

Innovation Helps Cure Community; Services Revive District Complex

By David Montgomery
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Arsena Perry, a D.C. government nurse, thought charming Edgewood Terrace in Northeast Washington would be a wonderful place to retire, never foreseeing it would become drug-plagued Edgewood Terrace. Bishop Warren R. Hicks, a federal employee and part-time pastor, used to have to nervously pick his way around the crack sellers when he came home late from church work.

Now Hicks is more likely to see children playing, and Perry's dream of a peaceful community for her autumn years appears to be coming true.

The rise and fall and rise of Edgewood Terrace, a cluster of brick garden apartments and mid-rise buildings with 884 rental units near the Rhode Island Avenue Metro station, is a striking tale of how a mixed-income community can be rebuilt, and how new ideas about providing affordable housing are taking root.

The effort is founded on the insight that successful communities entail more than adequate shelter; they require a variety of support services, such as day care, counseling, job training.

Much work remains to be done, and the final results won't be known for years. The most troubled portion of the property, known as Edgewood I, with about a third of the units, is now the focus of renovation. A high-rise section called Edgewood II never fell into disrepair and social chaos. Edgewood III, devoted to D.C. public housing, still has poor living conditions.

But there are marks of progress, including this: In recent months, the Edgewood renaissance has attracted 84 middle-income tenants to newly renovated apartments in Edgewood I, offering hope that the community may regain an economic diversity that it lost because of flight to the suburbs. About half the prospective tenants who applied last month now live in the suburbs, according to data provided by Edgewood. They include the manager of a dry cleaning business, a secretary, an accountant, a dental assistant, a salesman, a bartender.

A Bethesda-based nonprofit housing developer, the Community Preservation and Development Corp., is leading the effort, supported by local universities, foundations, private companies, the D.C. police and funding from the city and federal governments. National affordable housing advocates say it could prove to be a model for others to follow.

"It has really made an impact in this area," said resident Alvin Jones, 46, who is receiving job counseling and computer training through a new program at Edgewood and now teaches computer skills to fellow residents.

"Not to say they wiped out all the negativity," Jones said. "But just by putting together structured programs and letting residents do their part to help the community: It's good, man. It's good."

Edgewood Terrace was built in 1971 on 16 hilly acres. Middle-income residents like Arsenia Perry were welcome, along with lower-income households. Perry moved in a couple of years after it opened.

But by the mid-1980s, management problems in some of the buildings, coupled with changing federal rules designed to make more housing available for poorer people, caused the tenant mix to change. Average household incomes dropped below the poverty line. Many who could afford to leave did so. Some units became run-down. The once lovely courtyard became a hardscrabble turf ruled by drug dealers.

"They were boarding up apartments as people would leave," said Perry, 78, treasurer of the Edgewood Terrace I Residents Association. But she and a group of active residents refused to leave. "My reaction was, 'I moved here to retire. Where do you want me to go?'" Perry said. Edgewood I, where Perry lives, fell half-vacant at its nadir a few years ago. The U.S. General Accounting Office came up with a simple fix: Tear it down.

In 1991, the community preservation group started working with residents to find a better solution. It was founded by Eugene F. Ford, an owner of Mid-City Financial Corp. and Edgewood Management Corp., which manages thousands of apartments in the region. Ford remains chairman of the nonprofit, but it is independent of his companies.

"Our goal is to bring the most important resources for a strong community close to home," said Leslie A. Steen, president of the preservation corporation.

The group purchased Edgewood I in 1995 for \$1 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which had foreclosed on a previous owner. With about \$27 million cobbled together from a HUD grant, a city housing loan, a private mortgage and other sources, the rehabilitation began.

Residents were moved temporarily to vacant units while their apartments were rebuilt. They got new appliances, carpeting and wiring for Internet access. Gloomy hallways and lobbies were gutted and reconfigured to be roomy and light-filled. The courtyard was landscaped. A vigilant security force was hired.

The physical rehabilitation was accompanied by new services open to all Edgewood tenants. Beacon House Community Ministry provides after-school youth programs. A day-care center serves toddlers, and a center for infants and a music school for children are planned, freeing parents to pursue jobs. Social workers and counselors are on site for adults. Next month, Catholic University will begin offering adult college preparatory classes.

D.C. police beefed up patrols in the area, chasing out the drug dealers. The Edgewood area used to account for 75 percent of the crime in that section of the 5th Police District, but that figure has been cut in half, said Sgt. Brian Hubbard.

Finally, Edgewood is one of the most ambitious examples of an "electronic village," part of a national effort to bring computer technology to subsidized housing communities. By the end of the year, every apartment in Edgewood I will have a terminal capable of connecting residents to the

Internet and to an Edgewood "intranet" that will let them communicate with property managers, create newsletters and sign up for community activities.

A lab with 36 computers provides introductory and advanced computer training, and 36 more computers will be added next month. Microsoft Corp. donated \$100,000 worth of software. Residents pay \$50 or perform community service for each course.

One recent evening, Alvin Jones and fellow instructor Sirletha Gaither were supervising a class of 12 boys and girls ages 6 to 13, who were exploring software based on the "The Magic School Bus" television show. The youngsters arrive early and stay late with no prompting from adults, Jones said.

"The Internet had not been invented as far as our community knew about," said Bridget McLaurin, an Edgewood resident who is a single mother of a 9-year-old boy.

In 1995, she had been laid off from her job as a courier when she enrolled in a four-day-a-week course at Edgewood that provides computer training and broader career guidance. She remembers the surge of confidence she felt.

"I knew I was bad when I created my first database," she said. "The Microsoft-software-database-making queen was here!"

McLaurin landed a job as an office administrator and database specialist for a job placement firm, and she enrolled in Catholic University with a scholarship available to some Edgewood residents.

Renovations at Edgewood I are scheduled to be complete by September, with 117 of the 292 apartments reserved for low-income families eligible for federal housing subsidies. The rest will be available at market rents to middle-class tenants with household incomes limited to about \$57,800 for a family of four or \$22,400 for a single adult. Monthly rent ranges from \$455 for an efficiency to \$800 for a four-bedroom unit.

"I just came across Edgewood, and I said, 'This is cute,'" said Lowan Sterrett, 34, a Maryland state employee who is one of the new middle-income tenants. He moved from Landover, and he said he's so pleased with his new home that he shows snapshots to his colleagues and urges them to join him.

Turning to Edgewood III, the community preservation group plans shortly to use \$4.2 million from various sources to renovate 42 garden apartments.

Meanwhile, after devoting a lot of money and attention to Edgewood I, Steen predicts that the community preservation group will be able to withdraw its influence in a few years. Rents will support upkeep of the property, she said. Tenants will gain seats on the property's governing board and one day may choose to buy it out.

"A few years from now," Steen said, "it will be self-sufficient."

Cutline: Edgewood Terrace is renovated outside and wired for the Internet inside.

The courtyard at Edgewood Terrace, formerly ruled by drug dealers, has been redone, with new sidewalks and landscaping. The complex is being renovated by a community development group.

Felecha Organ gives Diandra Wright and Sharon Gowing, rear, a computer lesson.

Leslie A. Steen, preservation group president, stresses community support.

At Edgewood Terrace, with its renovated lobby, ex-suburbanites are moving in.

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