

The Washington Post



Lives Transformed With Edgewood Terrace Residents Celebrate New Jobs, Skills Along With NE Complex's Renovation

By *Debbi Wilgoren*

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, October 8, 2003; Page B03

The Edgewood Terrace apartment complex has been transformed in many obvious ways: The broken windows, faulty plumbing and leaky roofs that have been repaired; the new elevators, high-tech wiring and computers that have been installed; the bright colors and architectural flourishes that complement inviting playgrounds and attractive landscaping.

The lives of many who live in the Northeast Washington complex have been remade as well.

Lisa Thomas, 38, was receiving welfare and working part time at Pizza Hut a decade ago, relying on food stamps to feed her three boys and on Medicaid to pay for their doctor's visits. She now earns more than \$34,000 a year using computers to track passengers and luggage on Amtrak trains.

"I have full health coverage, full dental," she said yesterday. "Plus vacation time."

Pat Fisher, 29, manned a cash register at Starbucks in the mid-1990s, hating the customers who were rude, the hours that were late and the pay that was low, leaving her and her son living with her parents in their small Southeast Washington apartment.

Now she works to prevent child abuse in her neighborhood for the Edgewood/Brookland Family Support Collaborative, earning about \$26,000 a year -- enough, combined with rent subsidies, to pay for a comfortable three-bedroom apartment.

Their stories and those of many others were celebrated yesterday, when resident leaders joined officials to mark the completion of an eight-year, \$76.4 million rehabilitation of the 32-year-old complex of high-rise buildings and garden apartments.

The buildings were repaired and improved in four stages by Community Preservation and Development Corp., a nonprofit affordable housing provider that owns the complex. The total project cost was cobbled together from federal and local grants for affordable housing, private bank loans, tax credits, Section 8 housing vouchers and other subsidy programs.

Residents participated in a host of educational, job-training and social service programs. There were computer courses and "workplace skills" sessions to teach office-quality English and manners; child care and classes for earning a high school equivalency diploma.

The total number of housing units was cut from 884 to 792 as some units and areas were expanded. Vacancy rates that had hovered at 40 percent shrank to zero. Crime almost disappeared. Newcomers to the complex included moderate-income renters from the city and the

suburbs, and the first whites, Latinos, Asians and African immigrants to live at Edgewood Terrace in recent memory.

Average household income for the 125 Edgewood residents who completed the job-training program jumped from \$9,400 to more than \$26,000, officials who ran the program say. An additional 435 adults, most from surrounding neighborhoods, went through the program and had their average income increase from \$11,000 to \$25,000.

"What Edgewood has helped the city to learn is that housing does not a community make. You've got to make the community work, too," said Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), one of a dozen officials to speak.

Norton and others noted that, unlike sprawling public housing complexes that are being razed and rebuilt as mixed-income communities with federal HOPE VI dollars, Edgewood Terrace was redeveloped in stages, without displacing residents.

And while many other affordable housing programs today focus on creating opportunities for home ownership for low-income families, Edgewood remained entirely rental, as the senior citizens who pushed for its revival requested. Affordable rental units are in demand in the District, as housing prices continue to soar.

When Edgewood Terrace opened in 1971, it was hailed as a model of low- and moderate-income housing. Just over a decade later, large parts of the complex fell victim to poor management, a thriving drug trade, crime and violence.

Thirty-one-year resident Arsena W. Perry said life is much better now. But she is lobbying hard for roving security guards to patrol the property. Noting that drug sales and other criminal activity still flourish a few blocks from the complex, she warned anyone who would listen that history could repeat itself.

"You cannot give up at all and think you got everything covered," said Perry, 83. "Drugs don't take no vacation."

© 2003 The Washington Post Company