

# Unity in Struggle

By: Kari Lydersen

Community leaders in a number of local mixed-income neighborhoods say they have found a reliable way to bring people of different races and income levels together: community organizing campaigns. It's through this kind of activism where these disparate populations share common interests and a sense of solidarity and mission.

In Uptown, which was famous in the 1960s through 1980s for multiracial community organizing involving the Puerto Rican Young Lords and Appalachian white Young Patriots, community organizations have fought hard to maintain a genuine mixed-income community in the face of intense pressure from both retail and residential developers.

Jamiko Rose, executive director of the Organization of the North East (ONE), has seen plenty of hatred and stereotypes directed at low-income residents by higher-income residents who have moved to Edgewater, Rogers Park and Uptown in recent years.

Among other things, opponents of affordable housing at the Wilson Yard development in Uptown distributed fliers equating affordable housing with Cabrini-Green and calling for "artists" rather than "poverty."

"They fear the obvious superficial things they associate with poverty," said Rose. "Poor people struggle with strains on the family; the adults are working so the youth have a lack of supervision and what people fear is the result of that lack of supervision."

But Rose says higher- and middle income residents have also been instrumental in numerous campaigns to preserve affordable housing, since many of them value the diversity of the neighborhood and see housing as a social justice issue.

"People want to see their kids interacting with kids from other cultures, they don't want to live in a bubble. They say they would move to the suburbs if that's what they wanted," Rose said.

Likewise, she noted that during the six-year Balanced Development Coalition campaign to get the city to pass legislation mandating affordable set-asides in new developments, even homeless people who had no chance of buying these homes participated. Thanks to the efforts of the citywide coalition, legislation was finally passed in May 2007 mandating all developments with city land or financing for over 10 units to include 10 percent affordable housing or an equivalent payment into an affordable housing trust fund.

People from diverse economic and racial backgrounds also came together over the past few years

in ONE's campaign to promote immigrant rights and pioneered a small loan program for immigrants trying to become citizens.

And last summer, an ethnically and economically diverse crowd affiliated with the Jane Addams Senior Caucus, a member organization of ONE, worked together to help preserve an affordable income senior building in Uptown called the Hollywood House that otherwise would likely have been turned into market-rate condos. The passage of the Hollywood tax increment financing zone was instrumental in securing funds for the nonprofit Heartland Alliance to buy the 198-unit building, after the nonprofit Hellenic Foundation, the building's owner, decided it needed to sell.

Hollywood House resident Gene Horcher, 70, had been active in affordable-housing battles with the caucus since 1999, even though as a financially secure, retired rehabilitation counselor he didn't think he would ever be fighting for his own housing. He moved into Hollywood House more than two years ago, and while he says he could easily find replacement housing, he worried about lower-income, infirm residents.

"Community organizing fights against the trend of pathological individualism where you don't think about anyone but yourself," said Horcher. "There is self-interest involved, but altruism as well. Sometimes self-interest and altruism mingle."

In Auburn Gresham, one of the South Side naturally occurring, mixed income communities identified by census data, the Target AREA Development Corp. service and advocacy organization has also used community organizing to nurture and sustain a mixed-income community. Target AREA Executive Director Patricia Watkins said people of various income levels can be united through shared interests like education, safety and civil rights. These efforts help eliminate lingering stereotypes or fears, Watkins said.

"We see the most interaction in advocacy campaigns that affect everyone," Watkins said. "We work so hard to unspin the spin. For example, we work to increase public safety with the least amount of criminalization of our people."

Other campaigns have reduced chronic truancy at local schools and attracted a wider mix of retail to commercial strips on Ashland Avenue and 79th Street.

Target AREA also develops mixed income affordable-housing and advocates to keep quality affordable rental housing available in the neighborhood. The organization also runs a community theater program in the lushly restored 2,200-seat theater that houses its headquarters.

"It's a way for community members across income levels to come together and share something

educational and exciting,” Watkins said, “People who are middle income and low-income are working together to keep the neighborhood moving forward.”

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