

AGENCY OF THE MONTH

Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement

They are the houses that faith built. Block after block in north central Harlem, once dilapidated and abandoned buildings have been renovated or completely replaced by Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, Inc. (HCCI), creating approximately 2,000 units of newly livable and affordable housing for low and moderate income residents.

HCCI was founded in 1986 when ministers from 16 Harlem churches came together in an effort to address the community's staggering housing and social problems.

"This was a vacant lot that had been excavated into below ground bodegas for various types of drugs," says Canon Frederick Williams, pastor of Church of the Intercession and president of HCCI's board, describing the site of HCCI's current headquarters at 153rd Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. "You could get your cocaine there, your heroin over there. You literally took your life in your hands walking up and down the street. Most of the buildings here looked like that."

"Government owned 60% of the buildings in Harlem," says Lucille L. McEwen, HCCI's President and Chief Executive Officer and a former Assistant Commissioner at New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). Most of that was In Rem housing – abandoned and in serious disrepair, having been taken over by the City for back taxes.

It is hard to imagine a more grassroots, faith-based initiative than HCCI. "We had no where else to go," says Canon Williams. "Our churches were here. Our people were here. We had to do something." The group began meeting monthly for breakfast and prayer at St. Matthews Baptist Church, then lead by Dr. John Sass, Harlem's most senior minister. They looked to other examples of church-led community development in



The new Construction Trades Academy is one of HCCI's employment training programs.

East Brooklyn and the South Bronx. They also joined with the Harlem Urban Development Corporation, City College of New York's architecture center and and Columbia University's Urban Technical Assistance Project to begin developing a plan. What emerged would be known as the Bradhurst Revitalization Plan – a comprehensive program for rebuilding the Bradhurst community, a 40-square block neighborhood that stretched from 145th Street to 155th and between Adam Clayton Powell to the East and the slope of parks running up hill to St. Nicholas Avenue.

The Bradhurst Plan was no timid proposal. It called for the development of almost 3,000 units of new affordable housing – both rental and ownership opportunities. It also presumed a broad range of social supports. "You can't just put people in a house and then go on," explains Williams. "You have surround them with support structures and mechanisms like job development, day care, computer training, health services. It is what we call holistic, community development."

Williams points to the lessons learned from earlier housing efforts in the South Bronx. "Jimmy Carter came to Charlotte Street. They built houses, but that is all they did. In a few years, it looked almost as bad as it had before because they had no supportive services."

However, the Bradhurst plan initially drew a cool response at City Hall. Despite then Mayor Edward Koch's serious commitment to housing development, the ad-

ministration questioned the ministers' capacity to oversee such a large scale project. "They thought they would throw us a bone," says Williams. "They gave us 9-10 buildings at one site." It was enough for 175 units, a tiny fraction of the plan's total housing target.

"It was an insult," says Williams. In fact, individual congregations within the HCCI coalition had already built a significant development track record. "Dr. Moran Weston of St. Philips Episcopal Church and Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker of Canaan Baptist Church had already built more housing in Harlem than the City had." Williams himself had come to Harlem from Michigan with a strong background in nonprofit housing. "I had built more housing than anybody else in the Episcopal Church in America."

The problem, however, was too big for any one church to handle. "In New York, individual churches can not make a dent," says Williams. "It is just too big, too complex. You really have to have a coalition."

After considerable negotiation, however, the Koch administration relented and signed an Memorandum of Understanding with HCCI to take the lead in implementing the Bradhurst Plan. HCCI, in turn, agreed to work with a series of partners in developing its properties. A year later, Koch lost his reelection bid to David Dinkins and the new mayor began putting resources behind the MOU and the Bradhurst Plan.

With Harlem now one of New York City's hottest neighborhoods, it is hard to imagine that in 1993, HCCI's first property had trouble attracting tenants – even homeless and low income tenants. "It was so bad that many residents did not want to move here," says McEwen. "It took us over six months to rent up the building."

The \$15 million project, John J. Sass Plaza, was developed by the New York Urban Coalition and turned over to HCCI on a turnkey basis. Its 94 units were allocated on a 51/49% basis to homeless and low income families.

Since then, the projects have come one after another. HCCI's West 140th Street development was funded with \$4 million from HPD's Neighborhood Redevelopment Program and provides 72 units on West 140th Street. Creations



Lucille L. McEwen, President and CEO HCCI

Plaza was a \$5 million project with 100 units of affordable housing and five commercial spaces on Malcolm X Blvd. and 120th St. The \$10 million Victory I development provides 110 units of housing for the elderly. Exodus was developed by Harlem Urban Development Corporation at a cost of \$6.9 million and houses 7 families as well as featuring an educational center for after-school programming. Phoenix Associates II offers another 59 units of low income housing.

In 1992, HCCI and its partner Consortium for Central Harlem Development (CCHD) began work on what became known as Bradhurst Phase I. The \$28 million, HPD-funded development offers 301 units along West 145th Street and near Frederick Douglass Blvd. Bradhurst Phase II is a \$20 million, 281-unit project developed by CCHD.

HCCI has always attempted to create economic diversity in its housing. The agency's 300-unit project on 148th Street for example, is divided into one-third very low income rentals, one-third market rate rentals and one-third affordable cooperative ownerships. "On that block we did what we think is ideal, having an ownership opportunity and having a range of incomes on one block so we have an economically integrated community. We think that is so important," says McEwen. "Making concentrated pockets of poverty is not the best way to build a



**EMPOWERING HARLEMITES
REBUILDING COMMUNITIES**

established
1986

For more information visit
www.hcci.org, Call 212-281-4887
or email info@hcci.org



HCCI began its work when much of Harlem's housing stock was abandoned and in decay.