

'The Way We Live': On the West Side, mixed-income housing delivers fresh hope

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STAMFORD -- Edward Miranda has a knack for remembering dates of significant events in his life, such as the day his favorite baseball player Roberto Clemente died in an airplane crash -- Dec. 31, 1972 -- and the day he quit smoking -- Jan. 26, 2005.

"No patch, no gum, just cold turkey," he said proudly.

Another date etched in his brain is the day he moved into Fairgate, a new development on Fairfield Avenue by Charter Oak Communities, the city's housing authority.

"Jan. 17, 2010," he said, after pausing and squinting for a moment.

A week before Christmas, the 52-year-old Stamford Hospital security guard learned that he had been selected from a waiting list to rent one of the highly coveted affordable units. Of the 90 townhouse units, 55 are designated for people making below 60 percent of the area median income, or \$75,420 for a family of four. Monthly rents for market-rate units range from about \$1,395 to \$2,225. Residents in the affordable units pay no more than 30 percent of their monthly salary. All of the units have been occupied since May.

Miranda, who spoke of a hardscrabble childhood growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y., lives in an airy, light-filled, one-bedroom apartment, which looks out onto the downtown skyline.

"To be honest with you, it was like I hit the lottery," he said. "Just walking in here, it was like a different world."

The roughly \$41 million project was completed last fall as part of a federal program known as Hope VI, which seeks to replace dilapidated public housing developments with mixed-income communities. In addition to nearly \$9 million in federal funds, Charter Oak received \$7.5 million from the state and \$1.5 million from the city.

The block had formerly been the site of Fairfield Court, a 144-unit 1930s housing complex that former residents say had been plagued by drugs and violence.

Today, the newly paved, tree-lined community features quaint townhouses that have become the architectural cornerstone of a rapidly transforming West Side neighborhood. More Charter Oak developments are in the works on Progress Drive and along Stillwater and Merrell avenues. Later this year, Stamford Hospital is expected to begin the first phase of a \$575 million redevelopment and expansion.

"It's a sea change," said Renee Kahn, a city historian and preservationist who recently toured Fairgate. Like federal and state officials who have also visited the site, she came away impressed.

"Any kind of subsidized housing used to wear a label that it was for 'those' people," she said. In the end, she said, residents and neighborhoods suffered. The new model, she said, "is a way to encourage rehabilitation."

Built in a Georgian colonial style, Fairgate was intended to emulate homes built across the West Side by Italian immigrants during the early part of the 20th century, according to Vin Tufo, the executive director of Charter Oak.

"The mixed-income nature of the project inspires the owner or developer to achieve a very high level of marketability, and that starts with the architecture," he said.

Some of the homes have brick facades adorned with white columns, while others are wrapped in white siding. Some face the street, while others look onto a courtyard of newly planted trees, plants and yellow daffodils. There is a regular security detail during nonbusiness hours. Unlike former housing authority properties, Fairgate is managed by a private company. The director of operations lives on the premises. An activities coordinator organizes community events such as morning exercise routines, barbecues and day trips.

About 20 families from Fairfield Court have relocated to Fairgate, according to Tufo. More than half of the former residents elected to move to two other new buildings on Taylor Street and Clinton Avenue, while others rented apartments elsewhere using federal Section 8 vouchers or moved out of state.

Those who have returned have been impressed with the changes.

"It's bigger than any apartment we've ever had," said Naomi Reddic, who shares a three-bedroom duplex with her four children.

Each of the units is equipped with amenities such as dishwashers, garbage disposals, washers and dryers. At a recent residents' meeting, one

woman jokingly confessed that she was still learning how to use the appliances.

Reddic said that over the course of her six years at Fairfield Court, she had become accustomed to the sights and sounds of drug use and gun violence.

"Every single night, it was like watching a movie," she said about looking outside her window and hearing gunshots.

From her living room Thursday morning, the only audible sound was the buzzing of a power hedge clipper held by a landscaper.

With its mixed-income structure, the community has become more diverse. Reddic, who is black, said she has noticed more white, Indian and Hispanic people at the development.

"I like that they did that," she said.

For Miranda, the road to Stamford and Fairgate started eight years ago. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he found himself laid off from his maintenance job at the South Street Seaport. In 2002, on a tip from a friend, he came to Stamford in search of work.

After three years at a cleaning company, he got his current job at the Tully Center on Strawberry Hill. Having sold his car several years ago, he walks nearly two miles at the crack of dawn to get there.

"I've got a 1958 model," he added, patting his legs.

As he opened up the door of his apartment to give a tour, he took care to take off his shoes before stepping on the beige carpeting. The rooms were immaculate and neatly organized, but the personal details nonetheless came through.

A crystal vase containing pink flowers set on the front windowsill was a touch from his girlfriend. In his living room, he paid tribute to his favorite team, the New York Yankees, with a trove of memorabilia that includes figurines of the 1998 World Series champions and a baseball signed by Bernie Williams.

A lawn chair with a Yankee logo stood against the wall. Laid across the seat was a Bible and a framed award from the hospital naming him Security Officer of the Year.

"I've been lucky and blessed," he said. "I've got my health, a job and a beautiful house."

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