

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

Preserving Income Diversity in a Hot Suburban Market

BY C.J. EISENBARTH HAGER

Like other residents of 50-year-old Pembridge Square Apartments in Wheaton, Maryland, Joel Araneda Vargas, Monica Martínez-Parra, and their two children moved to the property because it was affordable.

In exchange for affordability, however, Pembridge residents had to endure unreliable heat, crime, drugs, graffiti, and gangs. In Montgomery County, where the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,187, Pembridge was one of the only affordable options.

Then, in 2002, things changed dramatically for Vargas and the other Pembridge residents. **Montgomery Housing Partnership** (MHP), a NeighborWorks® organization in Wheaton, purchased the 133-unit property, began rehabilitation, and opened up its Community Life Program to the residents.



[top] Homeowners **Monica Martínez-Parra** and **Joel Araneda Vargas**

[bottom] **Pembridge Square Apartments**
COURTESY MONTGOMERY HOUSING PARTNERSHIP

The \$40,000-a-unit rehabilitation brought new kitchens, bathrooms, carpeting, heating systems, windows, improved security, and community facilities. MHP's Community Life Program offered a pre-school program, homework club, and summer camp, as well as courses in English as a second language, computer training, and financial literacy.

Today, the Pembridge provides efficiencies and one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartment homes for extremely low-, low- and moderate-income families in suburban Washington, D.C.

To help support the extremely low-income families, Pembridge has 20 project-based Section 8 vouchers. MHP also received a \$240,000 from

a special congressional appropriation to NeighborWorks® America to develop rental homes for extremely low-income families. The grant helped convert a former basement into a community facility with a pre-school, computer-learning center, community space, and kitchen.

Key Resident Services

Vargas was one of the first Pembridge residents to enroll in MHP's individual development account (IDA) program. The Vargas family had fled their native Chile to escape the Pinochet dictatorship, sought refuge in Brazil for more than 20 years, and eventually immigrated to the United States and Pembridge Square.

Vargas worked several jobs, including working as a day laborer. Others in his family worked low-paying, yet steady jobs. The family saved their hard-earned dollars, which were matched by MHP's IDA program at a 3:1 ratio. Their IDA savings and hard work, combined with financial literacy and homeownership classes, helped the Vargas family purchase a home.

Pembridge provided MHP an opportunity to preserve affordability in a community experiencing great change. Pembridge was an \$18 million project, including the \$7 million acquisition cost.

"Pembridge Square Apartments helps ensure that our low- and middle-income neighbors are not pushed out of the community, preserving the rich diversity of Wheaton," said Robert Goldman, MHP's executive director.

NeighborWorks® America CEO Kenneth D. Wade, speaking at Pembridge's opening ceremony, applauded the development for providing "more than new buildings with fresh paint. Having a safe, stable place to call home improves the quality of life, job retention, and access to higher education." Wade was quoted in the *Montgomery County Gazette*.

Since MHP purchased Pembridge, life has improved for its residents. Police calls are down by 26 percent. The homework club serves about 50 children. The students' academic performance has improved by an average of 1.5 years on word recognition and 1.7 years on passage comprehension.

The Vargas family, now no longer residents of Pembridge, credits the services and support of MHP's Community Life Program with helping them improve their lives.

Later this year, the family will celebrate their first anniversary as homeowners – and a powerful sense of accomplishment, ownership, and fulfillment. They said they finally have a place for their family. ■

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