A Decent Place To Live

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17 Seeing Is Believing

The minute I met Joe [Corcoran]—way back, before Columbia Point—he said to me, “The reason I want to do King’s Lynne is because I want to do Columbia Point.” Because he’s a Dorchester boy. He’s a Dorchester boy.
—Eleanor Wessell

Terry Mair, Esther Santos, and Ruby Jaundoo left the meeting with the developers curious enough to take them up on their invitation to visit King’s Lynne. There they could see for themselves what Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison had done to turn around a public housing disaster called America Park by taking it private and forming a partnership with the tenants.

Although America Park and Columbia Point were both public housing projects built in the early 1950s, in some ways they were very different. America Park was originally built as veterans’ housing and was owned by the state; Columbia Point was not restricted to veterans and was owned by the federal government. America Park, with 408 units, was only a third of the size of Columbia Point. While America Park’s two-story walkups were scattered over a sixty-acre hillside adjacent to a middle-income residential area, Columbia Point’s drab brick high-rises were densely packed on less than forty acres of land isolated on the edge of Dorchester Bay.

By the 1970s, however, the fates of the two projects had become cruelly similar. While Columbia Point had achieved national notoriety as one of the worst federally owned housing projects—in a class with St. Louis’s Pruitt-Igoe and Chicago’s Cabrini-Green—America Park had earned a local reputation as the worst state-owned project. The place was strewn with junked cars, old mattresses, and packs of stray dogs and, like Columbia Point, was rapidly emptying out. In 1970 only 125 units were still occupied; the rest were boarded up.

Like the task force at Columbia Point, a small group of determined tenants at
America Park had told the state that they didn’t want to put any more “modernization” money into the project. It would only be a Band-Aid on an open and infected wound. Instead, the America Park tenants received permission to use their modernization money to hire a nonprofit housing consulting group, Greater Boston Community Developers, to help them figure out how to rehabilitate their community.

The tenant group began working with a young planner named Langley Keyes. Keyes, who later went on to become the head of MIT’s Department of Planning and Urban Affairs, recalls the picture of life in public housing as the America Park tenants presented it to him:

The tenants felt that they never would be part of Lynn as long as they were part of America Park. If you lived at America Park, you couldn’t get a checking account. Your kids ended up in the back of the bus. It was mostly a white project; it wasn’t as though it was black. But it was housing of last resort for people from all over New England. There was a lot of other public housing, but this was the place that nobody wanted to live in.

The argument the tenant leaders made—and they made it very forcefully—was, “We’re always going to be outsiders in this town as long as we’re identified with America Park. So we need to do something more dramatic than just fixing up the units.”
The tenant group was led by the intrepid and outspoken Eleanor Atkins, a self-described “Lynner, born and bred,” who moved into the project with her four children in 1961. She later married Dan Wessell, another tenant at “the Park” and a father of five, and together they raised nine children there. By 1970 Dan and Eleanor Wessell were sick and tired of living in public housing and determined to work for change. Together they were a formidable pair. In Langley Keyes’s words, “Dan and Eleanor knew how to cut a deal; Eleanor knew how to throw a fit.” Eleanor Wessell was convinced, then as now, that low-income housing was doomed to failure:

I probably shouldn’t say this, but I don’t believe in public housing—not all low-income, anyway. And the reason that I don’t is because you have no dignity. There’s a stigma to it. Besides that, nobody wants to put any money in it. In America Park, if I didn’t repair my own apartment, I didn’t get it repaired. We used to get together and hire an outside contractor to come in and fumigate our units. Because we really felt the housing authority was feeding the roaches vitamin K. Largest roaches in the world.

You couldn’t get a job because you lived in America Park. You were charged more deposits by the telephone and the gas company because you lived in public housing. The school systems frowned on you. So that was not my idea of housing. At least with mixed-income, the school systems don’t know whether you’re a doctor’s child or an unwed mother’s.

The women on the Columbia Point Task Force had heard about America Park even before the meeting with CMJ. In fact, Esther Santos had met Eleanor Wessell when they sat together on a committee made up of residents representing several public housing projects in the Boston metropolitan area. All of the projects were facing the same problems—bad management, escalating crime, empty units being taken over by squatters and drug dealers. Columbia Point’s problems seemed worse only because the project was the largest.

Like the residents of Columbia Point, Eleanor Wessell had some choice words for the succession of people who had tried to “save” America Park during the War on Poverty:

Who needs these pompous, overeducated liberals who never had to worry where their next meal was coming from, telling us how programs will be run and who they will serve and why—like we can’t figure that out for our-

Left to right: State Representative Jim Smith, Eleanor Atkins, and Dan Wessell review plans to redevelop America Park into King’s Lynne. Courtesy of Eleanor Wessell.
selves. I don’t want any of those patronizing smart-asses around here anymore. They’re the ones who got us into this mess, and frankly it’s in their best interest if we stay in the mess. Then they can go out and tell the world how wonderful they are helping the poor while they take their paychecks and go live in the tony part of town.

The tenant group at America Park knew better than any outsiders what they wanted, and they worked with Langley Keyes to make it become a reality. The first hurdle was drafting state legislation that would allow state-owned public housing to be sold—the first such legislation in the country. Drafting the legislation was something of a balancing act. “We wanted to create an act,” Keyes explains, “which would make it possible to take a rundown public housing project that was judged to be substandard and deteriorated beyond repair, tear it down, and replace it with a private, mixed-income development.” At the same time, Eleanor Wessell emphasizes, they wanted to define the legislation narrowly enough so that it couldn’t be taken advantage of by cities that wanted to unload their public housing: “We knew that if there was a way cities could dump public housing, they would. So we had to make sure they had to go through a whole process before they could sell. A project had to be more than a third ‘unsuitable for living’—and the State Department of Public Health had to declare it—and the tenants had to be involved in planning what happened next.”

The legislation, which became known as Chapter 884, laid the foundation for the new community. Ownership of the property would be conveyed from the state to a private development corporation. That corporation would be a joint venture between the tenant task force and a private developer, with equal control over every aspect of the development. The new development would be mixed-income, with one-third low-income, one-third moderate-income, and one-third market-rate families. Finally, the state would provide funding to the task force for independent planning and social services.

The next hurdle was getting the legislation passed. Fortunately, it had the blessing of state representative Tom McGee, who would later become Speaker of the House—himself a “Lynner.” McGee shepherded it through the legislature. The final hurdle was financing. The Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency, or MHFA, created in 1971 with the purpose of making low-interest loans to private developers building mixed-income housing in the state, would make a tax-exempt 7.5 percent loan to the private developer. In addition, subsidies for low-income units were expected to be made
available through the federal government’s new Section 8 program, which provided subsidies that paid landlords the difference between low-income and market-rate rents.

It took only a very small group of tenants — six or seven — to form a core group to plan the redevelopment. As Langley Keyes explains, “The tenants’ organization at King’s Lynne was not only Eleanor and Dan but six or seven other very, very thoughtful, heads-up people. And basically everybody else, to be perfectly honest, just wasn’t there.” The tenant leader’s role, however, was often a difficult one. Keyes recalls going with Dan and Eleanor Wessell to meet with local neighborhood groups and put on a slide show explaining the new community. “The folks would say how awful people in the Park were,” Keyes recalls. “Eleanor would sort of bite her tongue and yell at me when the meeting was over.” Eleanor Wessell had to shuttle between meetings at the State House and tenants at the Park railing about the politicians. She would say to Keyes, “I’m up there promoting how bad the place I live is in order to get this legislation passed”—she was terrific. She would play a role. It wasn’t easy.

Once the legislation was passed and the financing arranged, the way was clear for requests for proposals. In 1973, when the state announced a competition for developers interested in redeveloping America Park, Joe Mullins and Gary Jennison went up to take a look. “The place was a nightmare,” Mullins recalls. “It seemed like the animal population was greater than the human population. One tenant, a member of the Hell’s Angels, had three pit bulldogs, an alligator, and two boa constrictors. He had had a lion, but the previous year he sliced the lion’s throat because it clawed one of his three children.” Mullins and Jennison reported to Corcoran not only that the project was severely deteriorated but also that the developer would be required to enter into a partnership with the tenants. As a company, CMJ was firmly committed to the mixed-income concept—as Joe Corcoran says, “It seemed to me that this was the right way to house poor people”—but they weren’t prepared for the “tenant as partner” concept. They were convinced that lack of strong management control was the main reason for every housing failure, public or private. If they were required to share that control, they felt, then they couldn’t guarantee the physical or financial future of a project. As far as the partners were concerned, they wanted no part of America Park.

While Mullins and Jennison were checking out America Park, the America Park tenants were doing some checking of their own. De-
etermined to find a developer who would turn their community around, the tenants visited several developments in the area—among them, Queen Anne’s Gate in Weymouth, Massachusetts, a mixed-income community built by CMJ in 1973 under the MHFA program. They liked what they saw—a beautiful, well-managed community—and what they heard, especially from low-income residents who were proud of their community. It wasn’t a “project,” they said, and they weren’t looked at as “project people.” “We saw good management,” Eleanor Wessell recalls. “We saw people who were interested in good housing. We talked to the low-income residents, who said they loved living there. In other developers we saw, ‘Oh, well, we’ll romance the tenants and we’ll get it and then it will be ours and they’ll be gone.’ We didn’t see that in Joe, Joe, and Gary.”

When Eleanor and Dan Wessell learned that CMJ had decided not to submit a bid, they called and asked them at least to give them a chance to talk. CMJ agreed to the meeting. “They asked us why we weren’t submitting a proposal,” Joe Corcoran recalls:

We told them there were two reasons. The first was that America Park was in deplorable shape and the second was that we didn’t believe that we could really partner with the tenants. We told them that we had a very strong private management company with strong principles, and that we really weren’t sure that we could be compatible.

But they went on to convince us that was exactly what they wanted. They wanted strong management, and they wanted to get rid of the bad apples on site, and they wanted a development they could be proud of, and they wanted to have people of other income levels living with them.

Eleanor and Dan Wessell’s persistence won the day. They persuaded CMJ to submit a proposal. Corcoran observes that the ten-

“Living room floor of apt. #28 at Whipple St., Lynn, America Park housing project, scene where two boys suffocated in a refrigerator,” 1974. Courtesy of the Boston Globe.
Langley Keyes explains that the tenants were convinced that the best developers of mixed-income communities are precisely those who are not specialists in subsidized housing: "It was clear that the people who built the best mixed-income communities—one-third low, one-third moderate, one-third market—were in fact conventional builders who found themselves having to do that because they were approaching it from conventional building, having to compete in the market side. And Eleanor and company said, 'We don't want somebody who's used to building subsidized developments, because they're not going to make it appeal to the market.'"

After agreeing to submit a proposal, CMJ visited America Park again—Joe Corcoran’s first visit. He found the site much more depressing than Columbia Point, an entire hillside piled with garbage, abandoned buildings, and dogs roaming in packs. Corcoran’s brother John also toured the site and later said to him, "Joe, these dogs, there are hundreds of them, and none of them wag their tails." Those unhappy dogs, CMJ decided, could be the first “test case” of the tenant-developer partnership. CMJ’s management company had a strict no-pets policy, and they asked the resident council if they would support that policy if they submitted a proposal. The resident council didn’t answer until a week later, after they had a
chance to meet with their residents. Yes, they would definitely support the no-pets policy.

Agreeing to the tenant-developer partnership in principle, however, was different from working out the specific terms of that partnership on paper. “We were sitting down to negotiate the partnership with our attorneys and their attorneys,” Eleanor Wessell recalls. “I don’t know whether you know about attorneys, but I have a son who’s an attorney. No attorney ever settled anything. So we decided to throw the attorneys out of the room. And that’s where we got the partnership. We decided that we would have a fifty-fifty partnership. And that’s what we did. And Joe’s attorneys were not happy with that. But he stuck with it and defended it.”

The terms of the partnership were simple: the tenants would have 50 percent ownership control, 10 percent of the syndication proceeds, and 10 percent of the cash flow, following the format that Langley Keyes had created. The tenants and developers would be fifty-fifty partners on all policy decisions—how many units, how big, kitchen appliances, and so on—with day-to-day operations carried out by CMJ’s professional management company. Both sides would have to sign off on all decisions before moving forward.

The city of Lynn resisted, first rezoning the property for industrial use in order to prevent the redevelopment of America Park from going forward, then opposing the fifty-fifty agreement. Eleanor Wessell explains that the developers stood by their new partners in the ensuing fight: “The city wanted us to have 49 percent and CMJ to have 51 percent. I went to the meeting and I said, ‘Look, this is crazy. I might as well have none as have 49 percent.’ And Joe, Joe, and Gary agreed with me. They said, ‘Well, the city is going to have to accept fifty-fifty or we’re not going to go ahead with it.’ I’d have fought them to a standstill, but I didn’t have to—which made it nice. We had to fight the city. But we didn’t have to fight each other.”

CMJ’s proposal was one of only three submitted. The general consensus among developers and policy makers was that a mixed-income development was risky enough without making the tenants equal partners. Although the two competing firms were more established, the America Park tenants on the selection committee favored CMJ. The company was ultimately selected, and ground was broken for King’s Lynne in 1974.

But that wasn’t the last of the hurdles at King’s Lynne. The 1973 Nixon moratorium on federal housing subsidies meant that there was no longer a mechanism for supporting low-income residents. Joe Corcoran knew the only recourse was state funding through
King's Lynne proved to be so successful, and in some areas the impact on the people, including the existing tenants and their kids, was measurable.

There was a junior high in Lynn where the kids from America Park went to school, and many of them had severe learning and behavioral problems. I remember some of the teachers telling me that the kids changed after moving into those new apartments. The teachers could actually see it in school. It was this fabulous new development with the pool and the tennis courts and the landscaping. That's what those teachers said. The change in behavior and attitude and performance in school was dramatic once they had this new opportunity.

—Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts and now a government professor at Northeastern University, 1998

leased housing programs administered by the Massachusetts Department of Community Affairs. He recalls:

The current year's allocation had been spent, and our only hope was to tap the following year's allocation. Obviously there was tremendous demand throughout the commonwealth, and the chances of obtaining what we needed were almost nonexistent. We met with Eleanor and Dan and decided to see Mike Dukakis, who was the new governor, and ask for the allocation we needed.

Dukakis had defeated the incumbent attorney general, Robert Quinn, in the primary and upset the incumbent governor, Frank Sargent, in the final election. I was concerned because I'd personally supported Bob Quinn. He was from Savin Hill, and my family and I had known him and supported him when he first ran for the state legislature. I worked for him delivering campaign flyers when I was in high school.

I'd never met Dukakis until that day. He listened intently, asked many pointed questions, and at the end of the meeting, obviously impressed with the persistence of the resident council, he indicated that if his housing budget for the new fiscal year was approved, that his administration would make America Park funding a priority.

This was an enormous commitment, and in my view, it was entirely due to the tenant partners, who presented the situation as only they could. Dukakis clearly responded to them. We were there as the developers, but it was the tenants who made the case.

Despite a two-year zoning battle with the city of Lynn, the partnership plowed ahead, withstanding growing pains from within and skeptics from without. Halfway through the design stage, for example, the tenants said they did not want Sasaki Associates, the international architectural firm selected by CMJ to do the site plan for King's Lynne, to design the new apartments for the new community. They preferred the local architect, Claude Miquelle, who had designed the buildings at Queen Anne's Gate. The partnership made a joint decision to switch architects.

Eleanor Wessell recalls a workshop she conducted with Joe Corcoran at a multifamily housing convention when they were first planning the partnership: "Joe was laughed at for even thinking that mixed-income housing and a tenant-developer partnership could happen. We went back to the same conference ten years later after it was all over and we were doing well. And Joe gave a speech at the conference and said, 'Ten years ago someone at this same conference told me to come back when I could sell refrigerators to Eskimos. Well, I'm back.'"

Another key component of CMJ's approach to redeveloping
America Park was providing social services to members of the community. CMJ and the social service providers involved the families in all aspects of designing the new community, from getting their input in designing floor plans, to choosing appliances for the kitchens, to planning playgrounds. Social service workers explained the development process step by step. The place had to work not just as a housing development but as a community. Joe Corcoran explains: “One, the tenants are immediately afraid that they’re going to get removed, and two, they’re afraid that they aren’t going to be able to make it in this new privatized development. Often they’re second-generation public housing folks, and the social service people come in and tell them that they are guaranteed a unit as long as they comply with the lease. If you pay your rent and don’t interfere with the rights of others and take care of your housing, you have nothing to fear.”

King’s Lynne was an eye-opener for CMJ. The developers had been totally skeptical about becoming partners with the tenants before doing the project. The experience made them true believers. From then on, the company made such partnerships an essential component of its public housing turnarounds.

When the Columbia Point Community Task Force visited King’s Lynne, they had clear concerns. “I remember that they were skeptical,” Eleanor Wessell recalls. They were concerned that there wouldn’t be a guarantee that the tenants would be able to move back after the community was redeveloped:

They were concerned that their elected board might not stay low-income people. That these smart market people would come in and move them out. I don’t understand why low-income people don’t think they’re smart. But they were concerned that smart people would come
in—lawyers and that—and take over their board and they'd lose control. You have to understand America Park was like 20 percent minority and the rest white. Columbia Point was almost 100 percent minority at that point. So they were saying, “You are different than we are. And you’re smaller than we are.” I think they were very skeptical. And rightly so.

What they found at King’s Lynne was a thriving mixed-income community with 441 units: a mixture of handsome, varied buildings on a wooded hillside; beautiful landscaping; several miniplaygrounds scattered about; tennis courts, two swimming pools, a fitness center, and a large community building with meeting and function rooms. Beyond the physical community, they found a proud, hard-working Resident Council whose members told them in no uncertain terms that they were indeed co-owners of the community, that they were indeed fifty-fifty partners with CMJ in all decisions affecting King’s Lynne. And that was the reason the place looked so good and worked so well.

The residents told the visitors from Columbia Point that they, too, had been skeptical at first—with good reason. They had lived through the same broken promises from the local housing authority. But they had taken matters into their own hands. They had persuaded CMJ to submit a proposal. They persevered for a fifty-fifty partnership because they wanted a permanent say in running the new development.

The Columbia Point visitors learned that the partnership was real. It wasn’t easy, but it was real. The tenants would have to be tireless. They’d have to educate themselves in every single aspect of planning the new community. They’d have to put in a lot of work preparing the tenants for life in the new community. And the work wouldn’t be over once the new community opened; it would be just beginning.

The task force returned from King’s Lynne impressed with what they had seen: an attractive, mixed-income community, and tenants who were truly partners with the developers. “They said, ‘We still think you’ll never be able to pull it off,’” Joe Corcoran recalls, “‘but we’re with you.’”

With the tenants on board, CMJ then approached the architectural firm of Goody, Clancy, & Associates to work with them and the Columbia Point residents to create a preliminary master plan. Architect Joan Goody shared Joe Corcoran’s vision of a mixed-income community—because, like him, she had grown up in one:
Joe Corcoran arrived in our office one day in 1978. We had just designed some subsidized housing for seniors in Winthrop and he liked the design. He had just turned America Park in Lynn into King’s Lynne. He had known Columbia Point as a boy living in Dorchester, and a long-term goal of his was to do the same thing here. He was working with a small group of tenants, and he had to sell the idea first to the Boston Housing Authority and then to get federal funds. So he asked us to develop a new approach to Columbia Point.

At that time the secretary of HUD was Patricia Harris, and the federal policy was very much against demolishing any public housing. It was after Pruitt-Igoe had been demolished, so one of the constraints was to minimize the amount of demolition—exactly 180 degrees from where the federal policy is now. And I think because I had grown up in Brooklyn, New York—in an area not dissimilar to some of the parts of Dorchester with one- or two-family houses, front porches, all the kids playing in the street—Joe and I both had similar images of what a neighborhood was.

I’d grown up in a completely mixed-income neighborhood. In fact, before World War II almost everything was mixed-income. There were rich folks living in my block—the doctors lived in the brick houses at the corner—then everything from laborers to professionals to business people lived in between. So mixed-income seemed like the most normal thing to me. It was just part of my innate thinking.

The group of tenants we worked with included a woman named Terry Mair. I frequently quoted one of the things I remember her saying about the importance of making this a mixed-income community from the perspective of the low-income tenants. She said, “If it takes rich folks to get the services we need out here, bring out the rich folks.” Having a mixed-income community wasn’t a matter of the low-income people needing role models. It was simply that a community that was entirely poor and isolated was never going to get the attention and the services that a mixed-income community could.

Armed with the tenants’ support, a legal and financial framework, and architects’ plans that reduced the project’s density and demolished some of its original buildings, CMJ then embarked on a serpentine journey through the political process, trying to muster support for its redevelopment plan. CMJ intended to use the same legal model for Columbia Point that they had used at King’s Lynne: the government—in this case, the federal government—would sell the public housing project to a partnership of the tenants and the private developer.

The first stop was the BHA, which flatly rejected the plan. “They thought it was impossible,” Corcoran explains. Undaunted, CMJ took the plan directly to the local office of the Department of Hous-
ing and Urban Development. HUD’s regional director, Edward Martin, was interested but said the plan needed the political blessing of his superiors in the Carter administration. There HUD secretary Patricia Harris objected that the redevelopment plan would reduce the total number of low-income units at Columbia Point. Martin recalls that these objections were overcome only when she visited the site in person in October 1978 and saw for herself that the project, situated on “the most wonderful piece of real estate in New England,” was too dense. “The site visit turned her around,” Martin says.

Even so, Steven Coyle, an assistant to Harris who would later become director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, believed that in order to succeed, the plan ultimately needed the blessing of local political powers in Boston. So Joe Corcoran went back to Boston and made an appointment to see Mayor Kevin White. White’s secretary told him the mayor would not have time to see the King’s Lynne video and that he would see him alone. Corcoran recalls:

We met in the afternoon in his office at City Hall overlooking Quincy Market. It was a beautiful June day, and he suggested we go out for an ice cream cone. As we crossed Congress Street, I told him how we had turned America Park into King’s Lynne and how we could do the same at Columbia Point.

As we returned to his office, I made my move for his support. I painted a picture of how politically advantageous it would be to be the first big-city mayor to turn around a deteriorating public housing project. At that point, he looked at me sternly and said with a sarcastic tone, “Corcoran, I don’t need political advice from you—you stick to real estate, and I’ll handle my political well-being.” He made it clear that he was not in a position to be out front as a supporter, but I did feel that he was receptive to the idea, and that was important.

CMJ’s plan to privatize public housing and create a mixed-income community failed to win the broad support of the controlling Democrats, who were reluctant to antagonize public and assisted housing advocates at either the local or national level. CMJ was forced to put the Columbia Point project on hold. However, the seeds had been planted in Washington and in Boston, where the highly visible public housing project stood as an embarrassing metaphor for government’s failings in both spheres. In the meantime, changes were brewing in the city and across the country that would forever change the fate of Columbia Point.

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Kevin White Remembers

As for taking Corcoran for an ice cream, I did the same thing with Jim Rouse [the developer who rehabilitated Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market]. I don’t know if it was nerves or to keep them off balance. I always liked Joe Corcoran. He didn’t have the same national reputation as Rouse, but he had the same disposition. He wanted to produce a pretty good product—and I don’t mean “pretty good” in a limiting sense, but caring about the project beyond the bottom line. And Faneuil Hall and Columbia Point became signature projects for both those developers.

—Kevin White, former mayor of Boston and now a professor and chairman of the Institute of Political Communications at Boston University, 1998

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King’s Lynne, 1998: A Mixed-Income Community Comes of Age

When the Columbia Point task force visited King’s Lynne in 1978, the community was only two years old. Today, King’s Lynne affords an interesting picture of what a mixed-income community looks like after twenty years.

King’s Lynne is 100 percent occupied, with a true mixture of incomes—one-third low-income, one-third moderate-income, and one-third market-rate families. Each of those income levels is mixed racially—black, Hispanic, Asian, and white. All of the buildings, in all of the areas of the community, have a mix of all three income levels.

King’s Lynne is one of the nicest places to live in the city of Lynn; the people who live there are proud of their community. It is not a “project”; the people who live there are not “project people.” Nor is it a luxury community, with token low-income families scattered here and there, clearly identified and recognizable but tolerated by those paying market rents. As Eleanor Wessell explains, King’s Lynne is a mixed-income community, one in which the preconceptions of both outsiders and residents are more than likely to be wrong:

The only way they would possibly know [who is low-income] is if a neighbor told them. There are no differences between any of the units. People might say, “Oh, look, that guy’s got a Cadillac. He’s got to be a market.” Nine chances out of ten he’s a low. In some instances, people assume that if you’re black, you’re low. And that in fact is not anywhere the truth. Because we have black doctors and we have black lawyers and black school principals.

And then there’s those people who are moderate who don’t understand the concept of mixed-income and they think they’re paying top dollar. They complain, “I saw so-and-so next door to me who keeps their window open during the winter and they’re wasting the heat and I’m paying big money and they’re black so of course they’re low.” I spend a lot of time enjoying saying, “I’m sorry, but they’re market and you’re being subsidized.”

We are very good about that. We had a woman move in some years ago, and the minute she found out there were blacks and welfare people here, she was unhappy. We just broke her lease. Gave her her security deposit back and said see you later. Because if you are not willing to live in a community that is a community, then we don’t want you. If you’re not happy, we don’t want you.

A lot of our elderly people prefer the townhouses. A big family is not necessarily a low-income family. I have a black family, a mother with seven children. She’s a market tenant. Now if you drove by and saw the kids out playing you would ordinarily say, “Ah, a low-income family.” That’s not true. And I would have said it too before King’s Lynne. But that’s what happens. Some people have large families no matter how much or how little money they have.

We do nothing here that doesn’t serve all three income groups. We brought in a family planning clinic. Our understanding was it would have a sliding fee scale. Well, it didn’t, so we asked them to leave. Because with a sliding fee scale then anybody could go. It’s very important. For one thing, the lows won’t come if it only serves the lows, because that earmarks them low. Nothing comes into this community unless it can serve all three groups.

Eleanor Wessell debunks the patronizing notion that mixing incomes is a good idea because market-rate families are a “good influence” on low-income families. She should know: she has approved the eviction of as many market-rate as low-income residents. She also sets the record straight on the importance of support services for low-income residents. Yes, it was important to teach them how to open a checking account. Yes, it was important to teach them how to use a garbage disposal. Wessell herself had never had one. According to her, the key is to let the tenants design their own programs, based on what they need and why:
If I had to say who we have evicted over the years, it’s been about equal across the board. That was not true when I first started. I thought sure it would be—but we spent a lot of time with our tenants. We did banking with our tenants so they would understand how you get a checking account. We made deals with banks so they got free checking accounts. We had the teachers come in to show them how to sew and make curtains and all of that stuff.

We did a lot of work. I had Joe put in a whole kitchen for me down in my office so that we could show them how to use the dishwasher, how to use the garbage disposal. These were things we didn’t have. How to care for a rug. So there was a lot of work spent in teaching the America Park tenants so that when they went into their new apartments they knew what they were getting. I didn’t know about that, either. I’d never had those things.

Twenty years later, Eleanor Wessell is still at the helm in her capacity as “resident representative” at King’s Lynne. She is tireless in seeing to it that her community runs well, watching over residents in all three income groups—what she calls “my markets,” “my mods,” and “my lows.” And she still calls it as she sees it:

I’ve heard people say, “Oh, you know, those market people have brought up the standard of the low-income people.” That is not true. That is no way true. I have as much problems with my markets and my mods as I ever did with the lows. Don’t get me wrong; I have problems. But the low-income people are—in most cases, not all—so happy to live here that they’re not going to step on anybody’s toes. The markets who are paying big money could care less because they’re paying their money. And the mods are generally a mixture of the two.

Eleanor Wessell is still active on behalf of residents at King’s Lynne. Courtesy of Eleanor Wessell.