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toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

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Housing: Shifting the Narrative

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Every Monday in the Park Heights neighborhood of Northwest Baltimore, groups of between two and fifteen residents meet to talk about one thing in particular: housing. Most are people who face eviction, foreclosure, forced home sales due to redevelopment, or unsafe or unhealthy conditions. Some have no problems at all; they just come to support others. What they are finding is that the housing situations they each face are not unique to them.

Recently, a Right to Housing Alliance (RTHA) member, Aaron, told a story of how he and his six year old son had no heat in their apartment this winter. After multiple attempts to get the landlord to fix the problem, he was told he should use his oven to heat his apartment. Aaron recalled his feelings of powerlessness and rage. He told how he recently won back custody of his son after a long, hard recovery process, and has been working hard to get back on his feet to take care of his family. There was a murmur of understanding while this story was being told. Other residents have experienced similar situations. Lack of heat in the winter, lack of air conditioning in the summer, rodent and roach infestations, safety issues, and lack of accessibility. He said his dignity was

stripped of him that day standing in his doorway talking to his landlord. But with the strength of the other residents at Right to Housing Alliance and in his apartment complex who are standing with him for his rights, he is starting to take his dignity back. RTHA resident member, Courtney tells us that after a period of hardship, she and her husband fell behind on rent. Their property manager filed a complaint at District Court, and tacked on the court fees and mysterious administrative fees which put the couple even further behind. Each month, the couple, received another complaint notice from the court, and a new round of court and administrative fees. They had decided to just pack up and move, as they were so far in debt with the landlord that they had no hope of repaying. But RTHA resident members from her apartment complex and other resident members from elsewhere were there to back her up. She is going to fight the property manager and stand up for her human rights.

The Right to Housing Alliance grew out of Occupy Our Homes Baltimore, a working group of Occupy Baltimore

that focused on helping homeowners facing foreclosure to win principle reductions and loan modifications to allow them to stay in their homes. But we soon had to ask ourselves: What was going on in those blocks between the addresses of foreclosed homeowners? What were the real housing problems in Baltimore and did they go beyond the recent primarily middle class crisis of foreclosure? Was there systemic housing inequality going back for decades? What was the situation of tenants? Homeless?

Occupy Our Homes Baltimore turned to the Public Justice Center, a non-profit legal services provider with a commitment to offer assistance to the poor through its Housing is a Human Right program. A partnership was formed, and RTHA was born, setting out to tackle these questions, and build a movement around the human right to housing in Baltimore. Using a strategy of legal defense (the Shield) to address the immediate needs of residents facing eviction by slowing foreclosures, evictions, or forced home sales through available judicial processes, and buying time for residents and organizers (the Sword) to build a long-term, sustainable movement around the human right to housing.

In Baltimore City in 2012, there were over 149,000 cases seen in District Court relating to housing, 69,698 warrants for eviction issued with 6,941 resulting in actual evictions, and nearly 2,793 foreclosures filed. Thousands of residents sleep on the streets each night, and thousands more are mere days away from homelessness. Developers focus on eliminating “blight” but not on providing truly affordable housing for Baltimore’s growing population of homeless and residents in extremely precarious housing situations. We found that there were two entirely different stories about these problems, depending on whether you are looking at them from the top or from the bottom.

The View From Above

On one hand, there is the view that the problem is poverty, white flight leaving an oversupply of housing, vacants, and blight, and that all the “good” people have left the city, leaving behind only criminals and drug addicts. Decent taxpaying homeowners suffer decreasing property value, businesses are suffering due to lack of residents who have money to spend. Tourists’ eyes have to suffer the visible blight of homelessness, and the State has to foot the bill for our lack of a tax base. The people who can save us all from these problems are the *community developers* who will wipe out the blight and parts of the city and replace them with new jobs, housing, and commercial opportunities to attract more good people while running out the bad ones, *gentrifiers* who bring

new cultural life, *Stephanie Rawlings-Blake* and her “10,000 New Residents” plan, and *anchor institutions* like Johns Hopkins University and University of Maryland who “clean up” the city around their campuses. The Vacants to Value program will solve the problem of pockets of blight by providing investors opportunity to fix up vacant homes, housing services offer assistance to low-income residents, and the Housing Authority of Baltimore City will ensure that good, quality residents have access to housing.

We can see a glimpse of the solution in the gentrification of Locust Point, Fells Point, and Canton, and the demolition of vacant houses in Park Heights to make way for new mixed-income housing that will bring a new, better type of resident to the neighborhood. Wiping the slate clean and starting again will bring new residents, increase the tax base, boost the real estate market, and start to create equity for struggling homeowners.

The View From Below

For most Baltimore residents, the problem is different. The problem is gentrification and development that in bringing a new cultural life to a neighborhood, displaces the old one. That old one exists largely among poor people of color who are forced to go somewhere else. The problem is a lack of permanently affordable housing, which is exacerbated by the housing speculators, developers, and City officials hell-bent on attracting development while writing off the residents who will be most affected by development. The problem is a war on the most vulnerable in Baltimore: the poor.

When the gentrifiers come to bring new cultural life to a neighborhood, what happens to the old cultural life that was there already? When developers come to demolish entire neighborhoods, what are they demolishing? The answer is: housing primarily for poor people of color. The Vacants to Value program is a great way to tackle blight, but does it provide real opportunity for poor residents to become homeowners when the price of fixing up the homes exceeds the price of purchasing a home already in habitable shape? It benefits investors and housing speculators, but not the poor who are most in need of housing. The anchor institutions “clean up” the neighborhoods near their campuses to make them more attractive to potential students and faculty, but what are they cleaning up? They’re cleaning up the poor people and telling them to go somewhere else. The housing services are offering rent assistance, but are also often turning a blind eye to conditions in housing that constitute safety or health threats to the residents they’re placing.

The only thing that can and will save the city from the constant displacement of poor people of all colors are those who choose to stay put and fight displacement. The heroes are those who choose to stay and fight the landlord, or bank, or developer instead of giving in and moving out, the organizations that fight with the poor: Right to Housing Alliance, Housing Our Neighbors, United Workers, and many more. But none of us can do it individually. We all have to come together as individuals and organizations to demand that the human right to housing is respected in Baltimore. The displacement has to stop somewhere, and the fight has to start somewhere.

We see a glimpse of the solutions in the community outpouring and coalition-building in response to the East Baltimore Development Initiative surrounding Hopkins East. We see glimpses in Park Heights where residents living in an area slated for demolition as part of the Park Heights Master

Plan for Redevelopment are coming up with an alternative development vision for their block based on the needs of the current residents. We see this in Aaron and Courtney's fight to demand that their landlords treat them with dignity. We see this in the support from people who previously didn't know them and would not have cared about their situations. Communities are coming together to stand up for their human rights are starting to shift the landscape, and shift the power.

Changing the Narrative

The Right to Housing Alliance realized that building a movement around housing rights in Baltimore would also have to involve changing the story about housing. People living in "blighted" neighborhoods slated for demolition, or redevelopment are not the bad people that the developers and mayor want us to believe they are. They are good people, working hard in a city where there is a lack of living-wage jobs and truly affordable housing. Aaron and Courtney are among those that we're supposed to believe are the villains. But they are just two among hundreds of thousands who are struggling with problems that are endemic in this city.

Human rights are being violated in the poorest neighborhoods of Baltimore, not due to an oversight, but as part of the City's plan to push the poor out of Baltimore. In RTHA meetings, residents can begin to break down the dominant narrative of housing in Baltimore that shames them into believing that eviction or foreclosure is an individual problem. Bringing human rights to the forefront of those conversations allows residents to see the connection they have to one another, and to begin to see every struggle as "our struggle." By transforming the story, RTHA residents are going to transform the city's agenda on housing to ensure that it respects the poor and values human rights. Baltimore does not currently value these principles, as reflected in the lack of living-wage jobs, the lack of educational resources, the lack of healthcare, the lack of affordable housing, the prioritization of hefty tax breaks for developers while impoverished communities lack basic resources. We see these violations in the Park Heights Redevelopment plan, where 75 acres of affordable housing will be demolished to make way for mixed-income housing that current residents will not have access to.

Changing the story and building a resident-led movement around human rights will begin to open up new possibilities to combat homelessness and housing insecurity.

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