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Beauty Turner

Tough Beat
In Chicago, Demise
Of Housing Projects
Is Hard on a Paper
As Residents Scatter, Tabloid
Vows to Keep on Slugging;
Crime and Corruption
'Everybody Knows Beauty'
By JONATHAN EIG
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CHICAGO -- "I'm a writer and a fighter," Beauty Turner shouted, as she stood before a worked-up crowd at the Rain or Shine Baptist Church here.

Ms. Turner organized the meeting last month to discuss problems facing low-income public-housing residents. Now she was leading the discussion -- and, at the same time, covering it for her newspaper, the Residents' Journal.

"Power to God!" she shouted from the pulpit of the small South Side church. "Power to the people!" While the crowd yelled its response, Ms. Turner stepped back and snapped pictures. Later she collected phone numbers so she could interview participants for her column.

Ms. Turner and her editor, Mary C. Johns, produce Residents' Journal, a free tabloid circulated every other month among this city's 100,000 public-housing residents. The two women, both of whom live in federally subsidized apartments, write about hazardous living conditions, overdue electric bills and the failure of government to help those in need.

In recent years, they have scooped the mainstream media on several important stories. Now they are in a fight to keep their paper alive as big changes in public housing scatter their readership.

For more than a decade, Chicago has been on the forefront of efforts to reinvent public housing. The city is in the process of demolishing about 50 high-rise public-housing buildings. So far, about 13,000 apartments have been torn down. Among the thousands of displaced residents, some have moved to new, smaller



Mary C. Johns

developments. But the majority have been dispersed around the city and nearby suburbs, using government vouchers to subsidize their rent on the private market. In theory, these tenants should be moving to safer and more prosperous neighborhoods.

Some critics of the plan, including Ms. Turner and Ms. Johns, say poor people have been swept aside, out of sight and out of mind. In far-flung locations, the critics say, the poor have trouble getting the same level of services they had access to in the projects. Meanwhile, the old high-rises, many in prime locations close to downtown and public transportation, are being redeveloped as mixed-income communities, with higher-quality homes and more amenities, but not enough affordable housing for the poorest of the poor.

"Is It 'Doomsday' For Public Housing?" read a recent headline.

The Residents' Journal duo fear that the demolition process, by making the poor less visible, will be the first step toward the elimination of the programs. They want to make sure that long-time residents of public housing get a chance to occupy some of the new homes when their old neighborhoods are rebuilt.

While some researchers share some of those concerns, federal officials say there are no plans to get out of low-income housing any time soon.

For these journalists, the demolition process has also made their job more difficult. Their constituents are as plentiful as ever but harder to find. Meanwhile, the newspaper's costs for office space and distribution are rising while its funding -- mostly from foundations, individual donors and a handful of steady advertisers -- has slipped.

After years of mismanagement, the Chicago Housing Authority was under the control of the federal government in 1995 when its leaders decided to start a newspaper for residents. The city's public housing, some of the most extensive and crime-ridden in the nation, was about to begin a transformation. Officials thought a newspaper would help keep residents informed of the dramatic changes. The CHA set aside \$300,000 a year to produce and distribute Residents' Journal.

The job of creating and operating the newspaper went to Ethan Michaeli, a white reporter working for the Chicago Defender, the city's oldest African-American newspaper. The University of Chicago graduate, now 38 years old, had one condition when offered the job of editor and publisher: He asked for and received a written guarantee that CHA would not try to control or tamper with the newspaper's content.



Ethan Michaeli

One of his first hires was Mary Johns, now 45. Before 1989, she had never lived in public housing. Loud and powerfully built, she was a single mother raising five children and living in a \$400-a-month, four-bedroom apartment on the city's South Side. Her only income, she says, was from welfare. She says she abused drugs and alcohol and sometimes sold some of her food stamps to get money for gambling.

'Whole Different City'

When the building was sold and she lost her apartment, the father of one of her children recommended public housing. She says she borrowed \$63 from a drug dealer to make a deposit on an apartment in the Washington Park housing development. "It was like a whole different city," she says. "I started complaining right away. Pop-pop-pop! You're ducking from the gun shots. I got these kids, but I can't go outside. I ain't got no money to go nowhere. So I stayed secluded."

She ventured out to volunteer at her children's schools. Then, after hearing about Residents' Journal, she began volunteering there six hours a day, five days a week.

After about eight months, Mr. Michaeli offered her a job as an assistant editor, working 40 hours a week for \$23,000 a year. It was her first full-time job. Today, she pays \$385 a month for a government-owned apartment in a gentrifying neighborhood on the city's West Side.

Writing headlines and editing copy, Ms. Johns helped set the fledgling paper's tone. The Journal covered problems facing CHA residents: "The CHA Is Weird," read a 2001 headline about the organization trying to influence leadership elections in housing developments. It also celebrated success stories, with a regular column called "Positive People." Mr. Michaeli, who is still publisher, says he knew the paper was catching on when he started to see residents brandish it as evidence at public hearings.

As thousands of people moved out of the big developments, mainstream media outlets reduced their coverage of public housing. Antonio Olivo, who covers public housing and urban development for the Tribune, says he and his editors are strongly interested in writing about the breakup of public housing and the movement of its residents. "But it's harder," he says, "because you don't know where they are now." For one series of stories, the Tribune had to file requests under the Freedom of Information Act and knock on doors to learn where public housing residents had gone.

Ms. Turner and Ms. Johns don't have that problem. Residents who might never think to phone one of the city's big media outlets often turn up at the newspaper's crowded, windowless offices on the city's South Side. Or they simply drop in on the

home of Ms. Turner, who has emerged as the public face of the newspaper.

Ms. Turner lives in one of the CHA's new, mixed-income communities on the South Side, where she pays federally subsidized rent of \$259 a month. "Everybody knows Beauty," says Laverne Williamson, 42, a former resident of one of the big developments who came to Ms. Turner's recent meeting at Rain or Shine church to complain about conditions at her new apartment. "She's knocking on doors, teaching people to come out to meetings. If you need some help with an apartment, or CHA is trying to B.S. you, everybody knows to call Beauty."

Ms. Turner grew up the youngest of 16 children on Chicago's West Side. She got married and had the first of her three children by the time she was 18. After divorcing her husband, Ms. Turner and her children moved to the Robert Taylor Homes, one of the city's biggest and most dangerous public-housing developments at the time.

"It was just me and my three children," says Ms. Turner, 49. "I was really happy with that. But I looked out my window and I didn't see any kids. Then one day I looked out the window and I saw a teenager shot down. A boy. I was crying and screaming, because this can't be real. 'Call the police! Call an ambulance! Somebody!' "

The incident, which occurred around 1990, inspired her to write the first in a series of letters to the editor of the Chicago Defender. The staff writer who edited those letters was Ethan Michaeli.

One day in 1999, Ms. Turner rose to speak at a protest concerning conditions in public housing. Mr. Michaeli, who by then was running Residents' Journal, was in the audience. He introduced himself and offered Ms. Turner a part-time job. Today, she writes six or seven stories for each issue.

She writes often about homelessness. Thousands of people are living in public-housing units without proper leases, either by squatting in vacant apartments or by sharing apartments with friends or relatives. Ms. Turner has used her column to prod the CHA to help find permanent housing for these men and women. Officials have said repeatedly that there's little they can do to help.

She has also written in defense of tenants who faced eviction because members of their families were convicted of crimes, which puts them in violation of their lease terms.

One of her favorite subjects is utility bills. They've been a big problem for residents on the move. In big housing developments, many residents ignored utility bills for years at a time, in many cases because they believed the charges were inaccurate.

But the residents weren't permitted to move into new apartments until utility bills

were paid. Some people owed more than \$20,000 after interest and late fees.

Two years ago, the CHA and Commonwealth Edison, the local electric company, agreed to a plan that would excuse the tenants from their debt if they paid one-third of their outstanding bills. Ms. Turner blasted the proposal, calling it unrealistic for poor families that owed large sums.

As it turned out, only 53 of the 1,200 eligible residents took advantage of the bill-paying deal. A spokesman for Commonwealth Edison said the utility had hoped more CHA customers would sign up.

Last year, Ms. Turner and Ms. Johns worked with a reporter from The Chicago Reporter, an investigative news magazine, to produce a package of stories showing that shooting deaths had increased sharply in housing projects even as buildings fell and populations dwindled. At the same time, the stories said, violent crime also had increased in the neighborhoods where former residents of the projects were relocating.

The articles, which appeared in both the Reporter and Residents' Journal, attributed much of the violence to gang members who were adjusting to new markets and new turf. The stories, which won several journalism prizes, prompted city officials to assign more police to some of the dangerous spots highlighted by the article.

Suspect Donations

More recently, Residents' Journal produced a special report with the Better Government Association, a Chicago nonprofit that investigates government corruption. The report said that dozens of CHA contractors had given hundreds of thousands of dollars to a political group from the district that CHA's chief executive, Terry Peterson, used to represent as an alderman. Many of the contractors made the donations within days of receiving lucrative CHA contracts, the report said.

Karen Pride, a CHA spokeswoman, said in an email that Mr. Peterson wouldn't comment on the fairness or accuracy of the stories. He didn't comment for the Residents' Journal article, either, although a spokesman for CHA said Mr. Peterson was not involved in soliciting donations or awarding contracts. The paper's story was widely covered by the city's other media.

Residents' Journal is no longer funded by the CHA. In 2000, it became an independent, nonprofit organization. Getting the job done has grown more difficult in the last year, Ms. Turner, Ms. Johns and Mr. Michaeli say. While the paper is passed out by residents in the remaining large projects, Residents' Journal now tries to reach its audience by dropping off bundles of papers at hair salons, libraries and other spots.

Until recently, the paper had been receiving free office space from the CHA. But six months after the Journal's story on contractor donations, Mr. Michaeli received a letter saying the agency would begin charging the paper \$500 a month in maintenance fees.

Mr. Michaeli says he suspects the fee was punishment for the paper's hard-hitting story on Mr. Peterson. Ms. Pride of the CHA says it wasn't.

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation recently renewed its support - but at an average of \$100,000 a year instead of the \$125,000 it had previously provided.

Mr. Michaeli won a grant from the Ford Foundation to study a plan to make the paper function more like a social service center -- setting up offices where CHA residents could get help adjusting to their new homes. But the foundation recently decided not to provide long-term funding.

Publication of the latest issue has been delayed several months by a shortage of funds. Staffers have gone weeks without paychecks. Ms. Turner, Ms. Johns and Mr. Michaeli have decided to take pay cuts rather than eliminate jobs.

"The money will come," Ms. Turner says. "I can't stop now."