

Halfway House In Trouble

By Tim Findley

An unusual, perhaps unique, halfway house for ex-convicts in Oakland may be forced out of business next month by its own success.

Alternative House, a coupling of two rambling old three-story homes at 526 and 530 32nd street in Oakland, is a family affair involving all 23 members of the families of Paul Cook and Maalik Al Maalik, from Maalik's unflappable grandmother to Cook's toddling infant daughter, Tina.

"Well, it sorta happened," explained Maalik, 31, a University of California instructor at Berkeley in Afro-American studies. "We had always intended to do something constructive about prisons beyond just rhetoric. We decided we could do a thing like this halfway house, but

we found we were in it before we said it."

After eight months in which the project eventually grew into room for 16 paroled convicts and even a nearby "kick pad" apartment for parolees trying to kick a narcotic habit, Alternative House is a month behind on its rent, the landlord wants to sell the house and Cook may be evicted.

PAROLED

It began last March when the 30-year-old Cook was paroled from San Quentin and came to live temporarily with the Maaliks.

Cook's parole did not come easily. Several hundred inmates threatened to refuse to work unless he was released.

A co-founder of the all-black SATE organization at the prison and a former cellmate of "Soledad Brother" George Jackson, Cook was a

recognized convict leader who landed in "the hole" on more than one occasion when he emerged as spokesman for protesting convicts.

Outside, Cook donned a vest of chains which he wears constantly to symbolize his links with prison and became a frequent, lashing speaker on prison reform at numerous rallies and meetings.

The rhetoric was direct and plain and aided undoubtedly by collisions of violence occurring at the time in prisons themselves.

DESPAIR

But at home, away from the shrill recanting of penal abuse, the simple realities of prison despair were still evident. Men Cook knew in prison themselves reached parole dates or gained 72-hour passes to look for jobs, and faced the same problems — jobs are scarce, living is expensive and opportunities are hard to find for an ex-con.

"People are still afraid of ex-cons, and that's part of the problem," Cook said. "But here, I brought my whole family to live with me and to be a part of the house and the community — maybe it gives other people courage, but all it really says is people are people and all they need is a chance."

Alternative House also went a step beyond other halfway houses to accept both men and women parolees into an atmosphere as comfortable as a family dinner.

As the concept grew, Cook rented the house next to Maalik's home. It was large and nondescript and badly in need of repairs to holes in the ceiling, full of missing parts and scratchy floors.

Because the idea just grew without a formal plan, Cook and Maalik never got around to seeking official financing from any source. The cost — which eventually amounted to more than \$1200 a month — was paid from Cook's fees



PAUL COOK
A symbolic vest of chains



MRS. PAUL COOK
The whole family is part of the house

from speeches, some from savings and his job with the Department of Human Resources and some from Maalik's savings.

Men released from prison on 72-hour passes to look for work prior to their parole are usually required to have some money in their prison account before they are let out on the short passes, but Cook and Maalik encouraged the Department of Corrections to allow men without funds to stay with them.

The Department of Paroles inspected Alternative House and also began referring parolees there. Normally the Department of Paroles provides a \$30 voucher for such men referred to halfway houses.

EXPANDED

"But that's a loan, and I know the problems parolees have in paying back those things," Cook said. "so we didn't ask for it."

The concept expanded more and more as the ener-

getic Cook popped out with new ideas. Ex-convicts from Alternative House began speaking at schools and club meetings, talking about why it happened to them, and telling kids about the harsh realities of crime.

There has been not one incident of theft or trouble in Alternative House since it came to life, but on the nearby streets of the integrated city community, there are pushers of dope, purveyors of vice and inevitable temptations.

Cook rented an apartment two blocks away and equipped it with food, some comfortable furniture and a television set and opened it up for any parolee who wanted to kick a narcotic habit. It's used now for days at time by men who want to kick and by members of the Alternative House family who are willing to stay there with them and help.

Cook's mother, Mrs. William Cook, spends much of her time with the young kids in the neighborhood. His 15-year-old brother is organizing a football team. On Friday nights, the broad, wood-floored living room of the house is turned over to a teen-age dance for neighborhood kids.

COMMUNITY

"We feel like it's all part of the community," Cook said. "Halfway houses have failed in the past because the community got disturbed from the start. We want to be part of the community from the start, so we have a kind of community relations program."

"This is a temporary re-entry center," Maalik said. "Here we have older people, younger people, men, women. We hope we can have a stabilized situation and maybe stabilize a man who's had trouble."



Maalik Al Maalik never got around to seeking official financing for Alternative House for ex-convicts in Oakland and now he may be evicted.