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Shelter in a city's many storms: Hundreds celebrate anniversary of housing authority



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Dan McCarthy hoped he might see a few old friends. While he lives in Florida, he showed up at Friday's [75th anniversary celebration for the Syracuse Housing Authority](#) because his life hinged on the years he spent in Pioneer Homes, a subsidized housing complex.

About 700 people were there. McCarthy, 65, found himself in a sea of familiar faces, even when he approached his table at the Oncenter: By sheer coincidence, he'd been seated near Bill Harris, a close companion from childhood and [the son of the famed Upstate boxing coach](#).

They immediately fell into tales of being altar boys at the old St. Joseph's Church, and going to the Boys Club at Fayette Park, and attending classes at the now-closed Washington Irving elementary school ...

And learning what it took to succeed in the world.

"I'm very proud of it," McCarthy said. His mother moved into public housing in 1950. She was divorced with three children and few alternatives. McCarthy began working, as a teen, for the Housing Authority. He later became an SHA manager before he established his own window replacement company.

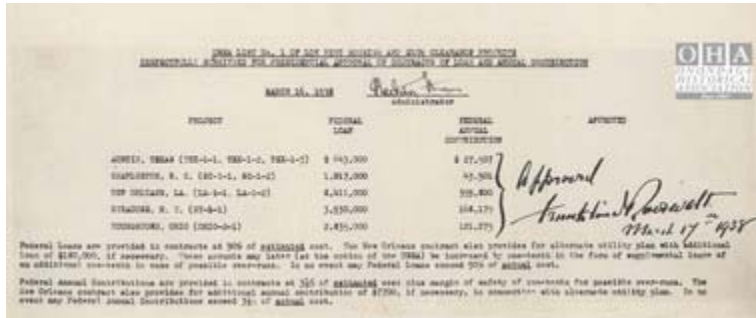
He arrived at Pioneer Homes barely a decade after President Franklin D. Roosevelt scrawled his name on a piece of paper, freeing up the money to build the complex - one of the earliest public housing initiatives in the nation.

At its best, McCarthy said, public housing serves as a subsidized refuge, a retreat, in times of struggle - and allows many families to get their footing before moving on to homes of their own.

"In spite of all the hardships, we didn't know we weren't supposed to be successful," said Bea Gonzalez, Syracuse University's [dean at University College](#). Her father, a migrant worker, began his life in Syracuse when he found a job washing dishes at the Hotel Syracuse.

Gonzalez remembers how the Spanish Action League was founded in the living room of her parents' unit at the James Geddes apartments. She remembers the thrill of climbing out a back window during the Blizzard of 1966 because the snow was so deep it blocked the front door. Beyond all else, she remembers a parental expectation:

Do your work and accept no barriers.



Document signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, approving construction of Pioneer Homes in Syracuse. Courtesy Onondaga Historical Association

She shared that common thread with Common Councilor [Khalid Bey](#), and [Pathfinder Bank vice-president Calvin Corriders](#), and retired [city court Judge Langston McKinney](#), who was born into a segregated public housing complex in Miami, has an SHA manor in Syracuse named in his honor - and who spoke Friday to the power of education.

"I wouldn't be the man I was if not for the (public housing) experience," said Corriders, among those featured in a video - produced by George Stroman III of the [Media Unit](#) - that recalled how the complex known as Central Village once had a more familiar name:

"To me, it's always 'The Bricks,'" said Bey, whose overriding childhood memory involves the way his mother worked two jobs to feed her children. Bey spoke bluntly of the risks young people encountered in 'The Bricks,' of the forces always pulling too many children toward the streets.

Still, there was something in the experience - an enduring flame of promise - that bonded many in the hall Friday night.

[Dr. Daryll Dykes](#), an expert on spinal care raised in Syracuse public housing, was the keynote speaker. Bill Simmons, executive director of the housing authority, said one of every 10 city residents is somehow served by the SHA - a breadth of clientele illustrated by the crowd.

Haji Adan, executive director of the Somali Bantu Community Association, accompanied a group of Somalians who live at Central Village. His people traded life near the equator for harsh, relentless winters. Yet almost everyone in his community in Syracuse, Adan said, has lost someone in their homeland to war or turmoil.

"We left behind everything," Adan said, "to be in a place where we didn't have to worry."

Others had their own tales of appreciation. Shirley Dawson needed a respite, a place to stay, after a career in the military. "The housing authority came into my life when I really needed it," said Dawson, of the Toomey Abbott towers.

Mary Susco had been a homeowner for her entire adult life. Her husband John, renowned for making race cars, died in 1990. Mary, fiercely independent, kept her house until the 2000s, when shoveling snow and cutting grass simply got to be too much.

It was a close friend, Millie Guardino, who helped her find an answer. Millie showed Mary her apartment in Eastwood Heights, an apartment so beautiful that Mary said, "I was in awe." She later moved into a unit in the same building, where she established a core of friends anchored by Millie - who died last year.

At the dinner, always thankful, Mary thought of her.

Many gray-haired retirees at the celebration offered tales from the 1950s of buying two-day-old doughnuts at the old Harrison Bakery, not far from Pioneer Homes, or of warm days of playground basketball at Wilson Park. They spoke of how Interstate 81, in the 1960s, leveled the old 15th Ward - and how that demolition pushed so many families into public housing.

The housing authority extended honors to former executive director Fred Murphy, former Rep. James T. Walsh - his nephew accepted in his place - and commissioner Gladys Smith. But the star of Friday's event was 8-year-old Joseph Utsey, who read a poem about how books can help children achieve any dream.

Joseph and his mother, Lisa Bigelow, live at Pioneer Homes, where the child takes part in a reading program sponsored by the SHA and the Golisano Children's Hospital at Upstate.



Construction of Pioneer Homes, South McBride Street, 1930s. Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

"I just want to encourage him, and I want him to go to high school and have a good reputation and no criminal record," Bigelow said. She is tired of "young men who are out on the street and tearing down this community," and she holds onto different aspirations for her son.

Pioneer Homes, she said, is close enough to SU that Joseph might grow hungry for college "just by breathing the air." She brought him to the Oncenter because he was asked to read, but in essence she had him there for a higher reason:

If the older folks shared a flame of promise, the same warmth might touch his face.

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