

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



*Faculty families are moving their children, their pets,
their private lives into OU's residence halls—
with several hundred freshmen as their closest neighbors.*

President David L. Boren has noted on many occasions that Thomas Jefferson deemed the university an "academic village." In the village of OU, dwelling among the groups of villagers ranging in size from 50 to more than a thousand, live the OU village elders. Known formally as faculty-in-residence and informally as FIRs, these faculty members do not depart their classrooms for homes in one of northwest Norman's many Brookhavens or east Norman's Faculty Heights; instead, they head for the dorms.

Conceived by Boren and implemented in spring 1996, the FIR program moves select faculty members into spacious, lovely apartments in one of the University's resident housing facilities. There they serve as professional role models, academic advisers, personal counselors, faculty friends and, above all, friendly neighbors.

The elder of elders, the FIRst FIR, as it were, was Tom Boyd, now David Ross Boyd Professor Emeritus of Philosophy. In fall 1996, he moved into Couch Center for a one-year tenure. The month after he and his wife, Barbara, accepted the FIR role, she was offered the pastorship of St. Paul Presbyterian Church in Aurora, Colorado. She accepted, and Tom lived out the year in Couch before retiring and joining her in Colorado, which since has been their home.

"I was so excited about the experiment," Boyd says. "The genius of David Boren is that he's willing to experiment and that he focuses his efforts toward what benefits students and the student-faculty relationship. This program seems to be to be one of the premiere adventures into the possibility of having more of a bridge between what goes on north of Lindsey and what goes on south of Lindsey.

"The program places a faculty representative in very

close proximity to the ongoing lives of students. The experience makes you empathetic toward what young students just beginning their careers go through. I was constantly aware of the stresses and pressures of living, not just studying, but of how to get on with one's days."

Boyd, who now teaches in the University's distance learning Advance Studies Program, sees the FIRs' role as including the liaison function, taking insights back to fellow faculty as well as helping the students. He did the latter in a major way when Couch's eighth floor caught fire, causing a middle-of-the-night evacuation and displacing residents.

Faculty members currently in the program speak glowingly of their experience. All say they are enriched by their immersion in student life and that, for several reasons, they do not really look forward to the end of their tenures, which the University sets at one to three years.

First, their attractive apartments average 2,000 square feet, and the oldest is only two years old. Most FIRs became involved in construction early enough to choose color schemes and furnishings. These homes have as their grounds the University's well-tended, garden-filled campus, its miles of smooth sidewalks for bicycling and walking and facilities

ranging from a cafeteria, where they enjoy a family meal plan, to a library to a cultural bonanza of music, theater and fine art.

Second, they truly like their neighbors. Living among mostly freshmen, the FIRs have found respect and insight. Those with children have found hundreds of role models for their own offspring as well as big brothers and sisters by the score.

Third, they enjoy the knowledge that they help many students make the difficult transition from dependent high

By fall 1998, Adams Center housed Eric Connell, visiting professor of architecture, his wife, Hilda De Leon Connell, and their two daughters, Lauren, 10, and Mia, 22 months; Cate Center had Rosa Cintron and her husband, Tom Owens, both assistant professors of education and their daughter, Sara, 5; Couch Center sheltered Doug Gaffin, assistant professor of zoology and his wife, Marielle Hoefnagels, lecturer in zoology and botany/microbiology, and their cats, Two and Scoops; and Walker Center included Shad Satterthwaite, visiting professor of political science, his wife, Valerie, and their children, Megan, 6, Tanner, 4, and Pace, 10 months.

Waiting for homes to be finished in other residential centers are Ruth Gana Okediji, associate professor of law, and her husband, Olutade Okediji, assistant professor of economics, and Allen W. Knehans, professor of nutritional sciences, and his wife, Jean.

school student to independent college student more easily.

"To become a faculty-in-residence, one must be willing to truly commit to the well being of someone else," says Dave Schrage, director of University housing and food services, whose department administers the program from apartment construction to provision of supplies the FIRs need for a plethora of in-house programs. "Our FIRs do that superbly. They might on a given instant stop cooking dinner and address the death of a parent or some other traumatic situation. Students 17-19 are going to have traumas. Two-thirds of our students in residence halls are freshmen, and many of them are first-generation college students.

"How a FIR operates depends on his or her style. Some are more geared toward academic enlightenment and presenting academic challenges, but they all serve as friends and mentors as well. With each family, it's unique, but in general the academic factor is clearly a critical one."

To that end, each FIR schedules two formal, in-home "lecturettes" each semester as well as many informal student events. Add to that the daily contacts that come from eating in the cafeteria, walking the children around campus and picking up the paper from the residence hall lobby.



Rosa Cintron, her husband, Tom Owens, and their daughter, Sara, of Cate Center, are the senior faculty-in-residence family, now in their fourth semester.

A sampling from fall 1998's lecturette series shows the Satterthwaites hosting Larry Michaelsen, David Ross Boyd Professor of Management, as he speaks on "Group Decision Making"; the Cintron-Owens providing students access to Architecture Dean Robert Fillpot and Fine Arts Dean Marvin Lams discussing "Beyond Technical Excellence: Searching for the Artistic"; the Gaffin-Hoefnagels offering Lynda Lee Kaid, George Lynn Cross Research Professor of Communication, talking about "Video Politics"; and the Connells presenting anthropology professor Robert Fields delivering information on "Use of Cradleboards and/or Tipi Construction."

The FIRs of Cate:

Rosa Cintron and Tom Owens

"I agree with President Boren that this is a community, but it's a university so we should emphasize a community of scholars," Cintron says. "For me, it has been important to bring the passion and enthusiasms of the classroom into the residence hall. The lecturette series isn't just social. The presentations are intellectual conversations about a topic of current or historical interest.

"It's been great for us, too, because you can become pretty parochial within your own department. When I pick up the phone as a FIR, I talk to people all over the campus. Tom and I have always been interested in the university life and the world of ideas. It seems this is more than a profession; for us, it's a vocation. I told Tom as soon as I heard of the FIR program, 'This is the life for us.'"

Cintron and Owens were the second FIRs, moving into their apartment in spring 1997. Cintron had been a staff-in-residence at the State University of New York College at Old Westbury for three years in the early 1980s, but her role there was a bit different.

"There, I had disciplinary responsibility," she says. "On the weekends, I was on a rotation schedule. I had to do rounds. I had to make sure that students were complying with all the rules and regulations."

Schrage points out that OU's program does not ask faculty to serve in loco parentis. These village elders do not mete out

punishment for transgressions against the village.

"We have specifically designed the program so that they don't have responsibility for any of the negative things that might occur," he says. "Live-in residence hall staff members—resident advisers and center coordinators—are responsible for what you might call the good, the bad and the ugly. FIRs deal with students in only a positive fashion."

Because of the staff hierarchy and well-defined procedures for emergencies, Cintron and Owens report only a few late-night problems. Their positive encounters, however, are too numerous to mention.

"We respond more as a neighbor," Owens says. "Just as I'd help the guy next door if he needed me, I do so here. Once I stopped to talk to a woman between the age of my mother and grandmother. She was with her daughter and granddaughter, who was going to live in Cate. When the student and her mother went upstairs, the grandmother pointed at me and said, 'Young man, you take good care of my granddaughter, you hear?' I said, 'Ma'am, I will take just as good care of her as she will let me.' We have a lot of parents who breathe an audible sigh of relief to think there's an adult around, in spite of our assurances that we just don't intervene in student life, that we have no disciplinary responsibility."

Cintron and Owens take their good neighbor policy seriously. In fall 1998 a father, who was a native of India working in the United Arab Emirates, brought his son to school thinking he could stay in the son's dorm room. The son's roommate arrived early, however, and there were no rooms in the inns. The father spent several nights with the FIRs—and cooked two complicated traditional Indian dinners, which about 20 students had the privilege of sharing.

The FIRs of Couch:

Doug Gaffin and Marielle Hoefnagels

Gaffin and Hoefnagels moved into Tom Boyd's former apartment in fall 1997 when he moved to Colorado, but they already knew their predecessor in a different capacity. An ordained minister, Boyd had married the couple in a January 1997 ceremony in Jacobson Hall. Doug had been teaching at OU since August 1996, and Marielle had joined him that December. They moved into the residence hall in June 1997, newlyweds as well as newlyFIRs.

Schrage refers to Gaffin and Hoefnagels laughingly as the "scorpion and dirt folks" because of Doug's scholarly focus on the venomous stinging arachnids and Marielle's study of bacteria and fungi that live in the earth. Doug has taken groups of his students and a group of resident advisers on scorpion safaris, but he has not yet opened the experience to dorm residents, given the risky business of wrangling the stinging critters. However, he and Marielle twice have wrangled more than 250 students for midnight breakfasts.

"We were lamenting that we offer these academic expe-



Newlyweds Marielle Hoefnagels and Doug Gaffin, with their cats, Two, above, and Scoops, inherited the Couch Center apartment of OU's first faculty-in-residence, emeritus professor Tom Boyd.

riences—I sometimes call them our pointy-head programs—that appeal to a certain type of student but not all," Hoefnagels says. "We were not reaching the many students just sitting around the lounge who didn't even know our apartment was here.

"The first time, we actually all did the cooking: pancakes and eggs and sausage and bacon from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. It was quite a scene in the kitchen, let me tell you. It's good-sized, but when you have 10 RAs, it gets wild. This time, we got the food already prepared from the cafeteria. It was a lot less crazy."

The Gaffin-Hoefnagels say they average about five organized events with students each month, ranging from resident adviser meetings to speakers. They eat in the cafeteria and release some of the tensions of academic life playing table tennis and volleyball with students. They ordered two extra season tickets to the University theater, taking two different students along for each show. They recently had 15 pre-veterinarian students over for dinner to visit with an admissions officer from Oklahoma State's College of Veterinary Medicine.

"We didn't really know what the FIR program would be

like, but most of our fears were alleviated by talking to Rosa and Tom and Tom Boyd," Gaffin says. "You envision living in a small dorm room and sharing a bathroom with a bunch of undergraduates as you flash back to your own dorm experience."

Marielle adds, "We were also concerned about privacy. Doug teaches this humongous class, and we feared that on the night before exams, we might have 100 students dropping in asking for help, but that hasn't happened."

Doug says that transition back to non-campus residential life will be a challenge. He says that their experiences with their 800 neighbors have not been at all difficult.

"We actually have a policy now that if the doorbell rings once after midnight, we don't answer because we do get occasional drive-by doorbell ringings," he says. "If it rings twice, it's probably something important. We got a double doorbell ring just last week. It was a resident having difficulty with her roommate. They just weren't getting along. We talked to her and got her to her resident adviser. They took it from there. We talked to her parents, too, that same night. They were worried sick after she called them, so they called us."

The FIRs of Adams: **Eric and Hilda Connell**

The Connells joined the FIR force at the same time as the Gaffin-Hoefnagels, bringing Lauren, 10, and Mia, 22 months, to join Sara Owens, 5, in the ranks of FIRkids.

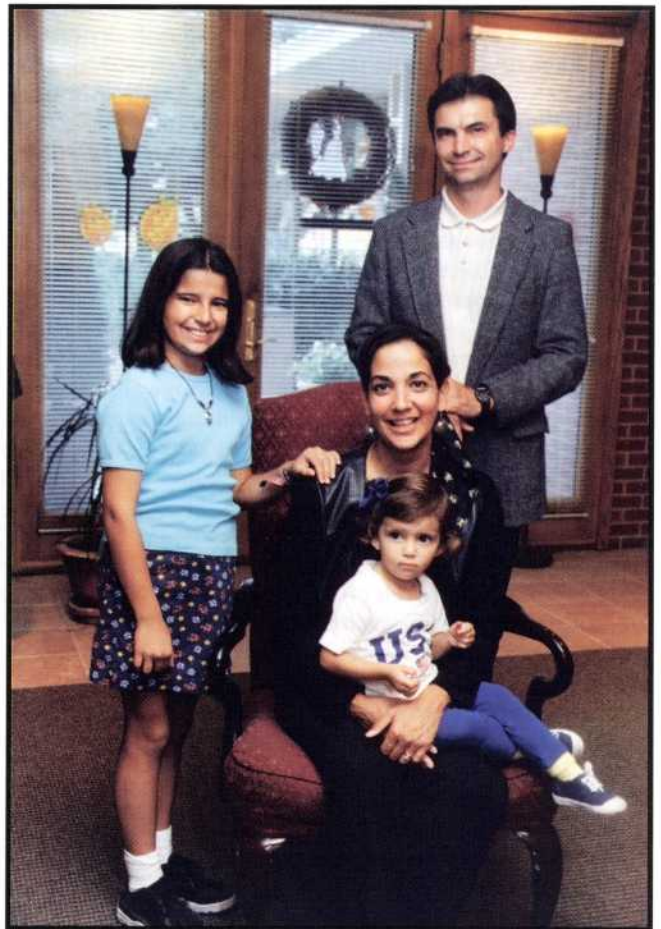
"It's like living in a mini city," Hilda says. "In any community, you have good people and bad people and medium people. It's like that here. We have those with problems and those without. We live with 800 students who come from small towns and big cities. Some have traveled the world; some have never left home before.

"We try to get to know all our neighbors. This year, Eric took a group picture of every RA with his or her residents. We want to get to know as many as possible by name. It sounds overwhelming, but you do come to learn them."

The Connells say their lives proceed much as they did when they lived off campus. They visit friends, have overnight guests and take family vacations while resident advisers apartment-sit. Before becoming FIRs, they walked and biked to campus to walk and bike on it. Now, they cut out Step (or Pedal) One.

In addition to their formal lecturettes, Hilda opens their home to social activities with a message as well. She plans a discussion of date rape and one on healthy eating. She recently helped with a dinner of Spanish and Mexican food that featured the Hispanic Student Association's vice president playing guitar and singing. She read folktales from different Spanish-speaking countries.

"We're not here to watch over the students or to take care of them or even to ensure they make the right decisions," Hilda says. "We are role models. But it does make parents feel comfortable to know that there's a family within reach. I was outside with Mia when a mother helping her daughter move a new fridge into her room saw me and said, 'You live here? You have children here?' Then she turned to her



Eric and Hilda Connell, with their daughters, Lauren and Mia, have found their 800 student neighbors in Adams Center to be very respectful of their privacy.

daughter and said, 'Visit her. You should go and visit her.'"

Eric recalls soothing the fears of another parent during a phone call from Dallas. "This father was concerned about his child being a bit lonely and out of touch. He said, 'Look, I wonder if there's any way you could find out for me if he's OK? His roommate lives in Norman and goes home all the time.' I went to the student's RA and asked him to get the student involved if possible. That's one case in which I think we made a difference. I don't think the parent would have called an RA as readily as he called us."

Eric says in their second year they have become more judicious in time management. Hilda adds that students are consistently respectful of the family's privacy.

"Last year, we said if the light in the lobby is on, come on by," she says. "This year we haven't even bothered with that. No one this semester has rung the bell after 10 p.m. We've heard of other programs in which students come at all hours saying, 'Help, I've lost my key.' Here, the staff takes care of those problems."

The FIRs of Walker:
Shad and Valerie Satterthwaite

The Satterthwaites moved their family into Walker in August 1998, doubling the FIRkid population. As the newest FIRs, they have not had much time to assess the program. They heard of it when Tom Boyd spoke at a 1995 holiday tree lighting in David Burr Park, just east of the dormitories.

“We brought the kids to that and stood listening to Tom talk about Christmas traditions and integrating them into residence life,” Shad remembers. “He spoke of the campus as his and the students’ front yard. We thought that was a great thing.”

Valerie says she was unsure what their lives would become or how the change in lifestyle would affect their three children.

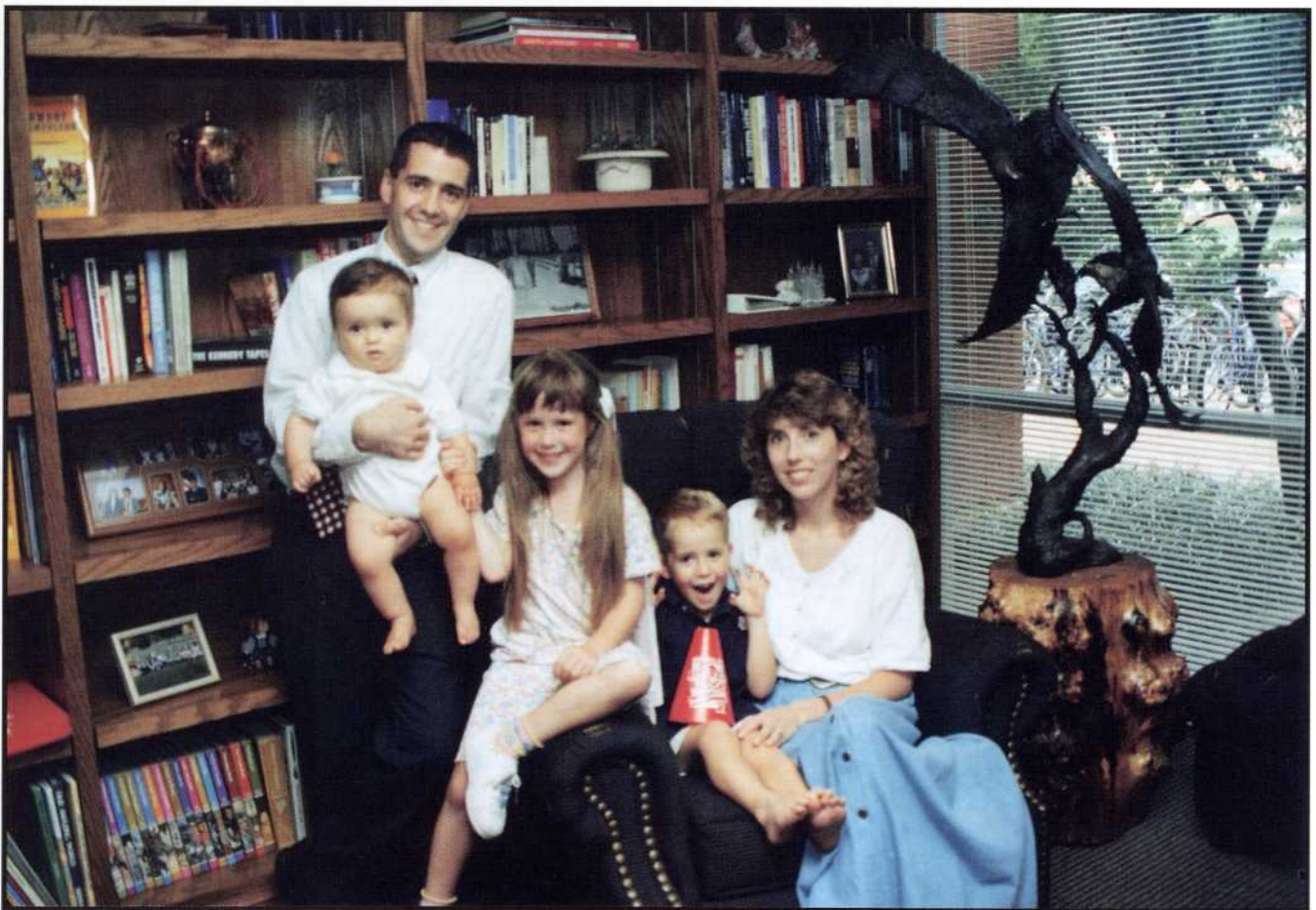
“I assumed there might be more downsides because as we told our friends what we were going to do, they would say, ‘You’re doing what?’” she says. “They thought we were absolutely crazy to move into a dorm with 1,300 undergraduates, but it’s really been fun, and the kids have loved it.”

Shad says, “It does take some getting used to, though. There are a lot of windows in this apartment, and you have to think about what you’re doing. You can’t just come out in your bathrobe with the lights on and parade around.”

The Satterthwaites say that when their doorbell rings, they open the doors to find students who have come by to chat, play with the children or plan center activities. One elementary education major has enlisted 4-year-old Tanner as part of a field experiment in math, bringing Life Savers for him to count and categorize by color. This FIR family’s student interactions have been fine, they say.

“We had one homesick girl who came in to chat,” Val says. “We invited her to dinner. That’s not really a problem; it’s just part of life here. One student said, ‘I watch your daughter eat breakfast every day as I go to my 7:30 class, and it’s so nice to know that there’s life still going on in a normal fashion.’”

The faculty-in-residence program gives proof to the idea that it takes a village to raise a student. As village elders, the FIRs eat, work and play as contributors to that worthy goal for several thousand engaged in the learning process. Creating a bridge between faculty and students, they create living/learning environments that nourish both the spirit and the mind.



The Satterthwaite family—Shad, Valerie, Pace, Megan and Tanner—who doubled the FIR kid population when they moved into Walker Center, were intrigued by Tom Boyd’s description of the campus as the “students’ front yard.”