



# A Fair Share

Meet two members of the Holy Cross community  
dedicated to equal housing opportunities

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WHITTEMORE



HCM readers first met Peter O'Connor '63 in the Fall 2001 issue, in a feature about his fight to establish the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, the first affordable housing development in the New Jersey suburbs ("In the Public Interest," Page 24). In 2015, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the *New Jersey Law Journal*.

For civil rights advocate Peter J. O'Connor '63, it all began with court time. Not trial court time—though as a pioneering public service lawyer for half a century, there would be plenty of that. No, it was actually basketball court time.

"I got firsthand experience of racial segregation through athletics," O'Connor explains. "I used to play basketball in the playgrounds of Newark and Jersey City, N.J., and many times I was the only white player. When the games were done, I'd go home to South Orange, a mostly white suburb then. Almost all of the black players went back to their segregated communities. I felt this was morally fraught—and just wrong."

Everyone's heard of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the most famous court case on segregation in the schools. For segregation in housing, though, the most famous court case is arguably 1975's *Southern Burlington County NAACP v. Mount Laurel Township*. Commonly called Mount Laurel I, it overturned the zoning ordinance of this suburb outside Camden, N.J., on the grounds that it excluded low- and moderate-income citizens from the local housing market. Mount Laurel I, and a later decision in 1983 (Mount Laurel II), relied on the interpretation of the idea of "fair share" allocation in a community, as cited in the New Jersey constitution.

And how does O'Connor play into the story? He was one of the three litigators to bring the 1975 suit. And that same year, he founded Fair Share Housing Center,

(left) Peter O'Connor '63 in front of one of the houses in the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes affordable housing community, the first of its kind in suburban New Jersey.

a nonprofit advocate of the Mount Laurel Doctrine. "The jugular vein of racism and poverty is the separation of races between cities and suburbs," says O'Connor. "And that was my motivation for getting involved with the Mount Laurel Doctrine. But there was political and racial pushback, and economic opposition in most of the towns of New Jersey. For 40 years, we've gone to court to get municipal governments, reluctant to do their fair share of housing, to implement what the courts decided."

Today, in law schools across the nation, the Mount Laurel Doctrine is a cornerstone in land use legal courses. And as of 2015, 60 percent of the towns in New Jersey have met the requirement for affordable housing. But O'Connor has not just fought discrimination on the legal front. He's also gone the route of bricks and mortar. In 1986, he founded Fair Share Housing Development (FSHD), a nonprofit developer and manager of affordable housing; it now manages 700 rental units in five complexes in southern New Jersey. As the FSHD website declares: "We provide families the choice to live in high-opportunity communities with access to decent jobs, good schools and a safe environment—communities where racial and economic discrimination have historically prevented these families from living."

In 2004, O'Connor and his brother, Jim, also opened the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center, named after their mother. It is an after-school homework club and summer enrichment program at the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, the groundbreaking integrated housing development in Mount Laurel his advocacy helped enable.

For this lifetime commitment to helping reverse the damage of discrimination, the *New Jersey Law Journal* honored O'Connor with its first Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015. Of the 25 attorneys and judges recognized (including U.S. Supreme Court judge Samuel Alito), O'Connor was the only public service lawyer.

But let's leave the law court, once again, for the basketball court. After all those urban pickup games, this 6'2" forward became an All-State basketball player at Seton Hall Prep and went to Holy Cross on a full basketball scholarship. "My whole commitment to the implementation of moral values came from my time at Holy Cross," says O'Connor, who majored in political science. "There was such a spirit of camaraderie there." A number of Crusader classmates have supported his cause over the years, some by serving on the board of FSHD, including Dennis Golden '63, Rev. Monsignor Francis H. Kelley '63 and the late Philip J. Fina '63.

O'Connor's classmates, plaintiffs, co-workers and thousands of residents of affordable housing have surely cheered his Lifetime Achievement Award. After all, as the citation says: "Social justice and Peter O'Connor are synonymous."



Peter J. O'Connor with "his kids:" the students of the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center at Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, along with their teacher, Steve Axberg (to the right of Peter) and our 2015-2016 Jesuit Volunteer, Corey Hubbard (in the black scarf to the left of Peter).