

A SYMPOSIUM REPORT

SOCIAL STRESSES IN CHANGING NEIGHBORHOODS

BY MELISSA KRISTEK

The First Ward neighborhood northwest of downtown Houston always has been ethnically and culturally diverse. Cleola Williams, a resident of the neighborhood's Washington Avenue community, was content with this. After all, for more than 60 years, she had been occupying the same home that her mother, grandmother and great grandmother lived in.

Eventually, people started moving away and the neighborhood, over time, showed signs of disinvestment and decay. Williams, a panelist during a NeighborWorks® Training Institute symposium in Minneapolis in April, wanted to reverse this.

She worked to revitalize her community as well as preserve the area's cultural, economic and historical diversity. Her efforts produced positive results, but then, interested developers envisioned the community as a prime area for commercial development. "Urban renewal."

Williams said, "Developers came in and got poor people to sell property for low and built expensive homes and condos when the poor left."

This is just one illustration of gentrification and its effect on residents. These issues were part of the symposium, "When Gentrification Comes Knocking – Navigating Social Dynamics in Changing Neighborhoods," sponsored by Freddie Mac.

The symposium was a unique forum for practitioners, board members, researchers and policymakers who work with neighborhoods that are experiencing gentrification now, have in the past, or may in the future. It included a theatrical interpretive piece, a panel of speakers, group and individual exercises, a special luncheon, and afternoon breakout sessions.

Defining Gentrification

What is gentrification? According to research by Maureen Kennedy and Paul Leonard in *Dealing with Neighborhood Change: A Primer on Gentrification and Policy Choices*, a discussion paper prepared for The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, the term "gentrification" has had a number of contrasting definitions such as the displacement of lower income residents by higher income residents or the commercial and residential improvements in urban neighborhoods.

This symposium deals with another side to gentrification, which is represented in part of Kennedy's and Leonard's definition. They wrote, in contrast to property-focused visions of the gentrification process, others describe gentrification as the class and racial tensions and dislocation-the socioeconomic or people-based effects-that frequently accompany the arrival of new residents into a neighborhood.

Flag Wars

During the symposium luncheon, keynote speaker Linda Goode Bryant, filmmaker and producer, discussed her PBS Point of View documentary of one gentrifying neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio. Filmed over a four-and-a-half year period, *Flag Wars* is a 90-minute documentary about an older, African-American neighborhood with new homebuyer interest from the gay professional community.



Symposium participants share their personal experiences with gentrification during a group exercise.

What the newer residents saw as a beneficial effort to renovate and restore value in a declining neighborhood, deep-rooted residents saw as an assault on their heritage and a threat to their ability to hold on to their homes.

As part of her presentation, Bryant showed and discussed several film clips in which residents gave personal insights about what was happening in their neighborhood and how it was affecting their lives.

She encouraged the symposium participants to think about community and what it really means. In one film excerpt, a long-time resident voiced his opinion on the dynamics of his changing neighborhood: "I don't want to wake up in my black community to see white people."

But the issues in the neighborhood weren't all about race. Other social stresses also were identified, such as economic status and sexual orientation.

Gentrification – Personal Perspectives

To detail the complexity and diverse ideas about gentrification, a panel of speakers shared with symposium participants their research and personal perspectives as well. Each panelist's unique experiences and lens illustrated the social stresses of gentrifying neighborhoods they worked and/or lived in.

As mentioned earlier, **Cleola Williams** described how the revitalization of her Houston neighborhood brought on the gentrification. When this began, Williams' mission had to change from "fixing up" her neighborhood to finding common ground to unify her newly gentrifying community.

Williams wanted to help reduce the social stresses as well as maintain its revitalization. Her solution: "You must get as many people together as you can. Organize and work toward a common goal." When there is a community dilemma such as flooding or a sewage problem, Williams said, status, class and race don't even factor in.

Kelly Hill, a Ph.D candidate at Emory University in Atlanta, outlined the results of her research study "Managing Neighborhood Change: Best Practices for Communities Undergoing Gentrification." In her study, Hill researched three Atlanta neighborhoods (Mechanicsville, MLK Historic District, and Reynoldstown), Shaw in Washington, D.C. and Jamaica Plain in Boston.

Each neighborhood was having a difference experience concerning gentrification. Other than discovering that gentrification carried a negative connotation, Hill found that there was little consensus on the definition of gentrification and a lack of research on the social impacts in gentrifying neighborhoods.

She identified four key determinants that affected a community's ability to manage neighborhood change:

1. Community cohesiveness
2. Community collaborations
3. Community building and organizing
4. Community response to gentrification

Hill reported that effective techniques for managing change were to help residents understand and navigate gentrification, enhance cohesiveness and create neighborhood pride, and build on the skills of community members thereby increasing individual capacity of residents in order to improve their chances of staying in the neighborhood.



Presenters (left to right): J Otis Smith, facilitator; Carlos Romero; Kelly Hill; Brad Lander; and Cleola Williams.

As the former executive director of Mission Housing, a San Francisco community-based, nonprofit affordable housing organization, **Carlos Romero** helped lead a massive participatory planning process in the Mission District, a historically Latin community that has grown into a community for shopping, dining and having fun.

According to Romero, many artists and young gay couples began moving into this growing community that is now a high-tech area. The housing stock went from being undervalued to a median home price of more than \$700,000.

Romero wanted to share with the community the planning and zoning process to help them understand the effects of gentrification and how they could survive it. Over two years he organized residents who were not familiar with the issues and offered "popular education" on community building and organizing. His next step was to plan larger meetings to discuss these issues and concerns. Meeting attendance increased from approximately 60 residents to 350.

In the end he oversaw the development of more than 590 affordable housing units and expanded community organizing efforts through an extensive program of social services.

Panelist **Brad Lander** worked as the executive director of the Fifth Avenue Committee in South Brooklyn, New York. Lander helped develop affordable housing units and innovative workforce development, housing, organizing, and community justice programs. With FAC's Displacement-Free Zone and other local initiatives, his organization assured residents in the Park Slope neighborhood that they could benefit from neighborhood change.

Park Slope was a poorer neighborhood that started seeing dramatic property value and rent increases. These troubles had to be addressed to protect the community's diversity and housing affordability.

To protect the diversity, one idea was to start integrating the schools with children from different cultural and economic backgrounds instead of sending the middle-class children away to private schools or other schools outside of the neighborhood. To protect housing affordability,

one deli owner who had tenants in his building was a surprise agent in helping with gentrification. Instead of instantly inflating rent as high as he could, he questioned how much he could raise the leases without displacing his renters and still pay his taxes.

There are so many different ways communities can experience gentrification. Kenneth D. Wade, NeighborWorks® America CEO, has more than 25 years' experience in community development and has worked with gentrifying communities in Boston. His interest in serving these communities sprouted from his personal experience with urban renewal as a child during the Civil Rights movement. Wade said, "Gentrification forces us to look at social and racial issues." ■

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GENTRIFICATION AS THEATRE

Gentrification, and the social stresses it causes, is often a sensitive subject. To inspire healthy, productive dialogue, the theatrical group BREAKING ICE performed a 10-minute series of skits and monologues to identify and demonstrate the stereotypes, beliefs and conversations of people from gentrifying communities. To view their performance, visit www.nw.org/training and view the link Symposium Highlights – Minneapolis 2005.

For more information on BREAKING ICE, visit their website at <http://www.puc-mn.org/theatre.html>.

BREAKING OUT

Various small-group afternoon sessions delved into the varying impacts of gentrification:

- Gentrification in Black and White: Working Through the Dynamics of Race
- Beyond Race: Cultivating Socially Connected Neighbors to Navigate Change in the Face of Gentrification
- It Isn't All About Consensus: Negotiating Competing Interests in Gentrifying Neighborhoods
- Creating a Broad-Based, Inclusive, Neighborhood Response to Gentrification
- Myths & Realities About Gentrification and its Social Impacts

Information on the work of these panelists and additional resources on gentrification can be found online at www.nw.org/training. View the link entitled Symposium Highlights – Minneapolis 2005.