



LETTER FROM THE FIELD

A Personal Reflection

REMEMBERING CUSHING DOLBEARE



Cushing N. Dolbeare, a long-time policy advocate for low-income affordable housing and founder and chair emeritus of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, died of cancer March 17 at her home in Mitchellville, Maryland, outside of Washington, D.C. She was 78. – Editor

BY STEVEN J. TUMINARO

On March 17, the country lost a “giant” in the field of affordable housing and social justice and a tireless defender of the rights of the poor. And I, and countless others, lost a friend, a role model, and a mentor.

Cushing was a true champion for housing and the rights of low-income people. Over the past 50 years, she consistently and unwaveringly worked to advance affordable housing and improve the housing conditions of low-income people. No one did more, during this period, to promote a rational federal housing policy that serves the needs of all people.

Her accomplishments would fill volumes, but a few highlights would include:

- ▶ Founded the National Low Income Housing Coalition (1974).
- ▶ Founded the Low Income Housing Information Service.
- ▶ Served as executive director of the National Rural Housing Coalition (1974 to 1977).
- ▶ Served on the President’s Commission on Housing (1981 to 1982).
- ▶ Chaired a joint HUD/EPA Task Force on the hazards of lead paint (1993 to 1995).
- ▶ Honored with the Heinz Award for the Human Condition (2002).
- ▶ Honored as Housing Person of the Year by the National Housing Conference.
- ▶ Served on the Millennial Housing Commission (2000 to 2001).
- ▶ Appointed Senior Scholar at the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University (2002).

The Heinz Award carried a \$250,000 stipend. Typically, Cushing donated the money to the National Low Income Housing Coalition for an endowment fund. Her remarks on accepting the award appeared in the summer 2002 *bright ideas* (page 90).

At the time of her death, Cushing served on the boards of the National

Housing Conference, the Center for Housing Policy, the Housing Assistance Council, The Enterprise Foundation, and the Alliance for Healthy Homes.

Despite her many accomplishments and contributions to affordable housing, I will always remember Cushing as ... well, just Cushing. She was friendly, gracious, patient, approachable, witty, intelligent, visionary, and bold enough to dream of what’s possible – especially when it came to responding to the needs of those who had been “overlooked” by the broader society.

‘It’s about poverty, not housing.’

Cushing was one of the very first people I met with in Washington when I began working for Neighborhood Reinvestment (now known as NeighborWorks® America) in 1978 from having been housing director in Yonkers, New York. She helped me learn what was going on in the “Washington scene” and across the nation.

I still remember and appreciate how gracious she was with her time – and how patient she was with my lack of understanding of the real issues (“It’s about poverty, not housing”). Over the ensuing years, I would interact with Cushing frequently, in meetings, at events, and, from time to time, in very special, private, one-on-one talks, where we’d just chat.

When Cushing was stepping down in 1994 (for the second time) from her role as executive director of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, I remember naively wishing her the very best in her well-deserved retirement. Cushing laughed and said something like: “Gracious me. I’m having too much fun to retire. And besides, we’re not yet finished with this fight.” I tried to keep the tone light: “How will you know when you’re finished?” Cushing suddenly turned very

serious: "When this nation fulfills its promise in the Housing Act of 1949 to provide 'a decent home and suitable living environment' for all Americans. I may not see that in my lifetime, but I'll keep working and fighting for that for as long as I can."

Just a week before her passing, Cushing delivered a moving speech before the National Council of State Housing Agencies in which she quoted from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address that described one-third of the nation as "ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed." "Today," Cushing said, "only the statement about housing remains true." She went on, "If we were willing and able – and we are able – to provide the same level of support that we provide for homeownership to low- and moderate-income households, we could solve our affordable housing problem in 10 years."

True to her promise, Cushing kept working and fighting to the very end. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the nation, someday, kept its promise of "a decent home and suitable living environment" for all Americans?

Cushing leaves a real legacy – and a void, for so many of us that will be very hard to fill.

Cushing, on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who are living in better housing today because of your tireless efforts, I say, "Thank You."

From now on, each time I think of Cushing, it will cause me to renew my own commitment, expressed in an old song often quoted by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "If I can help somebody as I pass along ... then my living will not be in vain." ■

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PS: For those who didn't know Cushing and are interested in learning more about this extraordinary woman, I would encourage you to simply do a "Google™" search on the Internet.

ATLANTA MHA MAINTAINS LEGACY OF PRIDE



GLANCING BACK

10 years ago in
facts, figures and
bright ideas



BY CHARLOTTE UNDERWOOD

In the summer of 1995, *facts, figures and bright ideas* (Vol. 14, No. 4 July/August 1995) reported that then HUD Assistant Secretary Nicolas Retsinas presented the Atlanta Mutual Housing Association with a "Federal Housing Commissioner's Certificate of Recognition" for its DeFours Ferry Manor multifamily property.

According to the certificate, "The mutual housing concept of 'ownership' instills a sense of pride and responsibility in all residents. Likewise, by including the residents of DeFours Ferry Manor in the renovation work and in decision-making roles, you help to ensure long-term quality housing and responsive management."

Before leaving, Retsinas also visited residents George and Clara Dipp in their apartment.

Today, if you listen to MHA Executive Director Ron Walker describe the DeFours Ferry Manor complex, the sense of pride still resonates. Since Retsinas' visit, DeFours Ferry Manor has undergone significant renovations and established

on-site programs made possible through various partnerships to provide residents with much-needed services.

Some of those services include a homeownership program, a social services program, a youth program, a technology bus (an instructor teaches and remains on property three weeks at a time), an after-school program, and a daycare program.

The original MHA model served as a means for residents to become responsible renters and prepare for homeownership. In fact, George and Clara Dipp bought a single-family home for themselves in 2002, Walker said, "so the plan worked!"

However, as affordable housing stock continues to diminish, Walker explained that some residents become long-term renters because there is no housing available at the same rate found at DeFours Ferry Manor. Walker added that Atlanta has an affordable housing shortage of 60,000 units.

Therefore, Walker stated that Atlanta's current challenge is to:

- ▶ Increase the supply of affordable housing as well as stimulate the supply;
- ▶ Create an industry through the Georgia State Trade Association of Nonprofit Developers (G-STAND) that supports affordable housing; and
- ▶ Work in collaboration with other groups such as the Chamber of Commerce.

In spite of the noted challenges, 67 percent of families who transitioned from DeFours Ferry Manor bought homes. The legacy continues. ■

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