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The Rock's Christian soldiers are battling for Kansas City's soul one jacked-up block at a time

By Casey Lyons

Dressed in his black Carhartt work suit, Ryan Kubicina circled a squat brick building in the hard-luck Lykins neighborhood with a can of paint and a brush. It was spring 2008.

He'd just finished covering up the gang graffiti when he heard a strange rumbling coming from within the former Holy Trinity Church school at 10th Street and Myrtle.

Kubicina walked along the building, its uniform windows looking as browned-over as a chain smoker's windshield. Next to the door on the most secluded side, he saw a pile of broken glass.

He peeked inside and saw a haggard, bearded 40-something man thrashing about with a club, bashing and shattering sinks and urinals, sending porcelain shards skidding into the corners and spraying water across the bare concrete floors with a wild violence.

Kubicina called the police from his cell phone. A man was there, he said, right now, destroying his building and stealing copper. He'd just spent months and thousands of dollars installing the new plumbing.

"And please be advised," he told the female dispatcher, "I'm going in."

She talked him down. He backed away to keep the entrance clear. After the man had reduced the bathroom to debris and dust, Kubicina heard only ominous silence. Then, with a series of loud metal-on-metal clangs, the man stacked parts in a crate. Then silence again.

Standing in the street a few houses down, Kubicina saw the man emerge, straining under the weight of the wrecked plumbing. He was headed down the street in Kubicina's direction.

"Hey, man! How's it going?" Kubicina called. "My name's Ryan. Haven't seen you around here much. Just, um, curious — do you have your driver's license on you or anything?" He looked at the box. "What are you doing with all that metal?"

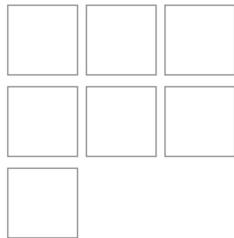
"Oh," the man said, looking back over his shoulder. "It was in that Dumpster."

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MICHAEL MCCLURE

Inside church, pastor Ryan Kubicina lays his hands on Rock members instead of copper thieves.



"And you have permission to take it out of the Dumpster?"

"Yeah, man, I talked to the people over there. They gave me permission to just take it."

"Really?" Kubicina said incredulously. "So you didn't just get that metal from the building?"

"Uh, no, man," the man answered. He was getting cagey now, looking around. "What are you doing, man?"

"Well, unfortunately, I can't let you take that metal. Because I know exactly where you got it. Because I'm one of the guys who helped install it."

Kubicina was gathering boldness. "So you're going to have to drop that right now. And just to let you know, the police are already on their way."

If the man had a gun or a blade, now was the time he'd show it, Kubicina thought. Instead, the man dropped the box with a metallic thud, grabbed a 30-pound chrome urinal flusher and attacked.

Kubicina jumped back. The swing's momentum made the man stagger. He recovered, wound up and heaved the makeshift weapon.

The fixture caught Kubicina's hip, but he didn't look down or feel it. He saw the man falling toward him. Kubicina stepped forward and landed a punch just below the man's throat.

The man jerked backward, turned and ran down Myrtle toward 11th Street. Kubicina chased him. Neighbors came out onto their porches, yelling bloody hell at the scene. Kubicina stayed on the man's heels until he scurried into an abandoned house.

Kubicina wouldn't follow him into a house that he hadn't been in before — not with five kids and a young wife at home just around the corner. He waited outside until the police came, but by then the man was gone. Next time, he thought.

For the members of Kansas City's new religious movement, these confrontations are an almost everyday part of their "suffering package."

And this baby-faced man with spiked-up black hair, chasing bandits in a paint-smeared work suit, is more than a neighbor and fellow spiritual warrior. He's the pastor.

The full name of the organization is Reclaiming of Christ's Kingdom, but everyone calls it the Rock. Its mission is to mend modernity's chewed-up and busted lives.

Its members want 10 percent of Kansas Citians to join them.

Reclaiming Kansas City's badlands one block-watch captain at a time, Rock families buy former drug houses cheap and rehab them to get a footing in the Northeast neighborhoods. First, they try to win the hearts and minds of the troublemakers, gangsters, prostitutes and thieves. If that doesn't work, they want them to get out.

They're armed, they're organized and they have the Community Action Network police numbers saved in their phones.

In the past two years, at least 15 families have moved out of their comfortable houses in insulated suburbs such as Overland Park and Liberty — or from places such as Dallas; Warren, Ohio; and Laramie, Wyoming — and into the 64127, statistically one of Kansas City's most violent and crime-plagued zip codes. Moving in is critical. It's what they call "walking out" their convictions.

In the same period of time, they've helped put a pillow over the face of violent crime in the neighborhood. Since 2007, crime has gone down 25

percent, including a 40 percent decrease in burglaries, according to the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department.

In 2008, members of the Rock made up the vocal community force behind new city legislation to hold metal recyclers accountable for the provenance of sellers' scrap.

Kubicina and others watched the daily parade to and from the scrap yard on 12th Street. Scavengers moved into houses on the block and lived there while they ripped out all the copper and brass. When the place was stripped, they'd move on to the next house.

More than half of those who moved into Lykins and rehabbed houses ended up losing their exterior air-conditioning units at least once.

For a year, Kubicina says, they worked with City Council members Cathy Jolly and Sharon Sanders Brooks. The resulting ordinance was, Kubicina says, the culmination of work on "our number one problem."

But the pioneers have also learned. Now they bore deeply into concrete slabs, tie their air conditioners with thick metal cable and secure them with locks.

Tim Johns is the Rock's gray-eyed founder.

He inspires Rock lifers with his big-personality charisma and his energetic, familiar oratory. Despite his middle-aged thickness and his more-salt-than-pepper short hair, he tosses around words such as "bro" and "man" a lot. If you stick around long enough, there's a fist bump coming your way.

At age 16 in Tarkio, Missouri, during the early 1970s, Johns was a headstrong, football-playing, beer-drinking jock not averse to the occasional toke. He had no real relationship with God, though he issued from a long line of Presbyterians.

One night, after a talking-to from a town evangelist, Johns dropped to his knees on his bedroom floor and dared God to show him what He had.

Then he felt a surge of electric energy. It made his body hot throughout, and a terrifying otherly presence entered the room. He started shaking and weeping, his nose running. The power — what he now knows as the Holy Spirit — knocked him prone, and he stayed there.

He started saying, "Come on in. Come on in, Jesus." He could feel the power mounting and getting more intense until, in a spiritual climax, he shrieked, "I'm yours! I'm yours for life! I'm yours for eternity! I want to walk with you!"

Johns still gets choked up when he tells the story. "I love Him so much," he says through tears. "Had that not happened, I don't know where I'd be."

By the mid-'70s, the countercultural wave had reached the small university town — hippie folk musicians Brewer and Shipley named their most popular album Tarkio; it's the one that contains "One Toke Over the Line" — and this appealed to Johns' anti-authoritarian streak.

Lacking a free-form alternative, Johns embarked on the traditional religious route through seminary into Presbyterian ministry. In 1981, he landed in the Northland, at Pine Ridge Presbyterian Church. People there still remember him.

"He was a young man who was sincere and also searching for his way of relating to all of us and trying to hear the Lord and presenting what he heard," says Kathy Rasmussen, Pine Ridge's choir director during the early '80s. "He used a lot of creativity. He was challenging and very effective. People were eager to hear what he had to say."

Rasmussen recalls one particular sermon that Johns gave. Rather than preach from the pulpit, he and his father sat opposite each other in chairs and conversed about how the Lord had led their lives.

As Johns remembers it, he spent his time at Pine Ridge shaking things up with his interest in signs, wonders and the supernatural aspects of Christianity and the Bible.

He launched a more casual youth service with guitars and drums supplementing the traditional hymns. He also staged revivals with faith healings and the casting out of "demonic oppression." He calls it "radically Holy Spirit stuff."

Such supernatural rites, however, are not part of standard Presbyterian worship, and some Pine Ridge congregants made plain their dislike.

In 1985, an administrative commission of the Heartland Presbytery, the church's regional authority, conducted a review of how Johns was relating to the congregation.

It was a power play, Johns says. He was freaking people out. Johns and Pine Ridge Presbyterian Church parted ways soon after.

"He could have been a very, very exciting, very popular and influential young pastor in the Presbyterian church, and the Presbyterian church needed that kind of excitement," Rasmussen says, "but maybe they weren't ready for him."

Penniless, adrift and a father of two, Johns took up with Mike Bickle, who would go on to found the International House of Prayer in Grandview, Missouri. The two of them prayed together each morning before dawn.

Johns' association with Bickle might give some observers pause. Since the 24/7 prayer program began a decade ago, Bickle's International House of Prayer has been hounded by suspicions that it's a cult. The church's aggressive real-estate acquisitions have made some South Kansas City residents nervous; neighbors have described naïve, starry-eyed kids crammed into houses, their cars clogging the streets. Bickle has denied the claims, saying the youthful worshippers can — and do — leave his church whenever they want.

Together, Bickle and Johns envisioned a Kansas City swollen with the Holy Spirit, a reconstructed family dedicated to worship and awash in Father's love.

Johns developed the concept for an organic network of "cell" churches, dubbed the Rock, in 1999 and wrote the founding document for his doctoral dissertation at televangelist Pat Robertson's Regent University in 2002. (Regent was politically influential during the Bush administration, earning headlines for graduating Monica Goodling, the ax-wielder in former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales' controversial firings of eight U.S. attorneys.)

In Johns' movement, there would be no formal church building in which weekly services were held, no ordained priests, no holy days.

Instead, they would worship in homes and encourage everyone to receive the Holy Spirit and consider every day a holy day.

One of the tenets of the Rock is that organized religion is man's construct, not God's.

Johns equates God's love to a cell-phone signal: It's all around, but you need the right equipment to receive it. The right equipment is an open heart, into which can ooze "the shimmering, plasmic, jellylike substance of Jesus' love," Johns says.

At the Rock, the path to the kingdom of God isn't paved with the stand-up, sit-down ritual of two weekly hours in church. It's something that needs to be lived and experienced 24/7/365.

Ryan Kubicina and his wife, Kortni, answered the Lord's call to ministry in 2001. They packed all their possessions and strapped their infant son, Caleb, into a U-Haul and towed the family car behind them to Kansas City.

As they wound through the darkened urban grid on the way to a friend's house at 37th Street and Tracy one winter night, they felt very far away from Warren, Ohio, the Youngstown suburb of 46,000 where Kubicina and Kortni had been high-school sweethearts.

Nevertheless, it wasn't their place to second-guess God's plan — or the sets of supernaturally foretold incidents that led them here. The family settled uneasily in a large, third-floor room.

One night a few weeks later, Kubicina couldn't sleep. Caleb was fussing and crying in his crib. Strange and scary images flashed in Kubicina's mind. He couldn't shake a sense of dread that something terrible was going to happen to his kid.

Kortni rolled over at 3:30 in the morning. "I can't sleep," she said.

"Why?"

"For some reason, I can't stop thinking that something wrong is gonna happen to Caleb," she answered.

"Oh, my gosh," Ryan said, alarmed. "I've been feeling the same thing."

He leaned up onto his elbows and saw, looming over the foot of his bed, a hairy and grotesque figure with two glowing red eyes looking down on Kortni and him. He knew it was a demon.

"Honey," he said, "do you see that?"

"We need to pray. Right now."

They prayed urgently for deliverance from evil. They prayed the Lord's Prayer, asking for deliverance at that very minute.

And as they finished, the demonic spirit vanished. The fear lifted, and a calmness settled in the room and their hearts. Caleb quieted down. Kortni and Ryan drifted off to sleep.

It wasn't the first time that he'd seen evil manifest itself.

When Ryan was 10 years old, his family was beset by dark days. In a four-month span, his parents divorced and drifted from the church, and his father lost his job.

Kortni had the same sort of broken past. Her father had died before she was a teenager, and her mother was waylaid by grief.

Ryan rediscovered Christianity years later at a bar. He was attending Youngstown State University on a golf scholarship. Drunk and horny in the Cleveland Flats entertainment district, he and his college buddies were dancing, mixing booze and beers, and throwing ice cubes up the skirts of dancing women.

Then, in an instant, everything changed. He saw demons. Everywhere. Each one different, packing the raucous and hedonistic scene. Then he heard a voice in his heart say, "This is not what I created you for."

It knocked the drunkenness right out of him. He went outside and sat on the curb until his buddies were ready to go. It was a transformative moment, but who could he tell? Who wouldn't think he was crazy?

The first demon incident convinced Kubicina that he was called to a special type of ministry, that he was to be one of God's lieutenants in high-stakes spiritual warfare.

He met Johns in 2000 and soon joined the Rock.

In 2007, he and Kortni arrived at the rectory at 934 Norton for a meeting with Rock elders. When Ryan slipped away to use the restroom, he looked down the second-floor hallway and had a vision: He saw all of his own

furniture in the house. When he brought it up with Kortni later that day, she had seen the same thing.

God had spoken to them in no uncertain terms. They moved into the rectory that August.

Thus started the Rock's convergence with the Lykins neighborhood. A few months later, Tim Johns rented out his place at 37th Street and Baltimore and moved into the Discipleship House, a nunnery turned training house that his nonprofit had purchased as a Lykins neighborhood foothold in 2000.

Johns now lives in the bullet-riddled building full time with his wife, Janet, when they're not off proselytizing around the United States or in the so-called "10/40 window" — a non-Christian zone within the globe's 10 degrees north latitude and 40 degrees north latitude that includes northern Africa, the Middle East, India, China and Southeast Asia.

By ones and twos, other members have arrived in Kansas City's urban core.

Rock members welcome new people to taste their spirituality. But becoming a member requires going through an invasive process that includes filling out a two-page document called "Expectations of Rock International Family Members."

And once they're in, they battle complacency by maintaining the four-column "Kingdom Lifestyle Weekly Overview" worksheet, where they rate five areas of their lives on a scale of one to 10 ("10 = awesome"). Among the categories: exercise (six times/week); communing with God (seven times/week); emotion; purity of speech; level of heart openness; "I embrace values, vision, strategy"; and character.

The worksheet identifies opportunities for improvement, though it also provides this disclaimer: "This weekly overview is not to be used legalistically to produce striving. Your Father & family love you unconditionally."

Kubicina says having precisely defined expectations is the most effective way to make sure everyone is onboard. He has had problems with some of the single men and women he has invited to live in his house.

Rock members commonly put up unaffiliated singles. They can move into a Rock family household in exchange for cheap room and board, a share of household duties, and unrestricted access to their secret hearts.

Some have been great, like the teenager who was "struggling with homosexuality and drug abuse" before the Rock set him on a path to hetero happiness. Others have been more difficult.

One houseguest in particular was struggling with a sex addiction. He was tempted by Internet porn.

"It was really a daddy wound in his heart," Kubicina diagnoses. "And I go, 'Bro, I love you. I'm with you. I understand where it's coming from, but dealing with the behavior isn't dealing with it. We gotta go in for the root issues.'"

Kubicina remembers that "all of a sudden, he wasn't going to tell me what he was bringing into the house and what he was struggling with. And I go, 'Bro, that's cool if we're just friends and you don't live with me. But we're more than friends, and you do live with me. If you're retracting permission for me to speak into your life, I'm retracting the opportunity to be here.'"

The guy left the household and the Rock, but Kubicina tries to keep in touch.

Holy Trinity Church's closed double doors at Ninth Street and Norton block the outside world during the Rock's annual Tribal Gathering in October.

Rock members from such places as Wichita; Dallas; Chicago; Los Angeles; and West Bend, Wisconsin, have gathered to pray, connect and hear Tim

Johns preach the Kingdom word.

Microphone in hand, Johns looks out over the 100 or so mostly white people — people whom he calls "radically sold-out lovers" — and sees the end of the world.

"This is the culmination of history," he tells them. "It's this kind of understanding, this kind of people that's going to be used by God for the last search before Christ returns."

He brings up the mandate to gather 10 percent of the population into the Rock movement. He tells them that the full brunt of God's power is behind them.

"We're gonna ask for a supernatural grace of the Lord to operate prophetically in intercession of the life cycle to ignite the unseen realm to enable this 10 percent to come to God!"

The centerpiece of this year's gathering is the unveiling and rededication of Holy Trinity, an old neighborhood icon that they've dubbed the Portal. Rock members bought the building, ripped out the drop ceilings, painted the interior, tore out the pews, built a sound room for the drum kit, and re-created it in their own image.

The unveiling will happen later tonight. For now, the congregants pass through the double doors back onto the sidewalk at Norton Avenue. There's no sign of anyone else, just a parade of white people passing abandoned drug houses with sloppy lawns and boards pried away from windows.

Ryan Kubicina and his family walk with them.

At a Mexican wedding shower that he attended a few months earlier, Kubicina says he hitched his young daughter to his hip and walked over to a man whose street gang had been tagging the Portal and training center.

For 15 minutes, Kubicina says, he connected at the heart with the man who leads "people who are really on the front lines of seriously demonic stuff." The man asked Kubicina about his daughter; Kubicina asked him about his girlfriend.

He hasn't had to paint over any graffiti since.

Everyone brings prepared food or cooks at Kubicina's "church."

In sweatpants and flip-flops, in jeans and sneakers or in business casual and low-key black pumps, the members trickle in carrying trays or boxes. Kortni Kubicina has prepared a couple of dishes using eggs laid by the family's backyard chickens. Ryan Kubicina is wearing a Carhartt baseball hat that crushes his normally gelled hair.

After dinner, they settle onto couches or chairs that ring a striped, shag area rug — the type that comes from Target or IKEA — or flop on the floor. A looping, ornate wrought-iron cross hangs on the wall above the couch.

It's a well-appointed house. Kubicina's income is partly from the 10 percent tithing that the Rock encourages and partly from a few rental properties he owns in the neighborhood and in Westport.

The group of 14 settles in to discuss tonight's topic: love.

It's part therapy session, part gripefest, part recalibration of spiritual compass. They talk about the troubles they've had loving fully, as God intended, and they take turns speaking about each other's lives. The honesty would be brutal if it wasn't well-intended.

Derek Cook, a tall, lanky kid with dark hair and light eyes, talks about a drug bust across the street from where he stays on Askew. As he was walking into the home he shares with Kubicina's brother and sister-in-law, he encountered a woman. "She asked, 'Are you my brother's social worker?' Uh,

no. 'Are you a lawyer?'"

The all-too-familiar story brings chuckles from the other members. It's a reminder that these streets are not yet Rock streets. But here in the warm-colored family room, with "Family forever a journey" inscribed over an archway leading into the dining room, they've isolated a sense of peace.

"This took me 800 miles from my family in Ohio," says Kortni, who home-schools her children. "I was concerned about my kids growing up away from family, but here I have more family than I ever would have had there."

As each member takes turns speaking, the topic eventually gravitates to Ryan and Kortni's plans for urban animal husbandry. They have egg-laying hens now, as does at least one other family, and in the spring they're hoping to buy some goats.

"Goats," deadpans Adam Schilling, a member of this house church and the Lykins Neighborhood Association's sergeant-at-arms. "Now people are really going to think we're a cult!"

Everyone laughs.

To conclude house church, the members bow their heads in prayer. Each one takes a turn speaking. When it comes to Derek Cook, he opens a Bible and reads a verse from Isaiah that has become one of the Rock's guiding verses.

Chapter 61, verse 4 concludes: "They shall build up the ancient ruins. They shall raise up the former devastation. They shall repair the ruined cities, the devastation of many generations."

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and, lest I forget, to God be the glory!

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