A Decent Place To Live

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For years, Columbia Point had been a dumping ground for stray dogs and cats. People would simply drive out to the project, open the door and let out the dog or cat, and drive away, leaving the problem for Columbia Point to deal with. In addition, many tenants kept dangerous dogs—German shepherds and Dobermans—for “protection.” By the time CMJ took over management of the project, not only were the packs of dogs a problem outside, but they would also roam up and down the stairwells, easily entering buildings whose doors were broken and hanging off.

Many animals were abused and neglected; the stray dogs had become a menace to the community. “I was afraid to come out of my unit to go to work in the morning,” Ruby Jaundoo recalls. “There was a big parking lot in back of where I lived and the parking lot would be full of stray dogs. And I was petrified. I would have to wait until someone came along to move the dogs along. That was how terrible it was. I think everyone on the task force had experienced something similar, with animals just roaming the site.”

In all of its developments, CMJ always had a strict no-pets policy. Wendell Yee, site manager at King’s Lynne, recalls the magnitude of the pet problem CMJ inherited there: “When we took over King’s Lynne there were about 126 units occupied, and there were probably three hundred dogs running around the site. So we put a no-pets policy into effect . . . We called the animal control office to pick up some of the stray dogs, and they refused to do it. They were just swamped; they didn’t have the capacity to take any more animals.”

As with the crackdown on drugs, the first step at Columbia Point was getting the community to agree to the no-pets rule; the task force endorsed it unanimously. Although Congress had passed a law in 1983 permitting elderly and disabled public housing residents to keep pets, Harbor Point was not bound by this law because it was private housing. In fact, the housing authority had a no-pets rule, and the lease explicitly forbade pets; but the rule had never been enforced.
The tenant-developer partnership set a date by which each family was required to find a new home for its pets. If the residents didn’t make arrangements by the deadline, HOU would take remaining pets to the Animal Rescue League.

It was difficult for families who had become attached to their pets to give them up, but most recognized that keeping pets, especially with so many people in such a relatively small area, wasn’t a good idea for the animals or for the new community, especially if things were to improve. The residents recognized, however reluctantly, that pets had to go.

The no-pets rule would trigger a major media event that would force Harbor Point—and the tenant task force—into the public spotlight. Before the storm was over, the task force would stand up to the developer, insisting on taking a much harder line on pets than CMJ. They would stand up to the media and feel the full heat of public indignation. They would stand up to the mayor and refuse to buckle under political pressure. The case of an Afghan hound named Goodboy and his ninety-one-year-old owner would be a watershed event for the task force, in which they stood together as owners and protectors of their new community.

Throughout the development of Harbor Point, the position of the task force was never an easy one. On the one hand, in their dealings with the developers, they constantly advocated for the low-income residents of the community. On the other hand, they had to answer to the accusations of many Columbia Point residents and dispel the rumors that seemed to be in constant circulation. “It wasn’t an easy sell,” Ruby Jaundoo recalls. She had heard it all: “You’re selling the community out.” “Maybe you’ll be left here, but we’ll be gone.” “You’re in the developer’s pocket.” “You’re getting some sort of kickback.” “You’re going to be protected, but what about me?” Jaundoo even recalls one resident, who later became a member of the task force, claiming that the developers were going to build a brick wall and put the poor people on one side and the rich people on the other.

In addition, the task force had to contend with various “tenant advocate” groups—in particular, the Massachusetts Tenants Organization (MTO) and the nuns of Project Care and Concern—feeding the rumor mill inside the Point and enlisting outside media support with their constant warnings that the developers wanted to “kick out the poor people.”

The task force was used to taking heat from the residents and
standing up to the developers. Now a frail ninety-one-year-old woman was about to put them in a very hot public spotlight. Alice Stacy had been living at Columbia Point for twenty-five years. When CMJ took over interim management, Stacy was one of only three white households left in the project. She was living on the fifth floor of the building for the elderly with her Afghan hound, Goodboy, and her black-and-white cat, Mischief. For years, Stacy had been unable to take Goodboy out of the building. Instead, he had been urinating and defecating in Stacy's apartment and the hallway.

The task force announced the new policy to the community: all pets had to go. CMJ offered to relocate any tenants who wanted to keep their pets, even promising that those tenants could come back if they didn't have pets sometime in the future.

The newly rehabilitated elderly building, 40 Westwind Court, with a large furnished lobby, a landscaped courtyard, and a convenience store and restaurant, was one of the first buildings to be completed at Harbor Point. The elderly residents had selected their own apartments and were excited about moving into the completely renovated building. When Alice Stacy missed the no-pets deadline, insisting on moving Goodboy and Mischief in with her, the other elderly residents exploded. The idea of bringing the Goodboy problem into the brand-new building had them up in arms.

CMJ had anticipated that the Goodboy issue had all the ingredients of a public relations disaster. In fact, the Massachusetts Tenants

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“Goodboy”

Alice Stacy, in her apartment, talks with one of the dogs of Columbia Point,” 1984. Courtesy of the Boston Globe.

“The Dog Was a Prophet”

Alice Stacy. All this 91-year-old wisp of a woman asked for was the right to share her life with the closest friend she had on the planet—a stray Afghan hound she called Goodboy. Back on a 98-degree day in June when a developer named Joe Corcoran tossed Alice out of her home for the past 25 years in Columbia Point, the dog finally stopped trembling . . . and died.

To this day, Alice believes the dog was a prophet. He trembled enough for both of them, because Alice never did. After one night in exile from the Point, Alice was then welcomed back by Joe Corcoran's hypocrites as if she were Cleopatra. She was granted a brand-new apartment—provided she stays there alone.

—Peter Gelzinis, “Recalling the Year's Heroes,” Boston Herald, December 22, 1988
Organization had already alerted the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to the no-pets policy being implemented at Harbor Point. In an attempt to head off a showdown, CMJ suggested a compromise: a grandfather clause in the lease that would allow only the elderly residents to keep any existing pets, but would not allow any new pets. The task force refused to compromise, however. Many of them were mothers of young children who themselves had recently gone through the ordeal of having to give up the beloved family pet.

CMJ suggested moving Stacy into the one ground-floor unit in the elderly building—intended for the building maintenance man—and fencing in an area outside for Goodboy. Again, the task force would have none of it. They took a much tougher position on the pet issue than CMJ was willing to settle for.

Then the media got wind of the story. An editorial in the Boston Globe on February 27, 1988, headlined “A Peevish Pet Policy,” began by congratulating CMJ for converting Columbia Point to “a handsome waterfront community.” However, it proceeded to charge that CMJ’s no-pets policy “threatens to shroud the opening [of Harbor Point] in controversy and, worse, an air of mean-spiritedness.” Charging that the developers “refuse to explain the reasons for the no-pets decision,” the editorial quoted Alice Stacy saying of her beloved pets, “They’re all I’ve got.”

“She is right,” the editorial declared, “as anyone who has ever worked with or cared about an elderly person knows. Pets provide a needed companionship and relieve loneliness.” Portraying CMJ as cold and calculating, taking away all a poor, ninety-one-year-old woman had left in life, the editorial called upon CMJ to “do the right thing for its elderly tenants.”

Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Tenants Organization and the MSPCA were calling for CMJ to change its policy on pets and evic-
tions. Both organizations were adept at garnering media attention: the MTO dramatized its position with candlelight marches by tenants.

Picking up the scent, the media took off on the chase. Photos of Stacy and Goodboy made the front page of the tabloid Boston Herald. Editorials excoriated the developers. For months, Stacy and Goodboy were regulars on the evening news. Meanwhile, Dave Connelly of HOU was busy trying to find an apartment off-site that would be acceptable to Stacy. She turned down the first three private apartments he found for her, insisting on BHA elderly housing. The BHA, however, well aware of the situation, wanted nothing to do with her. Finally, Connelly found her a new apartment in the nearby Lower Mills section of Dorchester and persuaded the BHA manager there to accept her.

While the press was having a field day tearing into the “heartless developers” who were forcing a ninety-one-year-old woman to part with her only companion, the residents of Columbia Point, especially the elderly who lived in the building with Goodboy, saw things differently. “They were fed up,” according to Ruby Jaundoo. “Everyone on the task force was united behind enforcing that rule.” The media never mentioned or showed the condition of Stacy’s apartment. The story they were interested in was the one about the feisty old lady being evicted by the cold-hearted landlord; they didn’t want that story to be ruined by the reality of the situation. But the residents of the project had lived in a community without rules and regulations, and they were determined that their new community would not suffer the same fate. For them, Goodboy was a test case.

“The dog was like a big pony,” task force member Etta Johnson explains. “She was a small skinny lady whose dog is—what’s the nice word?—defecating all over the unit. She couldn’t even take the dog outside.” The other residents had no sympathy for Stacy. “We had to get rid of our dog,” Johnson says. “So why is this lady having all this fuss with hers? We could take care of our dog. So why all of a sudden is there all this fuss, when she can’t even take care of hers?”

For Ruby Jaundoo, the pet issue wasn’t about one woman and her dog; it was about sanitation and how that one dog affected the health and well-being of the broader community. “I personally don’t feel that I want to take away a companion from an older person,” Jaundoo explains. “But when that companion becomes more than that person can take care of, then it becomes another issue. It becomes an issue of sanitation.” Indeed, the “sanitation” issue had
The Goodboy Legislation

Following all of the publicity around the Goodboy incident, an ordinance was approved by the Boston City Council and signed by the mayor, allowing elderly and handicapped tenants to keep pets in both private and public housing, as long as they obey the rules about animal control and care. The ordinance prohibits any housing development from evicting such tenants for keeping pets.

In June 1989, on the one-year anniversary of Goodboy’s death, the state legislature passed a bill allowing elderly in state-financed housing to own pets—known as the “Goodboy legislation” in memory of Stacy’s dog.

Ten years later, the broader issue of pets in public housing was still unresolved: on June 23, 1998, a “legislative alert” from the New England Affordable Housing Management Association warned of a pending bill that included a provision allowing pet ownership in all federally assisted housing.

reached emergency proportions. Wendell Yee was in charge of the team of people who had to go in and clean Alice Stacy’s apartment: “You went into that unit and literally had to get ice scrapers to clean the dog feces off the floor. It was that thick. The woman was not able to go out. It was a pretty sad situation. And it was not an easy thing to do but you had to do it . . . . This had been going on maybe a year or so. Literally, the people went in there with face masks and ice scrapers to get the stuff off.”

Ice scrapers notwithstanding, the task force by this time was in the middle of a media storm. They stepped forward into the spotlight, holding a press conference to declare publicly, in no uncertain terms, that they were the representatives of the Harbor Point community, and the community had decided that a no-pets policy was in its best interests. The press conference was a perfect example of what Joe Corcoran had always seen as the real value of making the tenants full partners in a redevelopment project: it was one thing for the “heartless developer” to say “no pets,” but another thing altogether for the residents to stand up and say, this is what we want for our community.

The drama came to a climax on moving day, June 15, 1988, in ninety-eight-degree heat. Stacy had finally agreed to move into the apartment in Lower Mills, rather than be separated from her dog. HOU had moved Stacy’s belongings the day before, and on Wednesday, with all the local television stations on hand, they loaded up Stacy and Goodboy and headed for Lower Mills. When the van pulled up in front of Stacy’s new apartment, with the TV cameras rolling, Goodboy took a tentative few steps out of the van, made a couple of loud gasps, and keeled over—dead. Just in time for the evening news.

Stacy ordered the van to turn around and take her directly back to Harbor Point. In her new apartment in 40 Westwind Court, she was as feisty as ever, and still talking to the press. “They are a heartless people,” the Herald reports her saying, “and I am damned mad at them . . . . I like it here, but it’s going to take me a long time to get over it all. You know I had a premonition it was going to happen—and then they took him away on a stretcher.”

Goodboy’s death—on live TV—kicked the story into even higher gear. The talk shows picked up the story. CMJ’s receptionist of ten years, repeatedly reduced to tears by the calls that were jamming the switchboard, announced she was taking early retirement. Mayor Ray Flynn called an emergency meeting at City Hall to ask CMJ
and the task force to change their policy, saying that no other issue in his entire term in office had generated as many phone calls.

Meanwhile, another elderly resident, Cotelia Thomas, was taking up Stacy's cause and refusing to give up her dog. Again, CMJ was ready to compromise with a grandfather clause. And again, the task force held the hard line. CMJ suggested a face-saving compromise, in which Cotelia Thomas got a letter from a veterinarian recommending that her black Labrador retriever not be moved. Reluctantly, the task force agreed, and Thomas and her pet were moved into a ground-floor unit in a building at a remote end of the site. After two years Thomas's dog died; but both she and Stacy lived at Harbor Point until they moved out into nursing homes and died.