A Decent Place To Live

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Part 4

Harbor Point, 1988–2000
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23 The Blitz

In September 1984 Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison took over management of Columbia Point, acting as agent for the Boston Housing Authority with full power to enforce the lease. CMJ welcomed the opportunity to manage the project during the two-year interim before construction began on Harbor Point. As the company had done at King’s Lynne, taking over interim management enabled it to clean up the worst problems at Columbia Point and to begin laying the groundwork for the new community—an effort CMJ called “The Blitz.”

At the time CMJ took over responsibility for managing Columbia Point, the community had almost completely disintegrated. Eleven hundred apartments were vacant; only 356 families remained. Squatters had moved into many of the vacant units, even though heat and electricity were turned off. Stairwells were dark, strewn with garbage, broken glass, and discarded hypodermic needles. Drug dealers operated with impunity, knowing that the Boston police would not come into the project. Stray dogs roamed the project in packs.

Dave Connelly, the director of Housing Opportunities Unlimited (HOU), the social service provider at Harbor Point, explains the attitude of the police toward the project. The police “were decent people, but in their minds they had written the place off,” he says. “They just wanted to contain it. It was like the mentality that created the Combat Zone [Boston’s red-light district]. There are certain activities that were allowed to go on in the Combat Zone—like certain activities that were allowed to go on at the Point—that you wouldn’t allow elsewhere.” The Boston Housing Authority, too, had written off Columbia Point. “If it was Old Colony, one of the projects where firemen’s mothers lived,” Connelly says, “they would never allow that to go on.”

Even while external order had broken down at Columbia Point, some residents were still managing to raise their families within their apartments. Ruby Jaundoo, a community leader and longtime resident, emphasizes that, even in its worst days, Columbia Point was a caring community: “People think because Columbia

Right: Groundbreaking for the new health center at Harbor Point, 1987: Mayor Ray Flynn (second from left), Ruby Jaundoo, Roger Taylor, Joyce Crump, Esther Santos, Betty Quarles, Representative Jimmy Brett, Joe Corcoran, and Representative Paul White. Courtesy of Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison.
Point was Columbia Point—and you can define that any way you want—that people didn’t necessarily care about where they lived. That wasn’t true. People did care about where they lived. People cared about each other. It was a community of people that was always there to support one another.” By 1985, however, the remaining residents were virtual prisoners in their own homes, keeping their children in day and night; terrified of having a fire in the apart-
“Mattie Hall, a resident of Columbia Point since 1971, has a bird’s-eye view of the demolition work taking place opposite her apartment,” 1986. Courtesy of the Boston Globe.

“Mattie Hall, a resident of Columbia Point since 1971, has a bird’s-eye view of the demolition work taking place opposite her apartment,” 1986. Courtesy of the Boston Globe.

ment or a child who was sick, because help would not come into the project. In the end, as former task force president Roger Taylor sums it up, “It was just a matter of, you exist on your own or you don’t exist at all.”

“The Blitz” was CMJ’s effort to rehabilitate and maintain the existing buildings at Columbia Point—a physical demonstration of what effective, caring management could provide. The Blitz was meant to show tenants that their rent payment would provide real services—graffiti would be removed; plumbing and heat would be supplied—a level of management attention Columbia Point hadn’t seen since its earliest days. Management began by consolidating the 356 remaining families scattered throughout the project into the
buildings at the northern end of the site. The only other building that was left occupied was the elderly building at the opposite end of the site. Marty Jones, vice president of CMJ at the time, was responsible for overseeing new construction and the relocation of the Columbia Point residents. She explains the special pains that were taken to accommodate the needs of the elderly:

They did not want to move twice. [The original building that housed most of the elderly] was sort of their little enclave, so we agreed to let them stay there. Talk about living in the middle of a war zone. The first building we created was the new elderly building. It was the right place for it to be in the long run, but it was the wrong place to be from a construction phasing point of view because it was right in the middle of the site. So the elderly lived through years and years of construction all around them, both in the old building and then in the new building. It was a little island.

Once the Columbia Point families were consolidated, the interim management team, headed by Paul Whitley, began a massive clean-up effort, hiring forty Columbia Point residents to help. Dan Murray, vice president of CMJ’s management company at the time, recalls the conditions at that juncture. “They would knock out the lights in the hallways in the old Columbia Point buildings,” he says. “You would be scared because there were these alcoves, and you wouldn’t know who the hell was in there. In the old days, some of the residents would knock out walls. If they had a four-bedroom apartment and they knew that there was nobody living next door, they would knock out the walls and make it a seven-bedroom.” Ironically, Murray says, the prevalence of guns at the project was a deterrent to break-ins. “That’s because the [apartments] had steel doors and you figured they might have guns on the other side,” Murray says. “You wouldn’t go breaking in or you might get shot right there.”

One of the first orders of business was to inspect and secure every vacant unit in the project. Wendell Yee, CMJ’s regional property manager, oversaw the effort. Yee had worked on turning around two other CMJ developments, King’s Lynne and Quaker Meadows, both in Lynn. Starting in the winter of 1985, Yee headed a team that inspected every single vacant unit at Columbia Point. The metal doors on the vacant units had been “tack welded” shut by the Boston Housing Authority. Using flashlights because the electricity had been turned off, Yee’s team broke the weld on each unit. Yee vividly recalls their grim search. Even though they didn’t find people in the units, they found plenty of evidence that people were liv-
ing there and, according to Yee, “would probably be back that evening”: “Some of those units had been broken into and were being used by squatters. You could see the drug paraphernalia and mattresses and candles on the floor. We came across some units that had animal skeletal remains; they had just boarded [the animals] up in there. It was a pretty sad situation.”

Shortly after the inspection job was completed, Sarah Pryor, a young white girl from the affluent suburb of Wayland, disappeared and a nationwide search ensued. The Boston police received an anonymous tip that Pryor’s remains could be found in one of the vacant units at Columbia Point. Based on the tip, Yee’s team reopened and re-searched every one of the units that they had just welded shut. A week-long search by a team of forty investigators came up empty. More than a decade later, in 1997, Sarah Pryor’s remains were discovered in a wooded area not far from her home. It is telling, however, that the public was all too ready to believe that Columbia Point was the scene of the crime, and that a comprehensive search was undertaken on the basis of a single anonymous phone call. “To so many folks it made perfect sense,” Miles Byrne, now manager of Harbor Point, observes ruefully. “And quite frankly, even those of us who worked there at the time were thinking, please don’t find her here.”

Building a new community at the Point wasn’t just a physical challenge: transforming the barren, prisonlike wasteland into a beautiful new waterfront community. It was also a social challenge: restoring order to a place where the basic rules of civilized community had been ignored and unenforced for years. When CMJ took over management of Columbia Point, the first step was for the partnership between the development team and the task force to hold a series of community meetings to develop a management plan, and then to have it approved by the BHA. CMJ and the task force were not inventing a new set of rules. They were simply enforcing the housing authority’s existing rules—making sure the community was aware of those rules and aware they would be enforced in a thorough and consistent manner. Wendell Yee recalls the earliest days of laying the foundation for the new community: “It was not an easy task to go in and say, ‘The rules are changing.’ It was transitioning people from no rules to a set of standards that they had to live by in order to be able to move into the new community. Some of the families realized that they were not going to be able to live within those parameters and they moved out voluntarily. . . . As the agent for the housing authority, we went in there and we enforced the rules and the lease—something the housing authority never did.”
Once the vacant units were searched and sealed, CMJ management turned to the most difficult and urgent problem at the project: drugs. For years, drug dealing took place in the open, on any street corner of Columbia Point. Turning around the drug situation would require the absolute commitment of the residents and management. The remaining residents had had enough; the tenant task force voted overwhelmingly for a policy of zero tolerance of drugs. CMJ, too, was willing to do whatever it took to get rid of the drug dealers.

It was clear to CMJ that the Boston police force had neither the determination nor the resources to root out the drug dealers at Columbia Point. Prior to CMJ's taking over, the BHA had employed a security force that was considered a joke by the residents. Because the problems were too severe to continue with a traditional security company, the tenant-developer partnership decided to establish its own security force, called Old Harbor Protective Services. They brought in Edward Connolly, the seventy-one-year-old former deputy superintendent of the Boston police, to run it. Connolly was a policeman of the old school, a street cop, who insisted that his security officers have police powers and be allowed to carry guns. At the same time, he promised that his officers would be trained never to draw or use their weapons unless their own lives were threatened.

Although the task force was determined to put an end to drug dealing and crime in their community, at the same time they were wary of bringing into the project an armed security force led by a hard-driving ex-cop. Ruby Jaundoo interrogated Connolly and expressed her concerns about overzealous guards turning Harbor Point into a police state. Connolly reassured her that, although he had been shot three times himself, he had never shot anyone in his fifty-year tour of duty. However, he didn't want his officers to be at a disadvantage in the existing situation at the project.

The Boston Police Department, aware of the monumental challenge of restoring law and order at Columbia Point and stymied in its own efforts to do so, readily agreed to "deputize" the private security force with the powers of arrest and the right to carry arms. Eddie Connolly had excellent rapport with the Boston Police Department and was able to summon them to Harbor Point on a moment's notice. After years of turning their backs on Columbia Point, the Boston police were finally rebuilding their connection to the Point.

CMJ management also spent a lot of time building connections with the Boston Police Department, especially focusing on the drug problem at the Point. Abandoned cars needed to be towed out. Fights with knives and guns had to be stopped. Dan Murray recalls
that on the very first weekend the new security force was on duty, a young man at Columbia Point started a fight with one of the guards. A crowd quickly developed, and the man’s girlfriend pulled a knife on the security guard. “He proceeded to tell her as she went towards him with the knife,” Murray says, “that he would kill her if she took another step. At which time she dropped the knife.” The Boston police arrived and dispersed the crowd, arrested the man, and initiated eviction proceedings against the girlfriend. “It was a test,” Murray says. “It was the first weekend. We had to win.”

With the task force 100 percent in support, management’s strict enforcement of the policy against drugs, and the ability of private security to use force to break up drug dealing, positive inroads were being made. According to Murray, one of the major players in the drug activity at Columbia Point was Toby Johnson, known on the street as “Blood”—the ringleader of the “Detroit” gang and one of the major drug dealers on the East Coast, who eventually was killed in a gunfight in Roxbury. Blood reportedly headed a $7-million-a-year operation that extended all the way from Massachusetts to the Carolinas. Although he didn’t live at Columbia Point, the project was his territory. He and his lieutenants conducted a major drug operation out of the Point, receiving pure heroin, cutting it with quinine, recruiting kids under sixteen to carry the drugs and the money, and using taxicabs to deliver the merchandise.

When CMJ management made it clear that they wanted to put an end to drug activity at the Point, they were helped by tips from the community—where the drug activity was going on, when the big buys were going down. Some tips came from people who wanted to put an end to drugs at the project; others came from people involved in the drug activity who wanted to settle a score. The Drug Enforcement Administration would ask CMJ management to shut off the water to the buildings before raids, so that drugs could not be flushed down toilets. After several major busts, Dan Murray recalls, “people were doing things less openly.” Guns, violence, and open drug deals began to dissipate.

Betty Quarles, a longtime member of the task force, recalls how
teenagers at Columbia Point would be drawn into the drug scene in the early 1980s, hired to “hold” drugs—keep them in their apartments—for as much as five hundred dollars a day: “I could see some of the kids, especially if their parents were on welfare and they don’t have much money. Their friend next door, his mother might have a job, and he might have the name-brand sneakers. But this kid doesn’t have the name-brand sneakers, so he gets into holding drugs so that he could get some money. Sometimes the parents wouldn’t even ask them, ‘Where did you get this from?’” Quarles remembers what she told her own kids: “I said, there’s only three things going to happen to you if you’re out selling drugs. Either you’re going to get shot, you’re going to jail, or you’re going to die.” She didn’t stop at warning her own kids; she found out who was in charge of the gang from Detroit and walked right up to him. “You don’t know me. I’m Betty Quarles,” she said:

“That’s my kid. Leave him alone. . . . If I find out that he’s selling drugs, he’s going to be locked up, and you’re going to be locked up with him. You want to do anything to me, do it now. Don’t wait until I turn my back.”

And then he said to me, “You know what? You’re the only parent that I know of out here that came and approached me about saying they think their kid is selling drugs.” I said, “I don’t want my children involved in it. That’s not the life for them.” And I just walked away from him. My son was standing right there.

When Quarles looks back on what she did, she says she wouldn’t do it today. Why not? “Because kids now would kill you quicker than they would then.”

In fact, most of the individuals whose names come up in the stories of drug dealing at Columbia Point are dead; the luckier ones are in jail. Dan Murray describes one boy, about fifteen years old, who carried drugs and money for Blood—and was later killed with him. “He was caught in a building with fifteen hundred dollars in his shoe,” Murray says, “which he said he got from a paper route.” It was a fate suffered by many of the young men at Columbia Point. “He
was fifteen but he was bad,” Murray says. “He was a bad kid that you knew was never going to make it. After a while, Dave [Connelly, director of HOU, which provided social services at Harbor Point] realized there are some kids you’re never going to save. Those are the hard core—and they don’t have to be thirty; they can be fifteen. They have gone the fast-money route. As I said, he had fifteen hundred dollars cash in his shoe. And he ended up dead.”

Once the word got out that drugs were not going to be tolerated, once enough busts had taken place, once the major dealers found that it was too difficult to operate out of the former housing project—a process that took several years—the flagrant, open drug activity at the Point had been cleaned up.

While the security force was cracking down on drugs and violence at Columbia Point, Housing Opportunities Unlimited was working with the Columbia Point residents. HOU offered residents many kinds of support. They referred people with drug habits to rehab programs and worked with management to hold their units and get care for their children while they were in treatment; found jobs; helped neighbors settle disputes in constructive ways; and developed programs for kids with special needs. If residents played their stereos at full blast at 2 A.M., they would receive a letter from management. At first, residents were shocked; for years, no one had enforced rules of any kind. Soon, however, the community began to understand that things were going to change.

Getting rid of the drug dealing didn’t end the drug problem. Many tenants struggled with drug addiction. “We suggested forming a residents-at-risk committee,” Wendell Yee explains. “A panel of four or five residents would meet with a resident at risk and say, ‘Look, you’ve got to clean up your act. We’re here to support you. But if you don’t clean up your act you’re going to go.’ And I think hearing it from your own peers has a much greater impact than hearing it from management, who would automatically say, ‘Clean up your act or we’re going to evict you.’ A lot of them entered treatment programs. Some were successful, some weren’t.”

Dave Connelly began by looking for the natural leadership in the community. “The sort of heart of Columbia Point at that time was the Hassett day care center,” he says, “so I used to go there in the mornings first thing and have my coffee.” Residents coming into the day care center would be surprised to see a white man, Connelly recalls, and would assume he must be either “a cop or an insurance man.” But in his view, finding community leaders was
critical. No matter how much help was coming in from the outside, no matter how much money was being invested by the developers, Connelly explains, “the only permanent change that will ever happen is if the people living there change their own community.”

Even though Columbia Point had deteriorated on the outside, Connelly discovered that many people in the project were still managing to do an excellent job of raising their families:

There was a real core of Columbia Point residents who were committed to their families, committed to raising them right, committed to schooling as an ideal. What we had to do was spread that core out. And get that core to begin to set the goals for the other people here. What happens in a project like this is that good families control their own household. In other words, when they come in the door, they close the door and that’s their household. When they go out into the hallway, that isn’t theirs; it belongs to the project. We were hoping to get the family that was doing a good job of controlling their own household to begin to think about controlling the whole Columbia Point environment.

One of the key issues that had to be addressed as part of restoring and enforcing the rules was the payment of rent. For years, many Columbia Point families had not been paying rent. In a number of cases, the apartments were in such bad condition that tenants were not legally required to pay the rent. According to Wendell Yee, the fact that some families owed as much as eight thousand to ten thousand dollars in back rent was a clear indication that the housing authority was not enforcing rent collection. As they had at King’s Lynne, where rent arrearages had also been a problem, management began by working with the families to understand and address the problem. “HOU became very successful working with families,” Wendell Yee explains: “They started workshops on budgeting—establishing what your priorities are. If you don’t have a roof over your head, what else is there? The roof over your head, the food in your belly and your children’s, have to be a priority in life.”

At first, the BHA expected CMJ to enforce its policy requiring eviction of all residents with arrearages that they couldn’t pay off within twelve months. “When we started going through the rent list and found out that a lot of the people here had an arrearage,” Ruby Jaundoo recalls, the BHA wanted CMJ “to start sending these people fourteen-day notices to quit [initiating the eviction process].” Jaundoo was well aware that when the BHA stopped enforcing the collection of rents, many tenants stopped paying. But she did not believe that eviction was the solution: “The task force put their foot
down and said, ‘No, you’re part of that process of people being back on their rents, because you haven’t enforced the collection of rents.’ We let people know they’re supposed to pay their rent. But if no one is enforcing the rules, we get lax on some of the things that we do.” Jaundoo argued at first that all arrearages should be written off. Besides feeling it would be unfair to punish people for ignoring a rule no one was enforcing, she also questioned why tenants should be required to pay rent for substandard housing. But as she began to realize that the fairness issue cut both ways, she had to, as she put it, “rethink” her position: “What about the others? There were 30-some odd people out of 350 who weren’t paying their rent. What about the other 320 who had been paying their rent on time and living under the same conditions? I paid up mine every month; why should you get away with owing two thousand dollars? So we had to make a compromise.”

The compromise reached by the tenant-developer partnership was for each of the families in arrears to work out a repayment plan. First of all, HOU “recertified” each resident, making sure that the rent they were currently paying was appropriate based on their income. Residents would then agree to stay current with their rent while gradually paying off their arrearage each month, depending upon what their budget would allow. Eventually, management collected 95 percent of the arrearages. The repayment program came with both a carrot and a stick: residents who failed to keep up with their payment schedules were in danger of losing their rehousing guarantee. On the other hand, those who were up to date with their rent received a five-hundred-dollar credit.

“The Blitz” was a success. Restoring and enforcing the rules at Columbia Point was sometimes a matter of pure force—as in Eddie Connolly’s armed security force’s rooting out the drug dealers—and sometimes a matter of careful compromise—as in HOU’s face-to-face settling of arrearages. In a matter of just two years, however, terror and violence had been largely eliminated at the Point, and a strong foundation was laid for the new community.