

# SAY "AMEN," SOMEBODY

Author preaches and teaches the urban lifestyle

BY MICHAEL GILL

**K**YLE EZELL uses the word "schlep" quite a bit. According to Miriam Webster, it comes from the Yiddish *shlepn*, and means "to haul." He says knowing how to schlep is one of the most important skills for living in the city, and one of the most important lessons from his book, *Get Urban* (\$18.95, Capital Books, 2004) When Ezell spoke with the *Free Times*, the urban planner-turned-author was in Washington, D.C.

"I just walked to DuPont circle," he said on the phone, speaking of the trendy neighborhood in the nation's capital. "I videotaped two hours of people schlepping stuff on their backs, on bikes, on scooters, pulling carts with groceries. These people know how to live in the city."

Ezell has made it his goal to teach people to live in the city, and he was shooting video to document how it was done so that he could show people who live in automobile-centric places what real city life looks like. Schlepping is a skill and habit people need to learn in order to take full advantage of city life, he says.

Heartland Developers, which focuses on urban development in Northeast Ohio, brought Ezell to the Shaker Heights library in April, where he spoke to a crowd of about 150 people on a Saturday afternoon about how to live in the city.

"I honestly don't think people who live in the middle of the country — and I hate when east coast and west coast people dog the Midwest — but the fact is that people in Ohio don't know the basics of city living. And you can't build something, like downtown condos, and expect people to behave in a way that they have forgotten."

So developers like Heartland, as well as city governments and realtors, bring Ezell to give talks that will jog their memories. The audience is a mix of real estate professionals — whom he's teaching to pass on the word — and potential buyers of urban housing.

"Literally I teach behavior," he says. "I

talk about what's normal in our culture. For instance, normal behavior is sitting on a freeway in morning rush at full stop, eating breakfast and looking around at everyone else eating breakfast. What's trendy and unusual is walking to work. When I worked for the city of Columbus I used to walk to work or take bus if weather was bad, and people would pull up to ask, do you need a ride? I was the only person on the sidewalk in city of 700,000 people."

Among other bits of footage Ezell has gathered is a woman who crisscrossed her suburb in a minivan six times in the course of a few hours running various errands.

Ezell took up his teaching mission after working in places like Columbus and Chattanooga, Tennessee as an urban planner. He got frustrated after talking with developers and elected decision-makers about planning concepts. He'd describe for them urban development patterns that

he believed in, both for their lifestyle and for their environmental impact, and they would cite the market to say it wouldn't work.

"After saying for 10 years, 'Why don't you build a walkable community, or build a development along a bus line?' and being told people won't be caught dead on a city bus, or people don't walk, they need two parking spaces," he made it his goal to lay the lifestyle groundwork that could rebuild the market for urban living.

In Cleveland and other cities, the target market for upscale, downtown condos is mostly empty-nesters and urban profes-

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sionals. And if baby boomers were the biggest segment of the population when they were changing pop culture in their youth, they remain so as their children move out of the house. Ezell calls urban empty-nesters "Ruppies" — retired urban people.

"I coined that term because of the number of empty-nesters finding the fountain of youth in cities. Seventy million baby boomers are reaching retirement age, moving to places where they can walk in the course of their daily life, to grocery stores, appointments, entertainment. It's a healthier lifestyle."

In addition to *Get Urban*, Ezell has also written *Retire Downtown* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2006). A third book, *Teaching Urban Values*, is due out this year.

Ezell doesn't have a very high opinion of most American cities, but he sees Cleveland's industrial-age infrastructure and dense neighborhoods (Ohio City is featured in his book) as a cut above.

"Cleveland ... is a spectacular city waiting for a true revitalization. Cleveland is way far ahead of other cities I've been to. Cleveland has a great urban feel, but it needs more people on street. I think the city has to do a better job of marketing itself to the country. But the thing is, if I've seen one marketing campaign for luxury loft, hip urban living, whatever, I've seen them all. There's only so much trendy and hip to go around. We need to get beyond that. As long as urban living is only for the trendy, we're not going to have very much progress."



EZELL Schleppin' it.