A Decent Place To Live

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27 Running the New Community

For the members of the task force, seeing construction of Harbor Point completed and moving all of the former Columbia Point residents into their new units wasn’t the end of the journey toward a new community. It was just the beginning. Task force member Esther Santos has been working tirelessly for her community for more than thirty years. “We worked from day one to reach consensus about redevelopment and then worked hard for ten years or so to get that done. We thought that was the hard part,” she says, laughing. “This is the hard part.”

Santos’s determination to keep her brand-new community as clean and beautiful as it was on the day it opened echoes the feelings of the people who felt privileged to move into the brand-new Columbia Point back in 1954. “To maintain Harbor Point as beautiful as day one when we moved in is really hard,” she says. “Some children never had shrubbery, grass, flowers. Columbia Point didn’t have any of those things. You have to teach the children you don’t pull them up. You don’t trample on them. As I told one child, ‘No, no. Please don’t walk on the flowers.’ The mother sat right in the window and didn’t say a word. She gave me a dirty look because I spoke to the child.”

Making sure the community works is a constant job. “A lot of times one would think you’d have input in the very beginning, and after things are up and running, you go home, sit down, and be quiet,” Ruby Jaundoo explains. “That’s not what happened. You have to stay involved, and we stayed very much involved. I feel this way: if you don’t continue to work at something that you helped create or build, it’s not going to maintain itself. Someone has to maintain it. It’s still an everyday struggle to keep it going.”

The community may be relatively new, but the issues involved in making it work are the same as ever. “Those of us that are good housekeepers really try to keep our building clean and our apartments clean,” Santos explains. “Then there are those that think, ‘What the hell. They don’t care, I don’t either.’” The difference between Columbia Point and Harbor Point, Santos
Harbor Point, 1988-2000

says, is the way the community follows up on people who are not complying with the rules and regulations. “The difference is we have HOU that works with the residents,” she says. Housing Opportunities Unlimited reminds residents of their responsibilities, gets them the help and support they need, and lets them know that if they don’t change, they will have to leave.

Dave Connelly works with those residents, most of whom do get help and change. Even so, “there still are residents that hate everything that happens here,” Connelly says. “These are people who we have helped get into drug programs. But when things get out of control in the family or their life, they look outside of themselves for blame. Not that they have to blame themselves, but they have to look inside themselves to fix it, the way we all do. They don’t do that; they look outside. That group is small and getting smaller.”

Some subsidized tenants reportedly resented the new rules imposed by management, including no washing or repairing cars, no sitting on the front stoop, and no loud noise between 11 P.M. and 8 A.M. They saw these rules as being overly restrictive of the subsidized residents and overly accommodating to the market-rate residents. Some even suspected that the rules were another way of driving out the low-income people. They had been used to living at Columbia Point in a certain way and now were being asked to live in another way.

Fitness center director Don Fry outside the Harbor Point Clubhouse. Courtesy of Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison.
Dave Connelly suggests another perspective on the rules: not as issues dividing along lines of race or income, but as shared issues that need to be worked out among all of the members of the community: “If you go to the [predominantly white] D Street project, you’ll see kids hanging out in the parking lot, playing music loud, and residents are calling and complaining about it. So I don’t think it’s a matter of race; I think it’s a matter of civics, of being civil to your neighbor. . . . It was the same thing at King’s Lynne, where the kids would be hanging out in a parking lot drinking beer and playing loud music, but they were almost all white.”

According to Ruby Jaundoo, one of the toughest struggles the task force faces is dealing with families that have multiple problems, that are constantly violating the rules and regulations, and that look to the task force to bail them out:

I’ve had a couple of residents who call on the phone and say, “You tell Ruby Jaundoo to get down to the court right now and tell this person to leave me alone.” Like I’m supposed to come down there and make it all go away.

When a person gets in trouble they would say to me, “Miss Jaundoo, you’ve been knowing me for thirty years.” [And I say,] “That’s right, I’ve been knowing you for thirty years, but that doesn’t mean you can break the rules. You can read. You know the rules and regulations as well as I do.” That’s the most difficult part—when people get themselves in a position where they’re in an eviction process and they try to throw that guilt thing on you.

People facing eviction often find any number of ways to shift the blame from themselves. According to Dan Murray, now president of CMJ Management Company, they claim that their kids never did anything wrong; that it’s a case of mistaken identity; that it’s racism; that the developers are only out to make their money. They charge that the task force plays favorites; that people who are their friends break just as many rules but don’t get eviction notices. According to Wendell Yee, rumors about management attempting to throw out the low-income families are especially persistent at the sites where there are tenant-developer partnerships, and tenants who get into trouble go to the elected members of the task force and appeal to them as their longtime neighbors from back in the days of the housing project.

Interestingly, market-rate residents and subsidized residents have been evicted from Harbor Point in similar percentages in recent years. In 1998, for example, a total of thirty-four tenants were
Evicted; twenty-five were market-rate and nine were subsidized. Those figures represent about 3 percent of the market-rate units and 2 percent of the subsidized units. Nonpayment of rent was the primary reason, and a range of offenses accounted for the remaining evictions.

Eviction, as far as Ruby Jaundoo is concerned, is a matter not of personal favors but of rules and regulations. Her commitment to the low-income residents of Harbor Point is profound, quiet, and unwavering. But she is also a believer in personal responsibility. “Although we work very hard at trying to help people maintain their tenancy—and I think every avenue is taken,” she says, “the responsibility has to go back to you after one has done everything.”

And then they will use these excuses and say, no task force member—and I guess they’re talking about me too—is ever called in for a private conference [the first step in the eviction process]. And I say, if those task force members aren’t breaking the rules and regulations, there’s no need for them to come before the governing board. But if their kids are out there violating the rules, fighting other people, knocking people down and kicking them in the head and things like that . . . that’s their responsibility, not mine.
For Jaundoo, the way you show respect for people—and the only way to make a community work—is by holding them responsible for their own actions. Her determination to protect the rights of the low-income residents is matched by her determination to hold them responsible for their own actions. “[Jaundoo] would always take the position of the tenant until every last defense was used up: ‘How do you know that? What did he say? How did she know that?’” Joe Corcoran explains. “But at some point, she knew that the person was completely out of line and she couldn’t do any more.”

According to Harbor Point manager Miles Byrne,

Ruby will say, “We have an obligation to these low-income folks. They were abandoned for years. If I’m the last person standing, I’m going to make [the developers] remember their commitments. You’ve got my name on Harbor Point property. But these people are my name . . . and these are the commitments I made to them when I signed my name.”

She may say that twice a year, she may say it eighty times a year. I tell you, it’s invoked and it’s right . . . If it’s a rent issue, she’ll say, “Screw it. We’ll work on it.” But if it’s a family that she sees is hurting the community and not making an effort to change, she says, “Get them out of here. I’ve worked too hard to make this a better property. You cannot hurt others.”

Etta Johnson, president of the task force, says that residents constantly come to the task force asking for little things. “It’s nothing big; it’s small stuff,” she says. Things like, “I know children aren’t allowed inside the tennis courts when someone’s playing tennis, but we’ll be careful.” Or “I know babies under a certain age or a certain height aren’t allowed in the pool except at certain times, but we’ll be careful.” The rules are the rules, she tells them. “You weren’t here in Columbia Point,” Johnson reminds the newer residents. “You don’t know what it was like. Rules are made to be enforced, and we’re here to make sure they’re being enforced. And we’re not changing those rules just because you’ve got a son or a daughter who wants to break them. It don’t work that way . . . Because at Columbia Point, the BHA did not enforce the rules. You did what you want, when you want, and how you want. And there was nothing said.”

In fact, the eviction policy of the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency—the state agency that holds the mortgage on Harbor Point—is clear. Any resident subject to eviction for cause is entitled to a “private conference,” a grievance hearing in which the resident has the opportunity to hear and answer the charges. At Harbor
Children of Harbor Point

About 650 of Harbor Point’s current 3,000 residents are children under the age of eighteen. Most are from low-income families; nearly 12 percent are from market-rate families. Their average age is ten, and they are evenly divided between boys and girls. Here’s what one fifteen-year-old boy and one seventeen-year-old girl had to say about life at Harbor Point in 1998.

The fifteen-year-old-boy is a student at South Boston High School.

Q: So how long have you lived here?
A: I’ve lived here for fourteen years.
Q: Do you have any memories of Columbia Point?
A: It was old and dirty.
Q: What did you do when you were little?
A: I used to go skipping rocks. Catching bees in a bottle. I would catch grasshoppers and put them in a bottle. Other kids used to flip on a mattress.
Q: What was it like to grow up here?
A: There used to be killings and stuff back in the old Point. Now there’s stuff like basketball. I had to stay in because I was young. I couldn’t go out like I can now.
Q: Your Mom made sure you came in. What about here? Does it seem safer now?
A: Yes.

Q: What do you do for fun?
A: Play cards and basketball.
Q: Did you choose to go to South Boston High School?
A: Yes, I chose to go to Southie.
Q: What’s the racial situation at Southie?
A: There’s no problem. I thought there would be more white people than black. But there’s really more blacks than whites [at the high school].
Q: What do you want to be when you grow up?
A: I want to play basketball and work at a bank when I get older, when I finish college and stuff.

The seventeen-year-old girl is a graduate of a pilot high school in Boston who plans to attend a local community college and pursue her dream of a career in the theater.

Q: What do you remember about Columbia Point?
A: We had a lot more crime and a lot of people were getting shot. Like you’d hear gunshots over here almost every night. A lot more teens were getting arrested. People were dying. And cops were out here more often for arresting than they are now patrolling the area. They changed it around and they got Harbor Point and it was cool. I didn’t like moving. Packing up my stuff.
Q: What do you remember of the transition time from Columbia Point to Harbor Point? Do you remember the construction?
A: It was a lot of noise. I hated it because every other day there was a new detour from getting off the school bus. You couldn’t cut through that way anymore. You had to walk around. That’s one of the reasons I hated moving. I was eight years old and I had to carry these boxes. I said, “I hate this. I don’t want to do this...
Moving from street to street to street. It was kind of terrible.

I remember the first week that we were finally getting settled in our new apartment and I looked out the window and they were demolishing our old building. I started remembering all the stuff that I’d left there and I wanted to go back.

The first few years of Harbor Point, there was much more activity than before because instead of letting the drug dealers and the gangsters stay here, they were kicking them out. I remember that being like a big thing for the first couple of years. It was like getting rid of the bad people and moving around a lot. People moving around, learning new streets, learning new addresses. And so after that, I can’t really recall a time that I didn’t live at Harbor Point. Because after that you get used to it. You’re like, okay, I live at Harbor Point. And you tell people to come and see you. Your friends, they’re used to Columbia Point. So you have to give them directions. I didn’t have any problem because a lot of people I still knew from Columbia Point were here.

And then they opened the pool in the summer and we all went swimming. Or riding bikes or going to play or watching the boys play basketball. Or you, like, had your friends come over on weekends and spend the night. It was basically the same. Just, like, a different name. And there was more room for new people to come in. Getting used to new people. But other than that it was the same.

Q: You don’t have to go into details, but what’s the drug scene here?

A: I wouldn’t know. Even though I live out here I don’t go around. If there are drugs, I haven’t seen any. The worst I’ve seen is, like, someone smoking marijuana. But that’s it. You don’t see, like, people—when it was Columbia Point, people were shooting up crack in the alleys and all that other stuff. You don’t see that. You don’t see, like, prostitution out bold in the street. Prostitutes getting picked up by pimps. You don’t see that anymore. The worst thing you could see a kid doing here is sitting at the bus stop smoking a cigarette or smoking a joint. And they’re like, “Oh, my gosh, that’s bad.” But you don’t care because you compare it to, like, the way it was.
Point, the grievance hearing is held before the governing board, which consists of two members from CMJ and two members from the task force.

At Harbor Point, as at King's Lynne, there were rumors at first that management was using evictions to throw out the old low-income residents and bring in their own low-income families—or worse, to eliminate low-income tenants altogether. However, the communities soon learned that that was not the case. In Lynn, for example, of the 169 original families that were guaranteed relocation in the new community, 90 are still living there twenty-five years later. Of the others, some were evicted, some died, and some moved out for a host of other personal reasons. Of the 350 Columbia Point families that stayed and were rehoused at Harbor Point more than ten years ago, 220 still remain—a remarkably low attrition rate of 3.88 percent per year, as compared with a national rate of 16 percent for residents of public housing. In fact, management is reluctant to initiate any eviction. According to Wendell Yee, eviction is the last recourse after every other measure has failed:

I think it's appropriate when you've given every opportunity to a family or a person to turn their problems around. If it's housekeeping—you go in there and you find a complete disaster—you get HOU to go to the family or the person and say, look, let us assign a caseworker. We'll work with you. We'll get some outside agency help for you. But management will be inspecting this unit every month for the next six months.

If you see no appreciable improvement or a lack of caring, then I think it becomes appropriate to make a move. Because you've got other people living next door that you've got to be concerned about—the infestation of roaches, the bad smells that emanate from those units. Or some people continually are late paying their rent. If after intervention by HOU and several private conferences with management to try to straighten this out, you cannot get this person to pay their rent on time, [eviction] becomes appropriate.

Dan Murray describes one such recent eviction case: “[The family] literally ruined the unit. The judge said, ‘Fix the unit, give her a chance.’ We fixed the unit. They ruined it again. We fixed it again. Told the judge. We went to court five times. The judge said to her, ‘Next time you're going to go.’ . . . She had a drinking and drug problem. She wasn’t taking care of the kids. Then they bring in the friends—the boyfriends, the buddies—usually they’re not a great class of individuals that enhances the property.”
According to Murray, eviction is never something management wants to do; it is a long, messy, painful, expensive process. In fact, Wendell Yee, a tough-minded manager who has worked for years in CMJ’s mixed-income communities, and who oversaw some of the most dangerous phases of restoring the enforcement of rules at Columbia Point, finds some evictions the most difficult part of his job: “The toughest thing, on a personal level, is to have to evict a family with a whole bunch of small children. Because they refused the help. They refused to make an attempt to turn their lives around. That’s a very tough situation, to see a moving company come in and take people’s personal belongings with five, six, seven small children. Where are they going to go? People say management has to have a cold heart. We don’t all have cold hearts. It’s a very difficult and very traumatic thing to see that happen. But it has to be done.”

The consolation, Yee says, is that these evictions may serve as a warning to others in the community: “The end result is that usually the message gets out and people who were hesitant on starting to turn their lives around, maybe that will wake them up. Not to say we use that as an example, but it becomes an example.”

The issue of eviction can raise tensions not only between the task force and the community but also between the members of the tenant-developer partnership. At Harbor Point, for example, when CMJ’s interim management was working to prepare the remaining Columbia Point families for the new community, one of the major efforts was evicting residents who were known to be involved with drugs and other criminal and violent activity.

Management’s attempt to evict one such individual involved in drugs and violence led to a serious test of the tenant-developer relationship. The lawyer for a tenant taken to court for eviction approached Wendell Yee, manager of Harbor Point at the time, saying that the tenant would be willing to move out and drop the case if he received three thousand dollars in “moving expenses.” CMJ, aware of the multiple costs, social as well as financial, of having him in the community—from the criminal activity and ongoing nonpayment of rent to the accumulating legal fees and the impact of the protracted eviction proceedings on marketing—felt that three thousand dollars was a small price to pay for ridding the community of the individual.

Yee paid the “moving expenses,” but did so without first securing the agreement of the task force. When the task force members dis-

Left to right: Metropolitan District Commissioner Ilyas Bhatti, former governor Michael Dukakis, and Kitty Dukakis at the formal dedication of Old Harbor Park, 1992.

Left to right: Joe Corcoran, Etta Johnson, and Father George Carrigg of St. Christopher’s Church at the formal dedication of Old Harbor Park, 1992.

*Photos courtesy of Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison.*
covered what had happened, they were furious. From their point of view, the payment amounted to rewarding one of their residents for his own bad behavior—unacceptable no matter what the extenuating reasons. Moreover, the payment had been made by the developer without the tenants’ say-so—in the task force’s opinion, a serious violation of the tenant-developer partnership.

The task force demanded that Wendell Yee be removed as manager of Harbor Point. “I thought Wendell did the right thing from his point of view,” Joe Corcoran explains, “but he had a partner. He ignored the partner, so I couldn’t defend him, and as a consequence he was taken off the site.” However sensible from the developer’s point of view the three-thousand-dollar investment to get a bad apple out of the barrel, to the tenants it was intolerable. In the interests of the partnership, Yee had to leave Harbor Point, even though he was, in Corcoran’s words, “an ace manager.” The incident demonstrated the importance and the power of the tenant task force. “Two years earlier,” Corcoran says, “they never would have had the guts to [demand that he be fired]—because they weren’t empowered at that point in time. But now they saw the process, and they knew they were a 50 percent partner.” As it turned out, Yee was too effective in his job to be cut off completely. CMJ had to reinstate him in a new position and promise he would no longer be on-site, though the new manager of Harbor Point would still report to him—an arrangement to which the task force agreed.

The partnership has weathered disagreements—some of them minor, a few major—over the years. Jaundoo explains that the partnership between CMJ and the task force hasn’t been “all peaches and cream.” “We have our amount of disagreements,” she says, “but I think we all come to an understanding of what’s best for the community”:

It’s not “this is what we think is best” and “this is what they think is best.” Our partners are business people. We understand that. And I think they understand that we’re residents. And we’ve got a better view of what we think is needed here. They can look at it from a business perspective, but we don’t want to put them in a place, either, where they’re going to go down the drain financially because of something that we do. So we have to look at the whole picture and say, “How beneficial is this to the community at large,” and then come to some sort of compromise.

A recent example of “coming to a compromise” was over the issue of carpets. In effect, as Jaundoo saw it, a double standard had devel-

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**Old Harbor Park**

Old Harbor Park, a six-and-a-half-acre stretch of Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) park land that runs along the edge of Dorchester Bay at Harbor Point, was dedicated in 1992. The park is used by community residents as well as joggers, cyclists, and walkers—all those drawn to the water’s edge for recreation or simply to sit on one of many benches along the park’s perimeter and stare at the sea.

Julia O’Brien, the MDC’s chief planner, explains that a small park built with federal funds had once stood at the far edge of Columbia Point. Federal regulations governing existing parks, coupled with state waterfront licensing regulations, mandated construction of the new park as a condition for the redevelopment of the former public housing project. To facilitate this, the Boston Housing Authority transferred the land to the MDC, which supervised the park’s design and construction. Harbor Point’s management company is responsible for maintaining the park’s landscaping and keeping it clean. O’Brien says the park is important to Harbor Point and the larger community as well: “It’s a critical link in terms of our continuing waterfront, especially the eight miles of unparalleled urban waterfront from Castle Island in South Boston to the Neponset River. It reconnects Dorchester with the shoreline, from which it had been badly cut off by the Southeast Expressway.”
oped for market-rate and subsidized residents. Each year, some three hundred units turn over at Harbor Point, most of them market-rate, and worn or damaged rugs are replaced before these units are re-rented. Meanwhile, the people who have been living in the subsidized units, some for as many as ten years, still have their original carpets. When the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency refused to approve the expense of new rugs for the subsidized units because it had not been budgeted, Jaundoo called them on the carpet: “One of the things that really annoyed me about that is that families have a yearly inspection, and a lot of times they were marked poorly because of their rugs. I mean, come on. You have kids. Rugs are not going to last forever. You’re not getting the best grade of rugs in the first place, let’s face it. In the last two years you just had to yell and scream and say, hey, listen. People are going to have to have new rugs. Because I was on the verge of telling folks, hold your rent.”

“Ruby understands the injustice,” says Harbor Point manager Miles Byrne. “She knows that it’s been ten years that none of her low-income residents have had their rugs replaced.” After months of wrangling with the MHFA to approve spending the $285,000 it would cost to replace 171 rugs, suddenly approval came through. “Within a week,” Byrne continues, “I got a call from Dan Murray saying we’re going to start the rug replacement. Bang, the money shows up. That’s power. And Ruby doesn’t even know it; she’s the worst in recognizing what her contribution is. She was this gift that we all got. Where do you get people like this?”

Over the many years Dave Connelly has worked at Columbia Point and Harbor Point, he has developed close relationships with many residents. When Connelly sees Harbor Point today, he—like everyone who lived or worked in both the old and the new community—is struck by memories of the old days. “They’re vivid memories for me,” Connelly says. He remembers taking Columbia Point residents home after going out for a beer at the end of the day and being struck by the differences between them: “Once in a while, I used to walk Ruby home when she was right over by [where the Bayside Exposition Center is today]—when it was a place that, you know, you’d try to walk her home. I always waited until she got in the front door, and in the beginning, I used to wait until she waved. They just risked a lot.”

Dave Connelly knows that there is an unspoken dividing line between him and the people who lived at Columbia Point and live at Harbor Point, 1988–2000
Harbor Point today. Although the friendships he has formed with these residents are close, he says, he is often reminded of the differences between them. The residents of Columbia Point who stayed and fought for the new community took a risk that no one else can really understand. Dave Connelly still drives away at the end of the day, but he feels very different leaving his Harbor Point friends behind: “When they walk down to their new place, it also strikes me that it’s terrific now when I’m leaving them at night that they’re walking to a great apartment that they’re happy about. Years ago when I left them they were going into that crap of having to walk around the people who were sitting and drinking on their front steps and the hallways. It’s changed so much and they really deserve it and they feel good about it.”

Ten years after the opening of Harbor Point, the task force members do feel good about it. But their work isn’t done. “Some folks haven’t got their rugs changed yet,” Jaundoo says. “I’m trying to tell them to be patient.”