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The Affordable Housing Complex That Works

By JILL P. CAPUZZO

Eight children sit around a conference table; one struggles with subtraction, another studies a map and tries to identify the Great Lakes. All of them have raced over to this makeshift after-school program in a temporary office trailer at the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes.

"I have to get all my homework done here, otherwise I get punished," said Francesca Jenkins, one of about two dozen regulars in the "homework club" here.

Francesca, a 12-year-old with copper-brown skin and a broad, crooked smile, is something of an anomaly in this mostly white New Jersey suburb 10 miles east of Philadelphia. The neighborhood she lives in is very much an anomaly, not only in Mount Laurel but throughout the state. The Ethel Lawrence Homes is the only suburban housing development in New Jersey to serve the full spectrum of low- to moderate-income residents.

While other affordable housing developments cater to residents who earn about 50 percent of the area's median income, in accordance with state standards, the residents in the 100 townhouses at Ethel Lawrence may earn as little as 10 percent of the median income, or as much as 80 percent. The idea was to create a truly integrated community in suburbia, an idea that was surprisingly revolutionary for a state with some of the most stringent non-discrimination zoning laws in the nation.

"Our hope was to design a model that would address a lot of the questions that people have about introducing affordable housing into communities like this," said Peter O'Connor, whose nonprofit Fair Share Housing Development built the Ethel Lawrence Homes.

Mr. O'Connor is no stranger to the battle over decent housing for the poor. Thirty years ago, the civil rights lawyer agreed take on the case of Ethel Lawrence, a school teacher, mother of eight and the first black Girl Scout leader in Burlington County, whose proposal to build 34 garden apartments for Mount Laurel's black population had been turned down by local officials.

Around the corner from the Ethel Lawrence development sits Jacob's Chapel, a small white clapboard church with beautiful stained glass windows. The graveyard in the back is testament to the longstanding segregation of this community: the markers of the blacks who died a century ago are separated by an iron picket fence from the gravestones of the deceased whites. It was in this chapel that Ms. Lawrence and her fellow congregant waited eagerly to hear that the town's zoning would allow for the new garden apartments. Instead, the town committeeman they had invited to speak told them, "If you people can't afford to live in our town, then you'll just have to leave."

Those words set in motion the case that eventually made its way to the New Jersey Supreme Court, becoming the first of three -- and soon to be four -- landmark housing decisions known as the Mount Laurel doctrine, laws that require every municipality in the state to provide affordable housing opportunities for all citizens.

Jump ahead 27 years. After winning a protracted battle with a new set of officials and residents here, Mr. O'Connor managed to patch together the financing and begin work on his \$16 million project. But the path continued to be fraught with challenges.

Soon after the first sign went up to mark the site of the new homes, vandals tore it down. When the developers began laying plans for the 62-acre property, neighbors asked that the recreation field be pushed into a corner -- away from their homes -- and suggested planting fir trees as a buffer rather than trees that would lose their leaves in winter. And when the 868 families who showed up the first weekend to apply for a townhouse overflowed into a senior citizen development across the street, residents called the police.

To look at the development today, 11 months after the first residents moved in, a visitor would have a hard time distinguishing this complex of neat homes with trimmed yards from some of the neighboring developments along Moorestown-Mount Laurel Road that cost from \$200,000 to \$400,000.

But with 28 families from Camden, and many others from urban settings, the needs of the residents here, some of whom pay as little as \$145 a month for a three-bedroom townhouse, go far beyond merely providing a roof over their heads.

Thus the homework club, which offers after-school day care -- a service inner-city families had become accustomed to -- and much-needed educational support. Troy Sterling, a fourth-grade teacher at Hillside Elementary School here, recently took on this second job running the after-school program.

"When I heard about it I got goosebumps," said Mr. Sterling, who serves as after-school tutor and liaison between these students and their families, and the Mount Laurel school district and the community. "I thought yes, I can do something here."

"I can see how the community has to broaden its knowledge and acceptance of things," he added, "and how these students -- and more so their parents -- have to recognize the wonderful opportunity they have here."

Mr. O'Connor was the first to acknowledge that "the lower you go on affordable housing, the greater the need for social support." Because of that, in addition to school support, Mr. O'Connor said he planned to hire a full-time social worker and was looking into providing a more conventional preschool and day care program. But one year into this social experiment, Mr. O'Connor said another truth had become apparent: "the opposition issues are a myth."

"People predicted their property values would go down, there'd be crime, we'd be maintaining a blighted community," he said. "None of it happened. Instead, we've created a viable environment with no negative impact on the surrounding neighborhood."