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Once-Ailing Edgewood Terrace Is Restored to Health

By Susan Straight

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Leslie Steen, president of the Community Preservation and Development Corp., recalls that when she first saw Edgewood Terrace more than 10 years ago, her first thought was, "Oh my God -- how do we get resources to tackle a problem like this?"

The 16-acre, 884-unit property in Northeast Washington was in such bad condition that it was only 40 percent occupied. The parking lot had collapsed. Plumbing had sprouted leaks. Drug dealing and other crimes were rampant, with the plaza between buildings functioning as an open-air drug market. The convenience store on the first floor of a high-rise served as a drug storage and pickup depot, Steen said.

The first day that architect Michael Wiencek of Wiencek & Zavos Architects visited the property someone was killed in a gang fight. Now, he visits the property in the day or evening and says he feels safe and the residents greet him by name.

In slightly more than 10 years, the CPDC has squelched the drug trafficking and rehabilitated all but one building (the work is in progress). The Bethesda nonprofit, which has redeveloped several local apartment complexes, added career training, computers in every unit with high-speed Internet access for \$25 a year, a computer instruction center, a day-care center and an on-site nonprofit education and recreation office.

Some people who have been involved say the changes would never have happened without the determination of Rogerline Nicholson, the resident association president who passed away last year. "She and a handful of other longtime residents believed in this property" and managed to bring in the CPDC and the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the late 1980s to save it, Wiencek said.

Wiencek and his partner, Bruce Zavos, specialize in renovating low-income housing. "I get a lot of joy out of making a difference there. . . . They're so grateful" for the rehabilitation, he said. Edgewood Terrace is a model project for HUD and demonstrates the value of renovating instead of simply tearing down deteriorated low-income housing.

The CPDC bought Edgewood Terrace from a California-based management company in 1991. Using a HUD grant, the CPDC began an \$85 million rehabilitation program that is to continue for a few more years.

Edgewood Terrace includes garden apartments, high-rise units and a senior high-rise building. As a mixed-income complex, rents include market rate and Section 8 rates. The Section 8 rates are set under a federal subsidy program in which residents pay 30 percent of their income for their unit.

Wiencek said the rats and plumbing were so bad in some of the buildings that HUD wanted to tear them down and start over. Wiencek argued for their rehabilitation because they "had great walls -- solid masonry you could still get a lot of life out of." And rehabilitation would save a lot of money, even though the buildings still had to be gutted.

Wiencek, who said his firm is known for using a lot of curves in its designs, added such architectural details as steel channels under windows and sweeping railings -- all painted in bright yellow, orange, turquoise and deep blue.

Another unifying architectural theme throughout the four sections of the complex is the 40-foot, three-dimensional steel truss triangles that jut off the tops of the roofs of the complex's garden-style and high-rise buildings.

Shark-fin hood ornament-type structures held up by suspension rods grace the tops of the stair towers on some of the buildings. The lobby in one of high-rises, among the first to be renovated, has a elegant concierge desk that still looks new after more than four years.

Resident Linda Howard has lived at Edgewood Terrace for two years and says she has not had any security problems.

That is a big change for a neighborhood that she did not feel safe in several years ago. "I used to dread" getting off the Rhode Island Avenue Metro," she said. The neighborhood "was a mess... It was dangerous" because of drug activity, she said.

Ben Jones has lived at Edgewood Terrace for 15 years and has three children, two of them still living at home. He has also seen a lot of changes in the area surrounding his apartment building. "This neighborhood is a whole lot safer than it was," he said.

A lot of the drug dealing that been done on the street in front of Edgewood Terrace has moved elsewhere, he said. He said the dealers who used to conduct business in the property's convenience store and carryout restaurant moved when the CPDC replaced the businesses with the computer lab.

Late this summer, residents will get a new music room and infant day-care center. The 2,000-square-foot music room will have instruments, a recording studio and a stage as well as electronic equipment.

Wilburt Pittman has lived in Edgewood Terrace's senior-citizen building for 12 years but has friends who have lived there since it opened in 1971. He said the older folks in the building get to know each other well because they eat together in the social room.

"I know all of the older residents, not the younger ones," he said. The seniors have their own social activities.

Beacon House Community Ministry is a nonprofit organization that the CPDC brought in to administer educational and sports activities for residents. For more than 10 years, Beacon House, founded in 1991 by the Rev. Donald E. Robinson, has provided tutoring, an after-school study hall, sports teams, weekend breakfasts, Saturday arts and crafts workshops, field trips and summer day camps for Edgewood Terrace and other Ward Five children.

All the Beacon House programs and activities are meant to be affordable. The day camps, for example, cost \$25 a week. "We've never turned a child away," Robinson said.

Beacon House, which rents space from the CPDC to run its programs, gets help from volunteers who come from more than a dozen Unitarian Universalist churches in the Washington area, as well as Edgewood Terrace itself.

Howard said her move there from another local apartment community has been good for her children. Since they moved in, her daughters, now 11, 12 and 16, have regularly attended the on-site Girl Scout meetings, computer training and after-school activities sponsored by Beacon House.

"My kids have gotten a lot of help here," she said. "I've seen a lot of improvement in their grades."

Her two younger daughters go to the computer-training center in their building for about 1 1/2 hours every day after school.

They also go to Girl Scout meetings regularly. Their scouting leader takes them to concerts, museums and art shows, she said.

Howard also likes that there are Safeway, Ames and other stores within a five-minute walk, plus bus stops close to the complex.

Jones also said he likes the proximity of nearby retail and recently applied for a job at the new Home Depot.

It is less than a 10-minute walk, he said, so "it would be really convenient."

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