

Getting cozy on campus at USF

By KIM WILMATH
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TAMPA — The door opened and Christian Lisko stood there for a second.

Half the room was already cluttered with stuff — a mini-fridge covered in magnets, a couple of skateboards, an empty cereal bowl — but the other half was empty.

All his.

This was the day Christian had been waiting for, when he and thousands of other University of South Florida students could move into their dorm rooms. Over the next few hours, the 18-year-old would start filling his 6-by-7 space with all the packed-up pieces of his life.

Those clinical white walls, with the hard mattress and tiny shared bathroom, would soon be home.

And that's music to the University of South Florida's ears.

The university once regarded as Tampa Bay's commuter school is working harder than ever at making sure students like Christian are comfortable. Sure, freshmen are now required to live on campus their first year, but that is not why Christian did it.

He wants to be there. And that is key.

USF's sentiment is one shared by colleges across the country, hooking into housing trends that cater directly to students' wants — gender-neutral dorms, expanded campus activities and "living-learning" communities that group students based on academic tracks or interests.

Christian, for instance, chose to live on a floor that houses only other business majors. That is not the only perk. His hall, USF's newest, Juniper-Poplar, in-



Christian Lisko stands outside his dorm room at USF's new dorm complex, Poplar. ST. PETERSBURG TIMES / JULIETTE LYNCH

cludes its own dining facility, a Starbucks coffee shop, a movie rental vending box, ATMs and a 24-hour help desk. That is in addition to the kitchens and study lounges on every floor.

It is all about the H-word.

"We have the ability to create a residential campus that students can call home," said USF's dean of housing, Ana Hernandez.

The goal: increase on-campus undergraduate residents from 17 percent to 25, the housing dean said. That would obviously benefit the university, financially and in recruiting efforts, but ask USF's administrators why they are heading in that direction and they point to students.

Students who live on campus do better all around, they say. They get higher grades, are more likely to graduate, make more social connections and have more school spirit.

Most importantly, they feel like they belong.

Christian was in the second grade in North Carolina when he discovered his family was different. Other children were talking about their homes they had lived in since they were born.

That's weird, Christian thought.

Because of his father's career in the U.S. Coast Guard, Christian had already lived in three places by then.

When he graduated from high school, the tally was up to 10, and never anywhere for more than two

years.

For Christian, home has been a lot of places, which is to say, it has been no place.

So when it came time to apply to college, Christian narrowed his search to Florida schools — partly because after living in three Florida cities, it seemed the most familiar.

When he decided on USF, Christian envisioned joining campus clubs or bands.

Finally, it was Wednesday.

Christian had woken up in his family's little hotel room at 6:30 a.m. His parents loaded all his stuff into the rental car and pulled into the dorm parking lot.

A welcome crew yelled Christian's name as he walked up to the building. They went up to the fourth floor, past a big dorm map and a painted poster that screamed "GO BULLS!" in bright paint.

And then, they were there. In that half-empty room.

Mom started messing with Christian's new sheets, Dad cracked jokes in his "USF DAD" polo shirt, little brother Patrick marveled at the size of the bathroom ("Wait, this is it?").

And Christian just looked around.

He unrolled a "Star Wars" poster and pushed his guitar amp under his bed. Then it was time for everybody to go.

Dad shook his hand. "Give us a shout if you need anything."

Christian walked them out.