

Mount Laurel Affordable Housing Decision Made Dreams Come True

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By **Linda Ocasio/The Star-Ledger**



Nine year old Delilah Martinez spins into a cartwheel near her house in the Ethel Lawrence Homes where she lives with her brother Zaibain, 12, and their mother Sandra Rios. Sandra moved from Camden 12 years ago for a better life for her and her kids. **Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger**

It took a while for Sandra Rios to let her son play outside. Memories of Camden will do that to you.

When she was a child — about 7 or 8 years old — Rios would duck behind cars as shooting erupted on the street. Then there was the time her stepfather was shot to death in broad daylight.

"In front of a whole lot of people," she said. "I didn't witness it. But my mother saw him lying there, bleeding. They loaded him in a car to take him to a hospital, but it was too late."

Even now, driving to her job as a personal banker in Camden, traffic might stop as a fight breaks out in the middle of the street. "I could tell you stories for days," Rios said. "It took me a long time to let go."

Those days are over. Now, her children play outside her window. On grassy lawns.

"When I was younger, I couldn't see myself leaving Camden," Rios said. "It took for me to move out to know the difference about how much better it is here."



Sandra Rios poses with son Zaibain Martinez, 12, and daughter Delilah Martinez, 9, in front of their house in the Ethel Lawrence Homes. Sandra moved from Camden 12 years ago for a better life for herself and her kids. **Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger**

Here is the Ethel Lawrence Homes in Mount Laurel Township in rural Burlington County. Her son, Zaibian, 12, and daughter, Delilah, 9, can run free on green lawns, shoot hoops or play baseball.

It's a common suburban scene that many of us take for granted, but for Rios and her children, it was decades in the making. Her escape route out of Camden was paved by the 1972 New Jersey Superior Court ruling that found Mount Laurel's zoning was unconstitutional because it kept people such as Rios out. Zoning regulations prohibited developers from building the kind of housing that Rios and other low-income families could afford: multiple-family rental housing on smaller lots, not single-family estates with a larger (and more expensive) footprint.

The ruling 40 years ago set off numerous court battles as towns fought back, trying to raise the drawbridge against Rios and other Camden families who yearned for peace and quiet and better schools. To a large extent, the resistance to Mount Laurel has succeeded. Only 60,000 affordable units have been built throughout the state under Mount Laurel mandate, as administered by the Council on Affordable Housing.

But the assumptions and fears fueling critics' resistance is groundless, according to Douglas Massey, a Princeton professor who led a study of Mount Laurel Township and Ethel Lawrence Homes. Twelve years after Ethel Lawrence opened, Mount Laurel Township has experienced no increase in crime or decline in property values. The study did find that many of the hopes new residents carried with them into Ethel Lawrence — for better schools, a sense of safety and community — have been fulfilled.

On Mount Laurel Road, some homeowners keep horses and sheep that graze their expansive lawns.

Side streets have names such as "Wagon Wheel." Stay on Mount Laurel Road and you'll soon approach the entrance to the Ethel Lawrence Homes. Low-rise town houses are set in a carefully groomed landscape, surrounded by woodland. It is all rentals; some are two-bedroom duplexes, others are one-bedroom apartments.



Nine-year-old Delilah Martinez (right) makes a group hug with her friends Asiniah, 4, (left) and Alissah Calaf, 6, near Delilah's house in the Ethel Lawrence Homes where she lives with her brother Zaibain, 12, and their mother Sandra Rios. Sandra moved from Camden 12 years ago for a better life for her and her kids. **Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger**

Sandra Rios and her children are one of the 140 families who rent at Ethel Lawrence Homes. Family income falls under 80 percent of regional median income, which could mean as high as about \$56,000 for a family of three. Residents pay no more than 30 percent of their income for rent and utilities. They are rigorously screened through credit checks, criminal background checks, income verification and home visits.

Two women who live in Ethel Lawrence Homes say the move has transformed their lives, bearing out the findings of the Massey study.

Rios has lived in a two-bedroom town house at Ethel Lawrence since it opened in 2000, following up on a tiny ad about the development in a community newspaper. peace of mind

"I was afraid of how I was going to survive 'in the sticks,' but I did it," she said.

No more walking to the corner bodega or taking a bus on State Street. She purchased her first secondhand car. And she hasn't looked back. "It's the best peace of mind ever," she said.

There's nothing unusual about her home. Her living room is decorated in calm earth tones, but the kitchen reflects her busy life as a working mom: The refrigerator sports pictures, calendars and handmade cards. No worries if her son or daughter leave a skateboard or other play things outside their front door — unthinkable in Camden. It's no wonder she has a plaque in her living room that reads, "Believe. Dream. Imagine." Her dreams of a better life for her children have come true.



Sandra Rios shares a light moment with her daughter 9 year old Delilah Martinez as Delilah does a puzzle on the back of cereal box in the kitchen of their home in the Ethel Lawrence Homes. Sandra moved from Camden 12 years ago for a better life for her and her kids. **Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger**

Neighbors talk to one another. One came over with cookies to introduce herself. Said Rios: "I was, 'Who is that knocking on the door?' I was like, 'Really, that doesn't happen in Camden.' "

Best of all, her children are excelling in school. Delilah, who takes violin lessons, gets upset if she misses class for a doctor's appointment, her mother said. Zaibian likes social studies and math.

And they both play outside.

'In the nick of time'

"Desensitized" is a word that comes up a lot when Jenyth Ruberte, 37, talks about her years in Camden.

"When you're in Camden, you're desensitized to the crime," she said, keeping an eye on her son Dante, 3, as he explored a community room at Ethel Lawrence.

Ruberte felt that as long as she minded her own business and kept out of trouble, she was safe. "Of course, there were bullets and shootouts," she said after a pause. "I didn't realize how bad it

was until I moved here. When I was in Camden, none of it wasn't safe, because I was desensitized."



Nine-year-old Delilah Martinez reacts after making a mistake practicing her violin in the living room of her house where she lives with her brother Zaibain, 12, and their mother Sandra Rios in the Ethel Lawrence Homes. Sandra moved from Camden 12 years ago for a better life for herself and her kids. **Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger**

That lasted until she came home one day and saw people running from her front porch — drug dealers had been hiding their stash in her flower pots.

The school district also was hiding something about her son, Jose, then 12. "He wasn't reading at his grade level, but he kept getting passed. I didn't understand it," Ruberte recalled.

Five years ago, she moved to Ethel Lawrence, where an aunt and her niece and nephew live. Ruberte works as a hairdresser in Cherry Hill, said Jose, now 19. He is a senior at Lenape High School and is reading better. "The teachers are more attentive to him," Ruberte said. "He has a lot of help provided to him. And he never had a sense of not belonging."

Dante will begin Head Start in September.

"I feel very blessed," she said, the tears suddenly flowing. "To raise them in a good environment. I'm not trying to demonize Camden, but I'm happy I'm here."

It was important to leave Camden when Jose was on the brink of becoming a teenager. "I got out," she said, "in the nick of time."

Linda Ocasio is a member of The Star-Ledger editorial board

Who was Ethel Lawrence?

She's been called the Rosa Parks of the housing movement.

Ethel Lawrence was the mother of nine children, a devoted church woman who saw housing costs in Mount Laurel growing fast, placing it out of reach for most of the township's black families.

Blacks had lived in Mount Laurel since before the Revolutionary War. Lawrence played piano at Jacob's Chapel AME, which had been part of the underground railroad.

Lawrence didn't live to see the development that bears her name, but it was her perseverance that ensured it was built.

"She went to every court appearance, hearing and meeting," recalled Peter O'Connor, founder of Fair Share Housing, a nonprofit developer that ultimately built the Ethel Lawrence Homes. "She could disarm you with her direct but soft approach."

— *Linda Ocasio*

Mount Laurel Decisions: A History

Significant milestones in the formation of affordable housing in New Jersey:

1970

Ethel Lawrence, community leader and mother of nine, organizes a petition of Mount Laurel Township seeking approval of zoning for 36 garden apartments.

1972

New Jersey Superior Court declares zoning that prohibits affordable housing unconstitutional.

1975

Mount Laurel I ruling — state Supreme Court establishes constitutional obligation to provide realistic opportunity for construction of affordable housing.

1983

Mount Laurel II ruling — Supreme Court requires every town to provide its fair share of low- and moderate-income housing.

1986

Gov. Tom Kean signs Fair Housing Act, creating Council on Affordable Housing to establish fair share for each town.

1990

Supreme Court allows towns to impose developer fees to pay for construction of low-income housing.

2000

The first phase of the Ethel Lawrence Homes opens, six years after Lawrence dies of cancer.

2008

Regional Contribution Agreement struck down by the Legislature. Towns can't pay other towns to take on their lower-income housing obligation.

2010

Legislature passes new housing law that imposes specific obligations on municipalities, which is vetoed

by Gov. Chris Christie because it does not allow municipalities to exercise complete home-rule powers.

2012

State appeals court rules Christie overstepped his boundaries when he abolished COAH as part of a government reorganization; COAH lives.

— *The Star-Ledger*