



Village Like No Other

When she was 22 years old, Sofia Valiente, an art major from Florida International University, went to live in a tiny town in the centre of the state. The village was unremarkable, with its rows of boxy white houses, stale summers and straight streets. Except for the fact that nearly all of its 150 residents were convicted sex offenders.

It was Miracle Village, a haven founded six years ago by the late church pastor Richard Witherow, with the aim of providing a new start for convicted sex offenders once released from jail.

Laws in many states across the US limit sex offenders from living within, on average, 300m of places where children gather, including schools, churches, bus stops and parks. But in Florida, which has the strictest sex offender laws in the country, the distance is almost 1km – which makes living in a city or town virtually impossible. Richard saw sex offenders who had served their time as modern-day lepers, shunned to the outskirts of society and often left homeless.

But then he found Pelican Lake Village. Surrounded by tall sugar cane crops, and 5km from the nearest town, Pahokee, it was the perfect spot to be exiled. Formerly an impoverished housing complex for sugar cane workers, Richard controversially took over the area with a group of reformed sex offenders in 2009. Local communities were outraged, and out of fear, stayed well away.

*In a world where next to nothing remains taboo, one photographer has **CONTROVERSIALLY** used art to shed some **HUMANITY** on an unmentionable subject – **SEX OFFENDERS.***

WORDS FIONA MACDONALD

“When I first heard about the community, it sounded like a terrifying place, like some kind of purgatory,” says Sofia, now 24, who last year published a book, *Miracle Village*, on her experiences in the town.

“I really had no idea what to think, and so I decided I would go and see it for myself,” she explains. Even though the softly spoken photographer is pretty tough, she admits to being thoroughly rattled on that first day. And her mother was, of course, horrified.

“I had the same prejudices as anyone else, I assumed all sex offenders were monsters. It was like walking into a room full of spiders,” says Sofia, adding that she later discovered the residents, who rarely had visitors from the outside, were just as freaked out by her arrival.

“The first person I sat down and spoke with was my age, he was 22, and I realised he was like anyone else, he was a human being. After that first day, everything I thought completely changed.”

What surprised her most was that the stories of Miracle Village’s residents were far more complex – and much different – to those she’d originally imagined.

Perhaps what impacted her most was that the community felt shockingly normal.

The village, for starters, doesn’t accept those who have committed rape or have been diagnosed as paedophiles. Those who have a history of drug use or violence also aren’t welcome. Out of the roughly 150 people living there, many were convicted for child pornography charges or dating underage women.

Some men were convicted for assaulting minors. There was one woman, Rose, living in the village, who was abused by her husband and still can’t talk about the painful series of events that led to her being arrested.

“One man urinated in public and a minor saw him. That’s how he received his conviction,” says Sofia.

“In Florida, there’s no differentiation between these sex offences and something more serious. They all end up on the register for the rest of their lives.”

Some have, of course, committed much more serious crimes. Richard’s commitment to those who grace the streets of Miracle Village came partly from the fact that he could have been

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one of them – when he was 18, he got his 14-year-old future wife pregnant.

“If that would have happened in today’s society,” he said in an

interview with NPR in 2009, a couple of years before he passed away, “I would have been charged with sexual battery of a minor, given anywhere from 10 to 25 years in prison, plus extended probation time after that, then been labelled a sex offender.”

Given their histories, the residents are understandably wary of outsiders.

When Sofia first arrived, many were unwilling to be alone in a room with her, be photographed or share their stories.

To gain their trust, she spent six weeks living in the community, sharing a house with former sex offender and director of the village, Chad Stoffel, and then another six weeks living in Pahokee nearby. For those three months, she went to church with the residents, talked to them, laughed with them and, eventually, listened to their stories.

She made friends with many of them and she still goes back for regular visits. When she decided to turn her project into a book featuring not only her photography, but also writing from herself and some residents, she says it wasn’t to try to change people’s minds about sex offenders, but to simply break down the stigma.

“When I mention the village to people they always ask ‘why?’ Why would I choose to photograph these people? >



“A walk through the village on a **summer day** is a great way to relax. Big puffy clouds dot the soft blue sky as far as the eye can see. The **sunshine** is warm. There’s usually a dog or two walking someone up or down the street. Sometimes there’s a jogger. It is an intimate community. They are sex offenders. And since there is **nowhere else to go**, they all live in Miracle Village.”

– Joseph Steinberg, resident of Miracle Village



PHOTOGRAPHY: SOFIA VALIENTE



“A lot of people don’t think that they deserve rights because they may have taken away someone else’s,” she explains.

“I’m basically saying that their side matters as well. They’ve done their time. Murderers or people who’ve sold drugs to kids are able to get out of prison and live wherever they like, sex offenders are the only ones that have those kinds of restrictions.”

Her work has now been featured by the *Guardian*, *Vice* and *TIME* magazine, and earlier this year, her photographs starred in a powerful exhibition in London’s Daniel Blau gallery.

For any young artist, it’s an impactful start to a career. But Sofia hopes it will do more than just propel her career forward – she hopes that people will see the village through her eyes.

“I hope that people see the individuals in my book the way I saw them, without prejudice. I think it’s important to understand who they are as people and the

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context of what led up to their crimes. No one wants to talk about sex offenders, but ignoring the issue isn’t helping either side. We need to get rid of that taboo.”

For now, this taboo is the key to Miracle Village’s appeal – the residents know that outside of those cane fields they’ll be judged. But inside, they’re equals. Everyone has a role to play in the community to earn their keep, some have jobs, others care for animals, all go to group therapy. The residents can come and go as they please, as long as they’re back at night. Rose, the aforementioned female in the village, has gone on to marry one of the other residents. No one has ever reoffended since living in the community, Chad reported in 2014.

The only real problem with the Miracle Village, says Sofia, is that no one wants to leave.

“There’s a beauty to me that these guys aren’t looking to impress anyone or be anything anymore, they just are,” says Sofia. “But at the same time there’s this tragedy to the whole thing, because obviously they’d like to live back in civilisation, but they know out in the real world, they’d be ostracised.

“For now, Miracle Village is their safe place.”

