptist General Conference.

He planned to become a prison chaplain but decided to pursue another course.

Creating Koinonia

Mill is the conceptual founder of Koinonia House.

He developed the idea after receiving shelter from a church member himself after leaving prison.

But while Koinonia House was Mill's idea, he says he doesn't run the show.

Instead, the organization is operated by a "board of control" — the equivalent of a board of directors — that has included officials from several local churches. Mill has a voice in all decisions but is not a voting member.

"I was the one that the Lord gave the idea to, but I am not Koinonia House," Mill said.

'A fine, fine man'

His friends see Mill as a person of integrity.

"Manny's a fine, fine man," Koinonia House Board of Control Chairman Jonathan Sceggel said. "I've known him for several years now, and I think very highly of him."

John Armstrong, former pastor of Trinity Baptist Church of Wheaton, which helped get Koinonia under way, spent a few hours each week helping Mill prepare for his ordination. Armstrong, who now sees Mill infrequently, remembers the former inmate's perseverance and passion.

"He's fervent," Armstrong said. "He does everything with passion and dedication; he does nothing halfway."

Armstrong believes Mill has shown similar persistence in the controversy that has surrounded Koinonia House.

Mill was vehement in his defense of Koinonia, arguing that the group has kept its word in all matters. He says Koinonia has found safe tenants and qualified board members, just as he had pledged.

Residents of the house have not been involved in any crimes since it opened.

Still, Mill knows many residents resent the house's presence.

"They have been fighting us; they have been hostile," Mill said.

"But any time they want to communicate with us, the door is wide open."