

Sunday, November 14, 2004

Close-up

## Low-income housing wins a beachhead in the 'burbs

By Josh Getlin

*Los Angeles Times*

MOUNT LAUREL, N.J. — On a crisp afternoon, Ethel Lawrence Boulevard looks like any other street in the comfortable suburb of Mount Laurel. Kids play football in front of gray Cape Cod apartments, station wagons roll by and an autumnal calm blankets the neighborhood.

"It looks normal, doesn't it?" asks Ethel Lawrence-Halley, who helps oversee the 140 apartments. "And that's just the point. After all the anger and hostility we had to deal with building these homes, they look like anywhere else."

Nestled in the heart of Mount Laurel, near Philadelphia, the Ethel Lawrence Homes are one of the few places in America where affordable housing has been built specifically for poor people — mostly blacks and Hispanics — in an affluent community.

It took three decades of litigation, legislation and financial wizardry to construct these apartments, and the last vacancies were filled this year. But the conflict continues. Some longtime residents remain angry, and activists voice frustration that more apartments haven't been built elsewhere.

### Falling short

During the past 20 years, New Jersey towns constructed 30,000 units of affordable housing, more than most states. Yet this falls far short of the need, estimated at 650,000 homes. And little of the new housing has been designated for the poor.

Next month, a state commission will issue new affordable-housing goals for each community. But even before the figures are released, some officials warn that too much construction could worsen suburban sprawl, and activists worry that the state's commitment to affordable housing may erode.

The struggle to open suburbia to low-income people and minorities has been waged more intensely in New Jersey than any other state. And it's largely because of Ethel Lawrence, a teacher who challenged the Garden State's exclusionary zoning laws 34 years ago.

She and others won a sweeping courtroom victory, convincing the New Jersey Supreme Court that communities have a constitutional obligation to build affordable housing for the region's poorest people. No other state has such a legal mandate.



CAROLYN COLE / LOS ANGELES TIMES

The 140 apartments that make up the Ethel Lawrence Homes in Mount Laurel, N.J., represent an extended struggle with recalcitrant officials and reluctant neighbors. A nonprofit organization opened them to low-income residents in 1997.

## **A legacy**

Lawrence died in 1994 and never saw the townhomes that bear her name. But the housing struggle lived on in her daughter, Lawrence-Halley. She kept fighting for the apartments and is now a project administrator at the 62-acre complex.

Lawrence-Halley is determined to build similar affordable housing throughout New Jersey, the nation's most suburbanized state. But the painful experience her family had in Mount Laurel gives her pause.

"We fought a long time to finally get these apartments built," she said, picking up stray pebbles on a pathway. But she added, "The issue didn't end once we got the housing built and occupied. We've still got a lot of work to do here."

Across the nation, a growing number of minorities are moving into suburbs. The vast majority, however, are moderate- and upper-income residents, not the low-income tenants that activists aimed to help at the Ethel Lawrence Homes — a development of two-story units clustered around a grassy commons and ringed by trees.

Less than a half-mile away, large, two-story homes sell for about \$500,000 or more in subdivisions bordering fields and small ponds. Mount Laurel is a bedroom suburb with acres of open space, about 40,000 people and no commercial center.

The town is filled with professionals and business managers who commute to work in Philadelphia or other suburbs. It is 87 percent white, and the median family income is \$76,280. Some residents in the apartments earn an estimated \$10,000 a year.

"The whole point of the Mount Laurel battle was to promote economic justice," said David Kirp, co-author of "Our Town," a book about the Mount Laurel case, and a public-policy teacher. "The courts said rich suburbs don't have the right to exclude people based on race or class. They had to provide real housing access."

In Mount Laurel, that theory is being put to the test. And for many townhome residents, the experience has been life-changing.

"My whole outlook is different," said Chicon Cruz, 27, a single mother of twins who works as an accountant. "I have a sense of hope. My girls can go to a good school. I feel confident about my future for the first time."

### **"You'll have to move"**

Lawrence's crusade for affordable housing took off in 1970 after an insult in church.

Mount Laurel then was a rural community of 11,200 with slightly more than 350 blacks. Residents had lived quietly together here since before the Civil War. But when they met with Mayor William Haines one Sunday 34 years ago, many blacks were troubled.

New single-family homes were going up all over town, at prices their grown children could not afford, they said. Why was the community blocking plans to build 34 garden apartments?

"If you people can't afford to live here," he said, "then you'll have to move."

Lawrence, a teacher and mother of nine, sat infuriated in the front pew, her daughter recalled. She had been leading the drive for low-cost housing and believed that the town's refusal to permit zoning for

apartments was morally wrong — especially since the community was welcoming new, mostly white residents to one subdivision after another.

"I'm not done with Mount Laurel," Lawrence said after church. Soon she joined forces with legal-aid lawyers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to sue the town.

Quite unexpectedly, they won, sending shockwaves through New Jersey.

In its 1975 ruling, the New Jersey Supreme Court said Mount Laurel's exclusionary zoning was illegal and suburbs must change their laws to permit the building of affordable housing. The decision was based on the state constitution and immune from review by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Suburbs balked. So the court issued a second decision in 1983, requiring each community to approve a specific number of affordable housing units. If a suburb failed to meet its obligations, developers could sue for the right to build affordable housing.

### **Loopholes**

Local officials promised to block the rulings any way they could. The Legislature took control, passing laws that allowed many suburbs to skirt the requirement.

Some towns, for example, paid thousands of dollars to poorer cities to build housing. Others raised taxes to buy open space and kept it off the market.

"Many suburbs have worked hard to remain exclusionary, and they have done it by approving every kind of affordable housing that you can imagine — for seniors, for moderate-income people — everything except housing for the poor," said Peter O'Connor, a public-interest attorney who guided the housing campaign in Mount Laurel.

Despite the obstacles placed in their way, Lawrence and her allies refused to give up. The town had grown since the lawsuit was filed, but it had created little, if any, housing for low-income people.

The activists battled numerous legal challenges and endured economic downturns, which limited funds for construction. Weeks before her death, Lawrence met with state officials at the site and begged them to fund the project.

### **The next generation**

About the same time, she asked her daughter to get involved.

Lawrence-Halley, a paralegal who lived nearby, had her own life to worry about. She had two children and a husband — who later died of cancer. She did not want to revisit the past.

But she remembered evenings when her mother returned from meetings enraged, because neighbors spat obscenities in her face. She recalled the night a zoning official said low-cost apartments shouldn't be built in Mount Laurel because blacks used the bathroom more than whites. The sewage system, he said, would be overloaded.

"I had to continue this work, because this Mount Laurel battle had become a generational thing for us," she said. "For me, there was really no choice."

The Ethel Lawrence Homes were finally approved in 1997. Many hoped the issue had calmed down. Instead, tensions surfaced at final meetings.

According to the transcript from the Mount Laurel Township Planning Board's hearing in 1997, attorney and resident Steve Gershman charged that "middle- and upper-income people are being compelled to support this low-income housing project, and it is being rammed down the Township's throat."

When construction began on the \$18 million project, the public acrimony began to die down. And then came moving day, three years ago, when the first tenants arrived.

"On that afternoon, when I saw little kids running from school buses to their moms in the new apartments, I cried," Lawrence-Halley said. "We had come so far."

Today, Councilman Peter McCaffrey says, the town is happy with its new neighbors.

"I think the original opposition, which was based on fear of the unknown, fear of people you didn't know, has gone away," said McCaffrey, a five-time mayor who has lived in Mount Laurel since 1972. "Most of that is behind us now."

### **Settling in**

O'Connor, who created Fair Share Housing Development, a nonprofit group that developed the apartments, agreed tensions had generally receded. The concern now, he said, is how well residents adapt to their new homes.

"Many of the kids are doing fine in school, but like anywhere else, there are some children who need extra counseling and help," he said. "Their mothers need help with day care, because it costs a lot more out here than it does in the inner city."

Most of the tenants are single mothers who work for medical, real-estate and insurance firms, among other small businesses. Rents are based on their pay.

Cruz, for example, pays 40 percent of her annual \$27,000 salary to live in one of the split-level townhouses. Her neighbors on Faith Court pay similar rents.

As Lawrence-Halley proudly strolled through the grounds recently, she described additional open spaces in Mount Laurel that would be ideal for day-care centers and more apartments. "I hear my mother's voice all the time, telling me not to relax for one second," she said. "And I always try to listen to what she says. I'm not done with Mount Laurel."