

The Washington Post

Longtime Residents Welcome Clifton Terrace Transformation Complex Had Been Among Nation's Most Troubled

By Manny Fernandez

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, June 30, 2004; Page B01

The Wardman Court apartments in Northwest Washington are a portrait of urban domestic bliss. Three five-story, tan-brick buildings surround a freshly landscaped, grassy courtyard, a flagpole in the center. Residents stand on the balconies of their newly painted units and admire the hilltop view, the Washington Monument gleaming in the distance.

But Norma Proctor-Johnson, 69, recalls another time, when the apartments at Clifton and 14th streets NW went by another name and reputation. She keeps a faded, hardcover photo album with snapshots of her 20 years here, to make sure no one forgets.

In May 1984, when she and her husband moved in, the apartments were known as Clifton Terrace, which officials once had called one of the most troubled housing complexes in the nation. Drug dealers and prostitutes competed for customers in and around the dilapidated buildings.

"This is our blacktop," she said, flipping through the album and stopping at an old picture of the exterior. "We had no grass."

She turned the pages, passing snapshots of profanity-laced graffiti in a lobby. "This is blood," she said, pointing to a Polaroid of a large, smeared stain on the tiled floor in front of her door, where, she said matter-of-factly, "somebody stabbed someone."

Yesterday, the scrapbooks and memories of Proctor-Johnson and other longtime residents underscored the change that surrounds the area. City leaders, federal housing officials and neighborhood activists gathered beneath a white tent below the flagpole to celebrate a \$37 million renovation that rescued the apartment complex from inner-city misery.

The ceremony marked the official rebirth of Clifton Terrace as Wardman Court. D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) congratulated the two developers who renovated the complex, the Community Preservation and Development Corp. and Michaels Development Co.

With a \$9 million redevelopment grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, they took on the revamping of Clifton Terrace with the stated goal of providing affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families.

It marked at least the third try by the federal government to rescue Clifton Terrace. In 1978, HUD foreclosed on a loan to a company led by Mary Treadwell, a former wife of Marion Barry, after determining that the company mismanaged and misappropriated public funds.

HUD acquired the building and turned to a partnership run by North Carolina businessman Rick Marshall to save it. But by 1988 poor conditions persisted, and HUD took over the complex in 1996, selling it to the current developers for one dollar in 1999.

"This is almost a case of literally rising from the ashes again," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) told members of the audience seated on plastic folding chairs in the courtyard's plush grass.

Today, the 228 units include renovated apartments and condominiums. The one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments all have been rented for \$665 to \$1,160 a month, and all the condominiums have been sold for \$107,000 to \$221,000.

Of the building's original 289 apartments, 23 households that receive Section 8 housing vouchers remain.

After the ceremony, some of the longtime residents sat in the gray-painted lobby of one of the buildings, eating ham and cheese sandwiches as a waiter wearing a bow tie served beverages. Times had changed.

In 1995, the president of the building's tenants association, Eugene Jacquet, 81, was shot in the stomach in a laundry room. In the middle of lunch yesterday, as the sun filled the lobby with light, he pushed his tie to the side and unbuttoned his blue striped shirt to show the long, vertical scar on his belly.

Why didn't he leave? "This is where I live," said Jacquet, who's resided here for 36 years. "I knew I wasn't going to let nobody run me out of my house."

Jacquet's die-hard attitude was echoed by some of the building's other seniors. "I didn't think it could get no worse," said a 31-year resident, Wilhelmina Robinson, 71. "It had to get better. I wanted to live long enough to see it the way it is now."

Over the years, Clifton Terrace had been a place where people didn't live so much as survive. Housing inspectors found more than 1,200 building code violations in 1967.

Twenty years later, the drug market outside the buildings got so bad that police temporarily banned all parking on the block. By 1992, Nation of Islam guards patrolled the complex, in addition to a heavy police presence.

Designed by architect Harry Wardman and decorated with chandeliers and marble foyers, Clifton Terrace opened in 1916 as the largest luxury apartment complex in Washington, complete with uniformed doormen.

Restoring some of that elegance has made Proctor-Johnson and other residents proud.

"I'm not afraid any longer," she said. "I take my trash out at 4 o'clock in the morning . . . People seem to walk taller and smile more."