



## Braun: Mount Laurel low-income housing is a success story

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By **Bob Braun/Star-Ledger Columnist**

**MOUNT LAUREL** — From the road, the development looks no different than the planned, suburban housing communities that ring cities throughout New Jersey. A tree-lined entrance opens to carefully manicured lawns and common areas. The homes are large and well-maintained. The place suggests comfort, safety, maybe even a touch of affluence.

But the main squares have odd names. Not Shady Acres or Pleasant Valley, but Faith, Hope, Tolerance and Equality. The cars might be smaller and older than those in similar villages in Mt. Laurel. And the children playing in the yards or attending summer camp on site — they're mostly black and brown, and that's the most unusual thing about the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes.

"We know we have visitors from some of the nearby housing developments who have just moved in," says Peter O'Connor, executive director of Fair Share Housing Development, located in the community. "They heard there is low-income housing in the area and they come to check it out. They are surprised at what they see."

The Ethel R. Lawrence Homes are what New Jersey would look like if the rules were written by the poor. An alternative to warehousing of people in urban public housing. A New Jersey not segregated by race, ethnicity and income. Where kids are safe and score as well on state tests as suburban neighbors, defying cruel stereotypes about poor and minority children.

The children, most from Camden and other poor areas, have family incomes of 20 percent to 80 percent of average. They not only have a nice place to live, they also are provided after school instruction at the community's Margaret



Saed Hindash/The Star-Ledger

Alexandra Parma works with, from left, N'Dea Holmes, 10, Eddie Ruberte, 9, and Lucas Paz, 7, on a digital storytelling project. The children who live in the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes in Mt. Laurel get to learn and work on projects at the Margret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center, also located in the complex. The project was centered on what they love about living at Ethel Lawrence Homes.

Donnelly O'Connor Education Center, named for Peter's late mother, a Newark teacher. The children attend Mt. Laurel schools.

"They do well because they go to good schools and they get support here," says Cindy Haas, the education center's director. "They're not afraid of going to school."

Cities are often scary places, especially for children. "I live in Camden and I'm terrified," says Alexandra Parma, 23, who works at the center, a volunteer from a Jesuit-run organization. Terrified kids don't do well in school.

"We are the light at the end of the Abbott tunnel," says O'Connor, a former legal services attorney who is both development chief at Fair Share and head of its advocacy operation, the Fair Share Housing Center.

The insight melds two of the most controversial legal doctrines in the state history — the series of cases on school reform known as Abbott v. Burke and the litigation that began almost as long ago over exclusionary zoning that keeps the poor out of affluent communities.

Like Abbott, the so-called "Mt. Laurel Doctrine" — requiring all communities to provide low- and moderate-income housing — is not popular among many politicians. It is back in the courts after the state agency that enforces the doctrine, the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH), passed new rules linking development of new housing to community growth.

But that is just the beginning of problems for the idea of mandatory fair housing. Gov. Chris Christie was in office only a few days when he signed an executive order suspending COAH's enforcement. Fair Share won a reversal of the action but the governor has now abolished COAH and shifted its powers to the state Community Affairs Department.

In a press release, the governor explained, "I've always believed that municipalities should be able to make their own decisions on affordable housing without being micromanaged and second-guessed from Trenton."

Christie declined a request to elaborate. Kevin Walsh, the lawyer for Fair Share, argues the issue isn't whether COAH exists but who enforces the requirement of providing fair housing — the state or local municipalities.

"It's been obvious that all manner of economic and political pressures keep local communities from offering their fair share of low and moderate housing," Walsh says. "Without state enforcement, the Mt. Laurel doctrine is all but dead."

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The issues surrounding fair housing, as the governor often says, are "complex." Questions of growth, property ownership rights, zoning rules, home rule, race — they are all implicated in the controversy. And the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes are, O'Connor concedes, "the ideal of what could be done."

The 140 units — with some set aside for handicapped — represent a fraction of the 60,000 low-to-moderate income homes generated by the Mt. Laurel doctrine.

"But it shows it can work," O'Connor says. "It shows what can be done."

Parma, the Jesuit volunteer and a recent Fairfield University graduate, is helping the children create a film about living in Mt. Laurel. Child after child faces the camera and tells of how much they love living there.

"Where I live — in Camden — I hear gunshots almost every night," says Parma.

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