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Annette John-Hall: Opening doors in New Jersey



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I bet Ethel R. Lawrence is doing the happy dance up in heaven right about now.

Because nearly 40 years after the lifelong Mount Laurel resident sued for the right to affordable housing, Gov. Corzine truly made her dream a reality.

Actually, the landmark bill Corzine signed last week reformed the state's affordable-housing policy by doing two things. One, it requires *every* municipality in New Jersey to provide for poor, as well as moderate-income, families. (Before, towns got around the requirement by building only for moderate-income residents and seniors.)

And two, it bans regional contribution agreements, or RCAs - a loophole that allowed richer municipalities to buy off their housing obligations and send them to other towns. In other words, writing a check to keep "those people" out.

You have to hand it to Lawrence, a retired day-care teacher who died in 1994, for having the foresight to see what was happening in her own backyard way back in 1971, when she filed suit.

All she wanted, she said then, was for her children and grandchildren to be able to afford to live in the town where her family had resided for six generations.

When you think about it, isn't that what we all want for our children?

That, and the right to quality education.

And a decent neighborhood.

And the quality of life that the suburbs offer.

All the makings of the American dream. Yet, lately, with the economy tanking and jobs vanishing, the dream is being foreclosed on for far too many hardworking Americans.

Suddenly, *affordable housing* conjures up a different image.

Truth is, the welfare stigma attached to affordable housing just doesn't fly anymore. Most of us are probably just one missed paycheck away from qualifying ourselves.

Sabotaged effort

Yet, over the years, a political whisper-down-the-lane campaign has ensued. "Affordable housing" went through one ear and came out the other as "there goes the neighborhood."

Politicians campaigned on lowering property taxes and decreasing sprawl, defining affordable housing as "set-asides," which did what it was intended to do - play on people's fears.

Don't get me wrong. I live in South Jersey, so I see what's being built. And there are plenty of affordable complexes that are less than ideal.

Near where I live in Cherry Hill, one is crammed in front of a truck depot, mid-rises built on top of each other, surrounded by an ugly, impersonal parking lot.

Alienation in the midst of suburban paradise.

"You don't put families on top of each other," says **Peter O'Connor**, founder of the **Fair Share Housing Center**, and the attorney who represented Ethel Lawrence. "It's all about greed and lack of planning. [Towns] want to minimize the costs. . . . If you just plan the thing properly, it could work."

No need to look any further than Mount Laurel for a shining example of how it can.

The Ethel Lawrence Homes sit on 14 acres - 140 townhouses, each with a lawn and walkway.

A row of yellow "Summer" banners greeted me as I drove onto the spacious grounds yesterday. Gardeners manicured the lawns, and utility men collected recyclables. The birds made peaceful harmony with the low roar of lawn mowers.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think I had been dropped smack dab into a "Morning in America" ad.

Not what they think

"I love it here," said Gladis Medina, a single mother of three teenagers who has lived in the Lawrence Homes for five years. "I hate what people think about affordable housing. It's not always like the ghetto."

Medina, a grocery-store checker who was recently laid off, pays \$693 a month in rent for her three-bedroom townhouse. But her rent buys her far more than a place to live. There's a recreation center, summer program, and tutoring, subsidized in part by O'Connor's Fair Share Housing Center. Neighbors formed their own community watch.

A support system goes a long way toward sustaining the community.

"It's about people wanting the best for their kids, and everybody helping out," Medina says.

Still, despite obvious examples of successful planning, nearly 200 mayors said last week that they would fight the requirements in the bill that mandate they build a certain number of units, throwing out every excuse imaginable, even though Corzine is addressing some of their legitimate concerns, such as the strain on schools.

We can only hope that everyone in this four-decade fight will put universal values into action, values that happen to be the names on the street signs at Ethel Lawrence.

Faith. Hope. Equality. And, most of all, Tolerance.