At the time of the mayor’s dedication ceremony in April 1954, sixteen families had already moved into Columbia Point. Over the next several months, hundreds more would follow. Each of them has a story—where they had come from, why they moved to Columbia Point, how they felt about their new home—and each story is different. The McCluskeys and the Shearers are just two among fifteen hundred of those stories.

THE MCCLUSKEYS

In July 1954 Patricia McCluskey, seven months pregnant, moved into the Columbia Point housing project with her husband and two young boys. The family was rapidly outgrowing its shared-bath apartment at 139 Bowdoin Street in Dorchester. The McCluskeys considered it “a step up” to move into an apartment at Columbia Point. Large families had a hard time finding housing anywhere, and the McCluskeys were glad to get good, clean housing with a private bath and lots of hot water. John McCluskey’s earnings as a cab driver put the family within the income limit for public housing tenants. And the man from the housing authority who visited the family at their Bowdoin Street apartment was satisfied that they were “fulfilling their housekeeping requirements.”

Pat McCluskey, tall and thin as a beanpole, with auburn hair and large metal-rimmed glasses, was born and bred in South Boston. From Columbia Point she could just make out her former home at City Point at the far end of the long, arcing line of Carson Beach. As she sums it up, “I always say I went from City Point to Columbia Point.”

The McCluskeys were the first family to move into apartment 816, on the sixth floor of the seven-story high-rise at 18 Brandon Avenue, where everything was brand-new. With their third son born in October and a daughter fourteen months later, the McCluskeys soon qualified for a larger apartment. In 1957 they moved into a four-bedroom apartment at 400 Mount Vernon Street, at the far end of the project. They lived there, raising
their family, which would eventually number seven children, for the next eleven years.

One of Pat McCluskey’s favorite stories is about her large family: “Once I went for a job interview with a doctor,” she explains. “And he said, ‘Do you have a family?’ and I said, ‘Yes, I have seven children.’ ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘a conscientious Catholic.’ I said, ‘Well, how do you know I wasn’t a passionate Protestant?’ And he laughed. I got the job, too.”

Pat McCluskey has vivid memories of what it was like living at Columbia Point in the late 1950s. The McCluskeys’ neighbors were working-class people like themselves. “Mr. Cronin was a carpenter,” Pat recalls. “Mrs. McDonald’s husband was disabled during the war, so he didn’t have a regular job. Mr. Malloy worked for the post office for a while, and later on he went on to the MBTA [Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority], as my husband did. And Mr. Duffy was a postal worker.”

Although the community opened without the basic facilities any community requires—playgrounds, grocery stores, schools—she remembers these as inconveniences, not hardships: “The children played around the building. We were at 18 Brandon and those were elevator buildings. When my older son, John Jr., became old enough and he knew the other children were going out to play, he would say, ‘Mama, can I go play?’ And I had the other little one, so I’d take him out to the elevator and put him on the elevator, and he’d go down. Then I’d look out the window to make sure he was downstairs. You put your trust a lot hoping that things would be all right.”

The lack of recreational facilities may have turned grassy areas into dirt, but the children used their imaginations to improvise all the games they wanted. Getting groceries was a major production, but the daily trip to the grocery store became part of the rhythm of Pat McCluskey’s day:

They used to have a bus that would come in there where you could go buy your groceries. They would park the bus over in an open area where the ball field was. But they would charge you all outdoors for the simplest things. And so every day I would just take the little ones,
after the older ones went to school. And I would walk from 400 Mount Vernon, the whole length of the project, and cut through a big empty field, which is all filled in now. I crossed a pedestrian bridge over Morrissey Boulevard to the First National Store, which is now Channel 56. So it was like a little outing for me too, you know? In those early years, most residents had to walk to the First National or walk to Uphams Corner to the Elm Market, and then walk back.

We didn't have that much money to spend. Every morning when my husband came home—he worked the night shift driving a cab—he'd give me his tip money, and I'd spend that money on groceries. But the children, even as they're grown up now, they said they never remember being hungry. So I guess I did the right thing.

When we first moved, there wasn't any local school either. The children were bused to South Boston. I think even then that there wasn't any kindergarten. We used to take them up to the administration building, and they had some teachers there. When the Paul A. Dever School opened up, John Jr. went to kindergarten, and it was quite nice that all seven of my children had the same teacher.

---

**Columbia Point Pride**

The March 1955 edition of *Your Home Bulletin*, a Boston Housing Authority publication, extolled Columbia Point's virtues:

We take great pride in publishing the facts relative to our Columbia Point Development in Dorchester, the largest Public Housing structure in New England, and the third largest in the Country. It cost twenty million dollars to build.

Its geographical location is unique, in that it sets on a neck of land surrounded on two sides by the waters of Bostons' inner harbor. Its South West boundary is in proximity to the William T. Morrissey Boulevard and to the MTA Rapid Transit Columbia Station. The Columbia Park playground is about a stones throw from the development as are the beaches of I Street and Carson Beach. Its massive buildings add impressiveness to Bostons' sky line, and is, indeed, a town within a town. [All spellings as in original.]

---

Christmas at 400 Mount Vernon Street, #346, 1959.
Clockwise from lower left: Noreen, 4, Kevin, 5, Johnny, 7, Stephen, 6, and Brian McCluskey, 2.
*Courtesy of Patricia McCluskey.*
In the early days, Pat McCluskey was busy not just raising her family but also working to build a strong community—not just putting food on the table and keeping the apartment clean, but also giving special recognition to an excellent teacher or doing something extra to spruce up her building. She and her husband were active in various community groups; Pat was president of the Improvement Association, and John started a credit union at the housing project. Although she looks back on these years fondly, Pat McCluskey is clear-eyed and still rueful about the obstacles she occasionally encountered:

At 400 Mount Vernon, there were four families on each floor. So there were twelve families in one building using the one stairwell. [There
Moving In: A Tale of Two Families

are] rules that they have when you live in a project, and because there
were twelve families that meant that each month of the year it was a
different family's turn to clean that hallway. And I'll never forget one
time I cleaned the hallway. And right next to our apartment door was a
window looking out on the back courtyard. So I thought I'd brighten it
up a little bit, and I put a curtain on that window. Someone took a
match, and burned the curtain right off the window.

I mean, it was just as if you were fighting—I don't know how to ex-
plain it—some people looked at housing just as housing. We were look­
ing at it as a place to live, and something that we could improve while
we were there.

Despite occasional hints of trouble foreshadowing the future, Co­
lumbia Point, as the McCluskeys saw it, was a good place to raise a
growing family. The community nurtured them in important ways,
and they in turn worked hard to give back to the community.

THE SHEARERS
In January 1956 Erline Shearer moved into Columbia Point with
her five children. They had been living in her mother's house in
Roxbury, but when her mother became seriously ill and the house
was put up for sale, Shearer decided to try public housing. She was
offered apartments in several projects, but the one at Columbia
Point was the first one she looked at, and she decided to take it on
the spot—apartment 607 at 164 Monticello, on the second floor of a
seven-story building. As she recalls, she "just liked it":

When I moved there, the building was not completely occupied. But
we were the first blacks in that building. When I first went out there it
was very strange. I had never been out to that part of the city before. I
had been out to Carson Beach, but I hadn't been beyond that. In fact I
didn’t know anything was beyond that. And I don't think there was un­
til they built the Point. We always knew it as that's where they did a lot
of dumping.

But I loved the apartment. I loved the location because my kitchen
window—let's see, a bedroom, and the kitchen, and the living room—
looked out on the ocean. Oh, and I could look right straight through to
Castle Island and beyond.

Alert to the subtle cues that might indicate how she and her chil­
dren, one of the few black families in the project, would be treated
by their white neighbors, Erline Shearer saw in a neighbor's greeting
a reassuring sign that Columbia Point would be a good place for her
family to live: "I met one neighbor in the hallway coming in. I guess
they knew that I was coming to look at an apartment. But she was

Linda and Debby Shearer
in their Easter outfits, on
their way to the Pilgrim
Congregational Church at
Uphams Corner. Courtesy
of Erline Shearer
very friendly. She said, ‘Good morning.’ And I took that as a good sign. The only thing that bothered me a little was I did feel some isolation because I didn’t see any transportation or anything. I didn’t see any buses or anything. But I figured I wasn’t going anywhere.”

Pat McCluskey and Erline Shearer would soon become friends, brought together by their shared commitment to building a strong community. In the years to come, they would walk the picket line together demanding that the city close the dump. They would watch their children grow from infants to far-ranging teenagers. As it turned out, all seven of the McCluskey children grew up to attend and graduate from Boston’s “exam schools”—two of the boys went to Boston Tech, two to Boston Latin, and the three girls to Boston Academy. Kevin, the third oldest, went on to attend Harvard University and serve as a member of the Boston School Committee. Four of the five Shearer children went on to college: one boy went to Brown and another to Boston University; one of the girls went to Brandeis and another to Northeastern. Over the years, Pat McCluskey and Erline Shearer would respect each other’s privacy as each dealt with her own difficult times. They would become friends for life.
Columbia Point was in Ward 13, which was my ward, Savin Hill. I was first elected as a state rep in 1956. The first time Columbia Point voted in such an election was 1954, but it voted then I think as part of another precinct. The first time it voted as a precinct itself was 1956. So I did a lot of campaigning out there, figuring it was virgin territory. We went in against incumbents. There were half a dozen of them . . . .

I used to go out there with an automobile with a big sound truck and as soon as the kids saw you, they went scrambling after you. Well, you didn't want the kids. You wanted to be able to talk to the parents. Somewhere along the line I realized that every one of these kids had two parents. If I could make friends with them, I may get two votes . . . . I think I won Columbia Point precinct by about seven or eight votes . . . . When you win by eighteen votes altogether, every vote counts. My first education was of the importance of all the votes. Eight of my plurality came from Columbia Point.

—Robert H. Quinn, former Massachusetts attorney general, Speaker of the House, and state representative from Savin Hill