

the **Stand** south side news

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Syracuse, NY

SUMMER 2015 Issue 43 **FREE**

SEEING FATHERHOOD

Teacher, disciplinarian, protector: How do you define the role of dad?

Housing discrimination

A look inside the efforts of CNY Fair Housing

special report

Shining the spotlight on housing workers, nonprofits and more

Jeffrey Houston
Remembering a musician who lived life to the fullest

REGISTER NOW FOR PRE-K



FAIR HOUSING EDITION

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Stand

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SCHOOL AND YOUTH | Why pre-kindergarten is a great investment for the future of Syracuse's children. Find out how to register your child before it is too late.



FATHERHOOD | Keith Muhammad defines fatherhood and reflects on the role it plays in his life and in the lives of his family members.

SPECIAL REPORT — HOUSING | A project called My Housing Matters takes an in-depth look at fair housing issues in Central New York. Where you live determines everything.

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Check out how a former Syracuse point guard plans to improve the city's parks.



ENTERTAINMENT | Musician Jeffrey Houston leaves a legacy of music and love after his death in early April.

■ Cover photography of Keith Muhammad with his grandson Kyren by Brenda Muhammad

CALENDAR | SUMMER

What: Celebration Luncheon for Onondaga County Seniors

When: Noon Thursday, May 21

Where: CNY Regional Market "F" Shed, 2100 Park St.

Cost: Age 60+, no charge; a \$2.75 suggested donation is requested. Under 60, \$12.

More details: Event honors three Onondaga County residents: Senior Citizen of the Year, Senior Services Professional of the Year and Flanders Memorial Caregiver of the Year.

RSVP: All guests must register by calling (315) 435-2362 ext. 4945

What: Second annual Bike for Brady

When: 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday, June 7

Where: The Brady Faith Center, 404 South Ave.

Cost: Donations and sponsorships sought starting at \$25

More details: All registration fees and additional donations go to support the Brady Faith Center and its mission to provide a space for peace, hope and justice to Syracuse's Southwest neighborhood. All rides begin from and end at the Brady Faith Center. The 52-miler kicks off at 8 a.m. The 26-miler starts at 8:30 a.m. The 8-miler starts at 9:30 a.m.

More Info.: Contact the Brady Faith Center at (315) 472-9077 or email andrewslunetta@gmail.com

A comprehensive report published last fall by CNY Fair Housing presented the state of housing in Syracuse and Onondaga County, along with the implications for certain groups or “classes.” Those include minorities, the disabled, seniors, refugees and immigrants, large families and those receiving certain kinds of public assistance.

Of particular note in the report is a previous assessment of Syracuse as “hyper-segregated,” the ninth most racially segregated metropolitan area in the country. This is evident not only in how the city is divided, but also in the school system. The CNY Fair Housing analysis reveals that this finding is reinforced in how and where people live here.

The report measured three indexes: educational outcomes, economic opportunities and housing/neighborhood opportunities.

In a special report on a dedicated website — MyHousingMatters.com — students in the Urban Affairs reporting class at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications spent the spring semester finding people directly touched by the identified disparities and putting faces to the data. In this summer issue of The Stand, we have devoted a special section to the My Housing Matters report.

Our focus

We put the attention on black families because this group stood out as having the greatest struggle with all three opportunity indexes. Stories told include: Personal accounts of all kinds, the Section 8 subsidy program, disparities in our educational system and experiences finding fair and affordable housing.

Our goal

By sharing honest, personal accounts of residents, and by focusing on the people who work at local agencies, we personalize the numbers, charts, maps and indexes. The project is about residents, decision-makers and policy-makers, those who use the system and who make it run, often against long odds — and often in the face of adversity. The project embodies a vital mission of journalism: giving voice to the voiceless.

Ashley Kang



INTERACT WITH US



You'll find even more stories, along with videos, at MyHousingMatters.com

- Follow us on Twitter @MyFairHousing
- Connect and stay in touch on Facebook with the official My Housing Matters page
- Share your photos on Instagram — My Housing Matters



UPCOMING EVENT

July 18

Annual Photo Walk

When: Saturday, July 18, 10 a.m.

Where: South Side Innovation Center, 2610 S. Salina St.

Details: A Photo Walk is a social photography event where photographers get together to explore a neighborhood, shoot photos and practice their skills. Participants will follow a path through the South Side, leaving from the South Side Innovation Center. They will take photos of the neighborhood and neighbors along the way. The event will open with a short lesson by professional photographer and multimedia producer Marilu Lopez Fretts.

After the walk, participants will share their photos with the group and receive feedback.

The day's best shots will be printed in the September issue of The Stand.

A limited number of digital cameras are available for loan. To reserve a camera and/or sign up for the Photo Walk, contact Ashley Kang by email before July 10.

More Info.:

Call (315) 882-1054 or email ashley@mysouthsidestand.com

HOW TO SIGN UP

Registration for 4-year-olds who reside in the Syracuse City School District is taking place through August as long as spaces are available.

How to enroll: Online or in person at the Student Registration Center, 1005 W. Fayette Street, 4th floor, from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday (315) 435-4545.

If you have questions: In partnership with SCSD, a number of local organizations and agencies are ready to assist parents or guardians who have questions or who encounter challenges with the registration process. On the South Side, contact Huntington Family Center, 405 Gifford St. (315) 476-3157.

More information and updates will appear in The Stand online and elsewhere over the summer.

REGISTER FOR PRE-K

Syracuse City School District will add more early education programs



> Pre-K students Dominick Bordeaux, left, Frank Ford and Zyaire Grant listen to Breagin Riley read a Dr. Seuss book to them this past March. | Photo courtesy of Syracuse City School District

Research shows that early education provides short-term and long-term benefits for children

It's time to register your 4-year-old for pre-kindergarten in Syracuse.

The Syracuse City School District has received a \$1.6 million grant to expand pre-K offerings this coming school year. Two new classrooms are being added to this year's pre-K budget so more 4-year-olds in the city will have access to early education programs. But we must make sure all these spaces are filled to secure the funding and keep pre-K moving forward in our community.

Research continues to document that early childhood education confers many benefits, both immediate and long term. Children enrolled in quality pre-K programs enter kindergarten better prepared for learning and are more likely to be reading by the third grade. These kids also have higher high school graduation rates and lower incarceration rates later; they are more likely to attend and complete college and to enjoy better job prospects.

Even without a college degree, youngsters who experience pre-K are more likely to be employed in the future and to earn higher incomes. In addition to these positive outcomes for children, full-day pre-K programs support the needs of families to balance their work schedules

with their children's education.

Perhaps most important, there is growing recognition that pre-K provides a vital step out of poverty, equipping children with early academic and social-emotional skills. Today, educators, business leaders and public officials are all talking about the value of this investment — both social and economic — to our nation's future. As Nobel Prize-winning researcher professor James Heckman put it at the White House Summit on Early Education in 2014: "The evidence shows that (it) is much more effective to invest in high-quality early childhood education programs than to remediate later in life."

Nationally, President Barack Obama has proposed more funding for pre-K programs. Locally, Syracuse Police Chief Frank Fowler has stated that early education is the best deterrent to crime. The mayor, Common Council, school board and superintendent have all voiced support for pre-K.

Don't miss out. Enroll your child in pre-K and give him or her a jumpstart for success in life.

Column submitted by Diana Biro, Peter Knoblock (chair), and Eric Rogers, members of the Pre-K Task Force of ACTS (the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse), a grassroots, interfaith network advocating for social justice.

CALENDAR | SUMMER

What: 2015 Creekfloat

When: 3 p.m. Saturday, June 6

Where: Starting at Armory Square, Downtown

Cost: Free to attend

Contact: Call Steve at (315) 345-2727 or Bob at (315) 396-2944 or email selent@msn.com

More Info.: This floating art parade takes place on Onondaga Creek each year. Artists create floating artwork and send them through Armory Square in front of hundreds of spectators. Volunteers are also sought to retrieve the floats from the creek when done and kayakers to help move the floats along.

What: Juneteenth: The 150th Anniversary Celebration of Freedom Realized

When: Starting at noon, Saturday, June 13

Where: Clinton Square, Downtown Syracuse

Cost: Free

Contact: Donate to the event and learn more by visiting syracusejuneteenth.org

More Info.: This is a free, family-friendly day of reflection and inspiration. Attendees will enjoy a kids zone, an educational area, food court, panel discussions, live entertainment and access to the Dr. Henry A. Washington health pavilion.

What: Weekend Warriors Boot Camp

When: 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays throughout the summer starting July 11

Where: Syracuse Salt of the Earth Ministries, 320 W. Onondaga St.

Cost: Free and open to all

Contact: Visit the church from 11 a.m. to noon Saturday, July 11, or register during any Sunday church service or by calling (315) 423-3829.

More Info.: This summer program is for youth in K through 7th grade. Attendees will learn positive behavioral skills, friendship and relationship building through fun and entertainment. Refreshment and snacks will be provided. The focus will be on "Healthy Living" — staying fit and eating better.

What: Tutors needed

When: Classes are from Monday, July 6, to Friday, Aug. 14. Volunteers will teach two hours per week.

Where: Various locations throughout Syracuse

Contact: Wendy Carl-Isome at wendy.carl@jobsplus.cc or call (315) 442-3242 ext. 1162

More Info.: JOBSplus! is recruiting volunteer tutors to help refugees practice "everyday" English and to teach computer skills this summer. No experience necessary. Tutors need to attend a two-and-a-half hour training session in June, plus an orientation to meet students. In 2014, the program helped 61 refugees improve their English and computer skills. The refugees were instructed by 38 volunteer tutors. Approximately 60 percent of the refugees were self-sufficient within 90 days of the instruction.



Make college dreams real.

Just Say Yes...!

Through Say Yes to Education, Syracuse University is joining with the Syracuse City School District and others to:

- > Put Syracuse City School District students on the road to success
- > Give city students a college tuition guarantee
- > Build an educated workforce, so local companies can grow and prosper
- > Create a stronger Central New York economy

Syracuse is taking the lead in urban education. As one of the first communities in the United States committed to making sure all public school students can afford to attend college, Syracuse is making college dreams a reality for thousands of students.

Learn more.

To find out what Say Yes to Education means for you and your family, go to sayyessyracuse.org or call 315.443.4260.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



> Keith Muhammad gives his grandson, Kyren, a helping hand as he learns how to ride a bicycle in the backyard of his house. | Brenda Muhammad, Staff Photo

Keith Muhammad, a community correspondent for The Stand, sat down with his wife, Brenda, also a correspondent, to answer her questions about fatherhood. Muhammad is a captain with the Syracuse Fire Department in the Fire Prevention Bureau, a Fire and Life Safety Educator, an American Red Cross Community Disaster Educator and an American Heart Association CPR instructor. More importantly, Muhammad is a son, father and grandfather.

By | Keith and Brenda Muhammad
Community Correspondents

There are terms that we throw out in everyday conversations that we never really discuss or define. For example, a young boy may be told that when he grows up he is going to be a man. But what does that really mean? If you ask different people, you'll get different answers. Generally nobody explains

to the boy what actually makes him a man. So he is left on his own to figure things out or he may confer with his equally uninformed friends to define the concept of being a man or father, which can be a recipe for trouble.

In an intimate conversation, we explored qualities and characteristics of what it means to be a man or a father. The experience provided an opportunity to share family history and strengthen the relationship. It is our hope that our intimate reflections will inspire other families to have an intentional dialogue about manhood and fatherhood.

What comes to mind when you hear the word father?

I think of the word further or furthering, which is synonymous to advancing. By this, I mean a father pro-

motes or advances his child towards becoming a man or a woman. He is someone that cares for you, provides for you, loves you and teaches you. He is a teacher, caretaker, disciplinarian and protector. He maintains his children, emotionally, intellectually, physically and spiritually. These are the words that come to mind when I think of father.

What should the community know about black fathers?

Every black father is not an absentee father. There are many of us involved in our children's lives. We are present and we care. Some of us have been prevented from being involved in the lives of our children, but we want to be involved. I think the Million Man March showed the world that black fathers do care and black fathers are involved. My father was active in my life. I'm active in my son's life. My son has a child, and he is active in his son's life. I have brothers, cousins and uncles that are active in their children's lives. Our family and other families are a living testimony that black fathers are active and involved.

What sort of things did you do with your father?

My father, Laymon Herring, was a publisher of two local newspapers: The Syracuse Banner and The Syracuse Crusader Newspapers. He didn't play sports, so he never showed me how to throw a ball, make a basket or run a sprint. He was an avid reader and writer. He told me he loved to read because he could take a trip anywhere around the world, through a book. He encouraged me to read, and we had discussions on the books he was reading. He loved to write, and he often asked me to proofread what he wrote. I think this was his way of getting me involved in the art of writing. My father was also a community advocate. Every year, we would host The Old Syracusan Picnic at Thornden Park, and about 1,000 people would come out for a day of food, fun and entertainment. He made sure that all of my brothers and sisters helped with the paper and the picnic. Today, I am a life-long learner, a writer and a community advocate, and it is because of the example of my father.

Did you dream about being a father?

I thought about it and the things that I might do. Some of it was based on what I did with my father; another part was based on what I saw other fathers do or what I saw on TV. For some men, if you are into sports, you envision playing baseball, basketball or football. I thought more about having a son than a daughter. I thought about playing ball and going to the park with him, reading and just spending time with him.

What makes you proud as a father?

I was proud when my son, Karesaun, was born. Karesaun has continued to make me proud as he reaches



> Keith Muhammad and his grandson, Kyren. | Brenda Muhammad, Staff Photo



> Keith Muhammad stands with his son, Karesaun, and grandson, Kyren. | Brenda Muhammad, Staff Photo



> Keith Muhammad and his father, Laymon Herring, sit with a young Karesaun. | Photo Provided

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Keith Muhammad makes a point of being a central figure in his son Karesaun's life, just like his father, Laymon Herring was in his growing up.

Here are a few other similarities between Muhammad and his father:

A LOVE OF WRITING

Herring was a publisher for The Syracuse Banner and The Syracuse Crusader. Muhammad is a community correspondent for The Stand.

LOCAL ADVOCACY

When Muhammad was a kid, his father would host The Old Syracusan Picnic at Thornden Park, a popular event. Muhammad takes part in the Million Man March and this year, he hopes to bring his son along, too.

KNOW A FATHER TO SPOTLIGHT?

To nominate a father, send a short explanation to The Stand Director Ashley Kang by calling (315) 882-1054 or emailing ashley@mysouthsidestand.com

ABOUT THE SERIES

Our first story in the new Fatherhood Series ran in March's special anniversary issue. It focused on a new community outreach program — the Fatherhood Initiative — launched by Syracuse Healthy Start to provide resources for fathers.

This series idea originated from photos that came out of The Stand's summer community journalism series, *From Where We Stand*. Eight residents shared photos of their family life throughout the summer, and many images highlighted touching moments between father and son.

In some of the final images, you can see a father playfully blowing bubbles with his young son, a father supportive of his son's dream of becoming a boxing champion and a grandfather teaching his grandson to ride a bike. During the exhibit's gallery opening, participant Brenda Muhammad said it best: **"This project is important because it shows there are strong men supporting and raising their sons in this community."**

Because of those photos and Brenda's statement, I wanted to further highlight South Side fathers through stories.

— Ashley Kang,
director of The Stand



> Keith Muhammad and his grandson Kyren share a happy moment on Father's Day last year. | Brenda Muhammad, Staff Photo

different milestones in life, like his graduation from high school, becoming a father and purchasing a home. He works hard and is trying to improve himself. He is going to school to finish his degree. He's a good father and

***"Every black father
is not an
absentee father."***

— Keith Muhammad

is there for his son, Kyren. Karesaun loves Kyren, and Kyren knows he is loved. I see Kyren's face light up when he is with his father. I get joy when I watch them, and I can see myself or my father in them.

What sort of talks do you have with your son about being a man or a father?

We talk about the proper way of treating women, providing for his family and earning an honest living. I've taught him that he should treat all women with respect; treat them like he treats his mother. We talked about purchasing his own home so that he doesn't have to deal

with a landlord knocking on the door demanding his rent and threatening to put him and his family out. He knows that his role as a father is to provide a home and meals for his family and to maintain a job. I told him that if he should find himself in a job that he doesn't like, it is his responsibility to continue working until something better comes along or until he makes a job for himself.

What is your fatherhood legacy?

My father gave to me a legacy of service to my family, my community and to my people. I think my legacy was being involved in the local organizing committee for the Million Man March and being a follower of the Hon. Minister Louis Farrakhan who convened The March. I was proud to be there to have witnessed it. That was the proudest moment of my life and I felt that if I had died that day after seeing that, it would have been all right. Because I knew that a change was occurring at that time, and one day, our neighborhoods would be as we hoped them to be. Where people can live, not in fear, but live in peace and in harmony. That was about manhood. Now that was about fatherhood. Period. That was about showing our children that no matter what happens, we are going to stand up and are willing to die to make it better for them. We are now coming up on the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March, and I look forward to taking my son, and my grandson on this trip. My son taking his son to The March; I want that to be part of my legacy.

Help Syracuse Kids Do Better in School



Become a Foster Grandparent

Spend 15 hours/week in a 1st or 2nd grade classroom. You must be 55+ and volunteers meeting eligibility requirements will earn a stipend. Enjoy the trust, respect, sense of purpose and accomplishment you'll experience as a Foster Grandparent.

Call 295-0719 or visit www.peace-caa.org



HAVE A STORY?

Where you live in the city can affect everything: your access to a good home; your kids' education and their opportunity to attend the best schools; the kinds of places where you can work.

Our city is one of the most segregated in the nation: whites, blacks, Hispanics are clustered in certain neighborhoods. Countywide, schools are especially segregated.

Outright discrimination does persist, although for most people in Syracuse it's not about that; discrimination is outlawed. But years of segregated living, and its outcomes, have yet to be undone.

If you'd like to share your story, we're interested.

You can tell us. Or, maybe you'd like to tell your story yourself. We'll work with you to do that, too.

Contact The Stand
Director Ashley
Kang ashley@
mysouthsidestand.com or
(315) 882-1054



MyHousingMatters.com

WE APPRECIATE YOU

Families were generous in many ways for My Housing Matters project



MEET THE MIMS FAMILY: Rashida Mims and nine children cram into an unsafe house in an unsafe neighborhood. Lead threatens their health, but it's the best they can do. Read her story at MyHousingMatters.com | Jessica Iannetta, Staff Photo

By | Steve Davis
South Side Stand founder

Residents' personal stories do remind us that, quite literally, it all begins where people live

The housing stories on these pages represent just a fraction of our work on this special report. If you visit our housing project website at myhousingmatters.com, you will find a number of personal stories that Syracuse residents shared with us.

We owe this special note — and a special thanks to them for opening up their lives.

The officials and bureaucrats we talked to navigated most questions comfortably.

But for the “real people” — the everyday city residents — it was different. We asked them about where they live, and how they live. We asked them to let us into their homes and to let us take pictures of them there, to tell us how much they earn and if they get government subsidies. Even their kids' grades were game for discussion.

Quite a few people turned us down right from the start; some said “yes” and then had second thoughts before we got started. Some said “yes,” had an initial interview and then fell out of touch, despite many follow-up calls and knocks on their doors. We tried to figure out where to draw the line and how to interpret all this: Were

people just busy and distracted, or sending us a message to go away because they had changed their minds? How many times should we knock, call or text?

In order to tell the stories of people effectively, multiple interviews are the best. Several reporters experienced the same phenomenon: Initial interviews were rather guarded, naturally. Second ones went much better. But then, not infrequently, still more follow-ups raised doubt.

- “Is there no end to the questions?”
- “Why do you need to know that?”
- “I don't know if I want people to know all of this about me.”

We tried to tell a range of stories across a range of circumstances, realizing that you — “the audience” — inevitably would see our work through the prism of “positive” and “negative,” as is natural. How many positive stories were there? Did we “fixate” on the negative? We were sensitive about tone, and how the people we profiled would be perceived.

That said, anyone who reads the Central New York Fair Housing report would recognize that indeed there is a lot more negative than positive in it. The simple truths expressed by Sally Santangelo and Langston McKinney on the project home page reveal complex, emotional and clearly perplexing issues for anyone who would hope to address them.



MEET THE BOYD FAMILY: Janelle Boyd has made a comfortable home in Eastwood for herself and her sons after a determined march out of public housing and through a maze of low-wage jobs. Read all about Boyd and her family at MyHousingMatters.com | Brooke Lewis, Staff Photo



MEET THE PEARSON-MCINTYRE FAMILY: Only a handful of African-Americans own homes in the city of Syracuse. For one who does, Brandiss Pearson-McIntyre, the odds were particularly long — and the rewards especially sweet. View her video story at MyHousingMatters.com | Photo provided



MEET THE MILLS FAMILY: None of the Mills children has “walked” on graduation day — yet. Will a change of scenery help? The family is considering different schools — and a different state — in hopes at least one of the kids can chart a better future. Read their story at MyHousingMatters.com | Jake Cappuccino, Staff Photo



MEET THE MAXWELL FAMILY: Romeka Maxwell has used her Section 8 housing subsidy to try to find the right place for her and her two girls. Her current place is OK, though a third of those in her census tract live in poverty, and she’s right at that line herself. Find out more at MyHousingMatters.com | Brooke Lewis, Staff Photo

PROJECT PARTNERS

The **My Housing Matters special report** represents the work that came from a partnership between CNY Fair Housing and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.

CNY Fair Housing is an independent, not-for-profit organization that works to create equal housing opportunity and to eliminate housing discrimination through the enforcement of housing discrimination laws. Its mission it to educate everyone about their rights and responsibilities in the housing market. It advocates for neighborhood diversity.

The S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University is committed to educating ethical, visionary communicators who champion an open marketplace of ideas guided by the First Amendment and using contemporary professional practices.

CLOSER
LOOK

What's in the CNY Fair Housing report?

The report — “*Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing*” — measures differences in access to opportunity in three categories: **economics, education and housing**. The report states: Compared to whites, African-Americans in Onondaga County are:

- More than twice as likely to live in an area of low economic opportunity
- Four times more likely to live in an area of low educational outcomes
- Three times more likely to live in an area of low housing and neighborhood opportunity.

To illustrate how these three factors affect minority residents, in particular, the nonprofit analyzed existing data and presented it in a variety of ways: charts, maps, narrative analysis and recommendations.

The report explains that unfair housing practices that impede equal access are those that interfere with a family living in a home of its choosing: **“Impediments to fair housing are not merely acts of discrimination, but any factor that limits the access to housing opportunities for members of protected classes.”**

NOT ENOUGH TIME

Section 8 waitlist stalls as over 6,800 applicants await assistance



> Files often cover employees' desks at the Section 8 office on Gifford Street. | Mike Mahardy, Staff Photo

By | Mike Mahardy
Urban Affairs reporter

Section 8 employees field nearly nonstop questions, updates for clients every day

The elevator doors slid open with a whirring noise, as one more person entered the waiting room. Eleven blue plastic chairs lined the walls, two of them occupied at 9 a.m. But an hour later, it was standing room only: 25 people jammed together.

Toward the back of the room, speaking through a hole in a Plexiglass window, a middle-aged woman bounced on her feet. Her voice was raised as she spoke to Meg Nasiff, the Section 8 employee on the other side.

“It will be fine,” Nasiff said. “We can call the landlord now. Just give us a few minutes, and we should have everything ready.”

Nasiff retreated deeper into the reception office that occupied one corner of the small waiting room. Stacks of papers lined the desks, covering family photos and hiding the faces of other employees. On the wall next to Nasiff’s phone, a list adorned a sheet of yellow paper: “Banned Landlords in the Syracuse Area.”

Manila folders, color-coded documents, folded applications — the Section 8 office overflows with paper

about its 6,800 applicants for housing choice vouchers, and its 3,400 active clients. For those who are in it, the program helps them afford rent and utilities in better houses than they possibly could afford otherwise. It provides government checks that go straight to the landlords and cover the amount that exceeds 30% of the renter’s monthly income.

The woman at the window opposite Nasiff opened a Styrofoam container, pulled out a fork, and ate coleslaw for breakfast. It was 10 degrees outside, and the waiting room was warm. For now, she was comfortable.

TRYING TO HELP STALLED CLIENTS

Outside, nine floors below the Section 8 office on Gifford Street, families trudged through the snow to Nojaim Brothers Super Market, while others crossed the street to ride the elevator up to the waiting room.

“We couldn’t get ahold of the landlord, either,” Nasiff said, sitting back in her seat behind the window. “We’ll keep calling during the week, and see if he picks up.”

The client had been in limbo for weeks, trying to reach a new landlord she hoped would accept her. She wanted to move out of her current place, but to keep Section 8, she’d need a new landlord who would agree. But few landlords accept renters on Section 8, and cur-

rent ones can sometimes stall on improvements.

The client shrugged and laughed. “What do I do until then? I can’t stay at that place much longer.”

She zipped her jacket, pulled on her gloves and left the waiting room, throwing the Styrofoam container, now scraped clean, into the trash. Behind the window, Nasiff greeted the day’s second tenant.

So begin routine mornings at the Section 8 office. From her seat in the reception area, Nasiff speaks to at least 100 visitors a day, all of them clients using housing choice vouchers, as part of a program that helps 2.1 million low-income families across the country afford their rent. They visit the office to update their income documents, seek mediation with landlords, and notify Section 8 if their family’s grown or shrunk. A growing family or shrinking income can mean a bigger check.

There are 22 employees in the Section 8 office, 12 of them caseworkers who work with visitors in some capacity. On average, Nasiff said, individual caseworkers meet with 20 different clients a day.

“They could be coming in for any number of things,” said Nasiff, who as receptionist will have contact with most everyone who walks in. “And they don’t always talk to us in person. This is just the mail we got this morning.” She gripped a 5-inch stack of documents, thumbing through them from top to bottom with a fluttering noise.

“It’s never-ending. There’s always work to do around here.”

VERIFYING THE VOUCHERS

The waitlist for new clients is full, and has been since 2011. Besides the active clients, there were those nearly 7,000 on the waiting list in mid-February, as the winter



> Damita Cole works as a Section 8 housing choice voucher specialist. | Mike Mahardy, Staff Photo

dragged on and Section 8 did its best to shorten the list.

They call it purging. Caseworkers send out inquiries to every person waiting, asking whether the families still need vouchers. Those that reply within a month remain on the list. Those that don’t, are deleted. Any additional vouchers would have to come from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), based on censuses that measure income and affordability in separate jurisdictions around the nation. And there is no word on when that will happen, or if that will ever happen. So the list is long — and the list is closed. Purging is the best Section 8 can do.

Nasiff spun in her chair as another tenant approached the window. This time it was a young woman with an application for the Courtyard at James, a nearby low-income housing development that is part of the voucher program.

That building, as well as several others in the city, is part of the project-based voucher program. That is, the owner of the building receives a federal lump sum, and the vouchers are only applicable for that property. Tenant-based vouchers, on the other hand, are used in private residences. But it’s up to the clients to find their own property in the Greater Syracuse Area — usually in the city, because of poor transportation to the suburbs. Then Section 8 has to sign off.

Behind Nasiff on that recent February morning, the room filled with more people, many of them wearing wool hats under fur hoods, shoulders relaxing as they escaped the drafty elevator. The waiting room was a brief respite, if only that, from the cold that permeated many of their homes. Housing choice vouchers help pay for utilities, too, but some of the properties are only barely up to standards.

Section 8 sends inspectors to each potential residence throughout the Greater Syracuse Area, to make sure safety measures and sanitary specifications meet standards before clients move in. The inspectors also respond to complaints when tenants don’t think their house is up to par any more. “Sometimes, the inspectors don’t even make it past the front hall,” Nasiff said.

DAY TO DAY DEALINGS

Within the hour, Nasiff spoke to 12 people, each with different agendas. Some spoke in whispers, others shouted. Others seemed too tired to talk at all. Some were there for appointments with caseworkers; some inquired about their application status. Others asked Nasiff to call potential new landlords, hopeful that she would have better luck with them. They handed Nasiff documents, returned to their space in the crowd, and waited for news.

PROTECTED CLASSES

What is a protected class?

Under federal law, it is illegal in the housing market to discriminate against certain people or groups of people by race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability or family status (to refuse large families, or single-mother families, for example).

Under New York state law, additional protected classes include: age, marital status, military status, sexual orientation and gender identity. A city of Syracuse law prohibits discrimination of transgender individuals, based on a person’s actual or perceived sex or gender identity.

What are the three indexes in the report and what do they show?

- Housing & Neighborhood Opportunity
- Economic Opportunity
- Educational Outcomes

These are measured on a scale of **1 to 5** for each census tract, with “1” representing the lowest outcome and “5” the highest.

These are reflected as *Very Low* (1), *Low* (2), *Moderate* (3), *High* (4) and *Very High* (5). A “1” rating for the Economic Opportunity index, for example, would mean that households make little and quite likely live in poverty.

HOW TO INTERPRET

So how can I use the data from the three indexes?

Using data, you can look up any address, identify its census tract and see where it falls on each of the three indexes.

Of the 48,852 blacks living in Onondaga County, 51 percent reside in census tracts characterized as having very low housing and neighborhood opportunity. According to the executive director of CNY Fair Housing, Sally Santangelo:

“If you were to tell me a child’s address in Onondaga County, I could predict with pretty good certainty what that child’s race might be and what their life outcomes might be.”

How do others fare?

The report finds Hispanics fare only slightly better, with 41 percent living in areas with very low housing and neighborhood opportunity. In comparison, only 10 percent of whites live in census tracks classified as very low opportunity.



> Barbara Alexander is one of the caseworkers who meets with applicants on a daily basis. | Mike Mahardy, Staff Photo

The reception area’s back door opened. In walked Damita Cole in a denim skirt and baby-blue sweater. Behind her glasses, her eyelids drooped. But her earrings bounced, her step was light, and she had a smile on her face.

“Come on back,” she said, strolling through back hallways lit only by overhead bulbs. “Seeing the sun outside would make me less productive.” She laughed.

It was hard to walk in her office. There was a desk there somewhere, under cascading applications, and a computer on top of it, hidden behind stacks of income reports. Cole sat down, brushing a few folders aside to make room on a nearby chair. On the wall behind her hung a cream-colored paper covered in a prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

As the housing choice voucher specialist — a title she said she’s not fond of — Cole speaks to mothers and parents and families on the waiting list. They call her, asking for their number on the list and how much longer until they ascend. Cole has a common refrain: “We’re reaching out now. We’re purging.” Just that day, the caseworkers mailed 120 letters. They would be thankful if half of those came back.

“One woman I speak to is pregnant,” Cole said, shaking her head. “She calls me saying mice jump on her bed, biting her when she’s trying to sleep. And I can’t get

her out of that house right now.”

Days before that, Cole spoke to a landlord who said he would accept housing choice vouchers. So Cole sent an inspector out. “Mice, bugs, holes in the walls, cracks in the windows,” she said. “I always ask the landlord if they would move their family there.”

And many of them said “no.” And again, Cole always had a response ready. “So why should we recommend you to Section 8 tenants?”

WORKING WITH LANDLORDS

If landlords choose to accept Section 8 vouchers, HUD pays them directly. And with a direct line from the government to their pockets, some landlords let low-income properties deteriorate, instead paying attention to their other tenants.

And when the tenants look for new landlords, rumors about Section 8 have often already reached them, deterring them from accepting vouchers. So the tenants come into the office, and Cole finds herself in the center of the vicious cycle.

“The landlords decide whether the tenant is good for them or not,” she said. “And these people are trying to improve their lives, but the landlords hear ‘Section 8,’ and immediately assume the worst.”

According to a recent report by the nonprofit CNY Fair Housing, the median household income in Onondaga County is about \$50,000. In the city of Syracuse,

it's about half of that. Families with female heads-of-household, and no husband, make slightly more than \$21,000, while blacks, on average, make \$13,000 less than whites.

And aside from 200 veterans, several hundred elderly people and the occasional single father, most people on the voucher waiting list are single black mothers, and the odds are stacked against them.

STRESS OF THE JOB

When the phone rang on Cole's desk, she answered, half expecting an angry landlord or exasperated client. But her posture softened — it was only Nasiff, calling from the front desk.

"I've wanted to do social service work for a long time," Cole said, hanging up the phone and turning in her chair. "I've worked at hospitals. I've worked with women. And now, all I want to do is help these people.

"But sometimes, the system is hard to work with."

Back at the front desk, Nasiff filed her last low-income housing application for the day. The waiting room was clearing, and the phones were ringing less. Nasiff, herself a landlord who accepts housing choice vouchers, stacked three folders in the corner of her desk. Some of the applications came in too late this month, and would have to be filed away until Feb. 28, when the



> Meg Nasiff is an employee in the Section 8 office. | Mike Mahardy, Staff Photo

next cycle for tenant consideration began.

But even if these applicants' incomes were low enough, their housing unsafe enough, their families in need of enough, they would have to wait. HUD wasn't passing down more vouchers.

"It's hectic here," Nasiff said. "Especially when you don't know if things will change."

She donned her coat, turned off the light and walked into the elevator. The air was drafty, and she could already see her breath. In 30 minutes, she would be home, with heat and hot water, and maybe some quiet. The lines would be here again tomorrow.

REPORT'S FOCUS

Why is the city such a big focus of this county report?

The report found that the black community was most affected by unfair housing practices and that the largest black populations can be found in the city of Syracuse. That's why the CNY Fair Housing report and the My Housing Matters project focus on this population and the city.

MyHousingMatters.com

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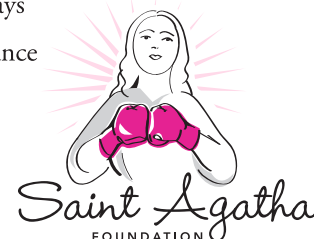
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WHAT IS SECTION 8?

Section 8, or the tenant-based rental assistance program, allows households to move to better neighborhoods by providing them with housing vouchers that assure they'll have to pay no more than 30 percent of their income toward rent.

Under Section 8, a landlord with a tenant on Section 8 is paid the difference between market rent and 30 percent of the tenant's income.

By obtaining a voucher, families can search for housing with better economic and educational opportunities, but oftentimes they have difficulty finding a property that will take Section 8.

In a local survey, of 712 housing advertisements on Craigslist:

- 25 said they would take Section 8
- 94 said they prohibit Section 8
- 593 were silent on the issue



MyHousingMatters.com

HOME SAFETY FIRST

Section 8 inspectors ensure units follow quality and safety guidelines



> Carroll Brown and Rob Nicklaw chat in their office as they prepare for the day's inspections. | Brendan Krisel, Staff Photo

By | Brendan Krisel
Urban Affairs reporter

Section 8 inspectors balance their jobs with listening to problems of tenants, landlords

Building inspector.

Not psychologist, counselor or ambassador. Carroll Brown works full time as an inspector for Section 8 in Syracuse, an often tedious and emotionally draining task that the job description doesn't even begin to capture.

He puts it this way.

"We're inspectors, we do buildings, we're not sociologists. A lot of times we don't know how to deal with people and their problems. We listen to them, we don't just blow them off, but it's very difficult for somebody like us to sit there and listen to it. It just wears us down."

Section 8 is a federally subsidized housing voucher program that provides checks directly to landlords of low-income residents, capping what they pay at no more than 30 percent of their income toward rent, said Michael Carey, the housing assistance payments pro-

gram supervisor for the Syracuse Housing Authority.

The Syracuse Housing Authority is responsible for running Section 8 in Onondaga County and Phoenix, New York, handling about 3,400 households, Carey said. Most people receiving Section 8 from the Syracuse Housing Authority live in either Onondaga County or Phoenix, but the housing authority does "port out" if participants find landlords who are willing to accept a voucher that was originally administered in Syracuse, Carey said.

But before tenants can use their Section 8 voucher, an inspector from the Section 8 office must make sure the property meets the program's minimum standards for quality and safety. The Section 8 office in Syracuse employs three inspectors: Rob Nicklaw, Carroll Brown and Charles Johnson. Each works a 36-hour week and can inspect up to 10 houses a day, making a range of \$33,000 to \$42,000 a year.

But the work of the inspectors goes beyond the building. For many tenants, the inspectors serve as representatives of the Section 8 program, said Brown, who has been an inspector for seven years.

"First and foremost we're building relationships,

because we are going to be dealing with these people time and time and time again. And we're the face of Section 8 when we're out there," Brown said.

Brown said that on each inspection he tries to compliment the tenants on their housekeeping, to encourage them about the inspection process. He treats every inspection as though he were a guest. If tenants decide they don't want him to be there, he reschedules.

Brown recalled being chased to his car by a tenant yelling at him. Sometimes he's felt so uncomfortable before a walk-through that he's called it off, too uneasy and wary to enter.

In fact, most of the time the inspectors go in blind, Brown said. The most common surprise for them: pets. Brown was bitten by a pit bull during an inspection his first year on the job.

"Basically all we can do is listen to them and say, 'Yes I understand. However, we're not in a position to do anything about it.'"

— Carroll Brown

The inspectors also find themselves dealing with other people's relationships as well, usually the relationship between landlords and tenants.

"Whether it's neighborhood relationships or differences between landlords and tenants or tenants and tenants, basically all we can do is listen to them and say, 'Yes I understand. However, we're not in a position to do anything about it,' " Brown said.

The inspectors hear from landlords, too, who have problems with the way tenants treat their properties. The properties that inspectors visit can vary dramatically. A few weeks ago Nicklaw inspected a home where the tenant was such a heavy smoker that the walls were covered in brown tar dribbling down onto the floor.

Tensions between landlords and tenants can get extreme, Nicklaw said.

"Years ago there was a building over on Bellevue Avenue, it was a three- or four- story brick building. There was a young lady in there that had some mental issues and apparently she had a falling out with the landlord and she moved out without notifying anybody," Nicklaw said. "She plugged the drain on the tub and left the water running, and this was on the third floor. The water ran down and the ceilings caved in two floors below her."

But however tense any relationship may be, the inspectors work to avoid getting attached or having a bias, Brown said. They are "not the touchy-feely type," but the "nuts-and-bolts type."

Brown said he is only ever "haunted" when he experiences a dysfunctional tenant who has children. He may have to call Child Protective Services or notify his supervisor.

Nicklaw said he once inspected a property of a mother of six, where children were locked in the bathroom and pit bulls were confined in a closet. The smell of dog feces filled the apartment.

During visits the inspectors check each room for proper structural conditions in the walls, floors and ceilings, as well as electricity, heat and the presence of lead-based paint. They note any code violations, and ultimately whether the property passes or fails. About 25 percent of houses receive a failing grade after inspection, Brown and Nicklaw said.

If a property fails, the landlord gets 30 days to fix it. After that, the leasing agreement between landlord and tenant is terminated, and the tenant gets approval to move. If an inspector identifies any life-threatening structural damage during the inspection, the lease is terminated immediately. On average, two to five contracts are terminated every month, Brown and Nicklaw said.

For some problems to be fixed, 30 days is not enough, and the landlord receives an extension. Or, if a landlord fixes the problem before the tenant moves to a new location, the property can receive a third inspection, Nicklaw said. If the property passes, the landlord and tenant may agree on a new lease.

After returning from a long day of inspections, Brown said he's always ready to go home. The work's not particularly challenging, and going through the motions can be tedious. He's anxious to escape the problems of others that he sees on a day-to-day routines.

"Nothing goes home. If it does it's 'Ha ha ha guess what happened to me today?'" Brown said.

REASONS TO INSPECT

Move-in

Any person who qualifies for a Section 8 subsidy must find a landlord who accepts it, and then ask that the property be inspected to make sure it meets standards. If it does, the tenant can move in. If a property fails the move-in inspection, the tenant has to wait until problems are fixed and the property is re-inspected. Move-in inspections are when inspectors detect most problems because new landlords are often unaware of Section 8 standards.

Peak

Every property is inspected once annually. This inspection is known as the peak inspection. Many problems surface during this inspection after building up for a year with no effort by the landlord or tenant to fix them.

Complaint

If a landlord refuses to address problems voiced by the tenant, the Section 8 inspectors can be called in to examine the problem. Common complaints include lack of heat during the winter or screens for windows during the summer. The number of complaints stays consistent throughout the year, Carroll Brown said.



CARROLL BROWN, INSPECTOR FOR 7 YEARS

Why did you take this job?

"Believe it or not somebody called up and said, 'There's a civil service exam for inspectors, you should take it.' So I did, and I did very well. Took the exam, pretty much forgot about it, and then almost a year to the date got a call saying 'Hey, do you want a job?' And that was the start of it, got through the interview process and started working."

What would you say is the most difficult part of your job?

"Keeping my opinions to myself. Like I said, you have to walk in there non-committal, you don't want to start a bias, you can't interfere with a tenant or landlord's decision to rent or to not rent. The marketplace is supposed to work by itself. We can't go in there and tell the tenant it's no good or tell the landlord it's not a good tenant or visa versa. You just keep your mouth shut and do your job."

What is the most rewarding aspect of the job?

"I mean there's a lot of little things but there's no epiphany or a, 'Ha ha, gee I'm glad I'm a public servant' type moment. They just don't exist, I think because of the nature of the job and the way we have to do our job and not get involved. It eliminates high points. So we just take it in stride if something comes up that could be celebrated, we're just not interested."

What is one of the toughest inspections you've ever been on?

"Mostly it was the burnout. The girl was sitting on the steps, went there and it was cold, and you know ask how she's doing and of course she burst into tears. How do you not get involved with somebody like that? But we talked and the landlord was actually a great landlord, he got things moving forward. It burned down at night and he was there in the morning getting things going and getting her into another place real quick, so that was one of those good relationships that even though it was bad, it could have been worse."



ROB NICKLAW, INSPECTOR FOR 30 YEARS

Why did you take this job?

"It was a job, seemed like a good job helping people find safe, decent sanitary housing, and I didn't plan on being here this long. I tried starting a business after I'd been here for several years, that didn't pan out. Then I ended up with some health issues and woke up one morning and I'd been here 30 years."

What would you say is the most difficult part of your job?

"Dealing with people's personal issues. A lot of times you're out trying to do an inspection and like I said before we deal with a lot of folks who are mentally challenged and sometimes that can be very difficult."

What is the most rewarding aspect of the job?

"The most rewarding is helping those folks who really have trouble navigating society and helping them find safe, decent sanitary housing. I was at the VanKeuren building yesterday, which is a property for homeless veterans. The guy that I was talking with yesterday there has the best place he's ever lived in his life."

What is one of the toughest inspections you've ever been on?

"I went to do an inspection for this young lady in her early 20s who had about six children. The children were running around naked in the apartment, there were a couple that were locked in the bathroom. There were a couple of pit bulls locked in a closet. There was a stench of dog feces throughout the apartment and dog feces everywhere. Several windows in the apartment were broken so it was very cold in there. There was old food on the counter in the kitchen that roaches were eating and just practically living in. It was just a sad situation for the children to be in. That's one that sticks in your mind, that's not something you're going to forget."



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HOUSING LAWS

The Civil Rights Act of 1866 asserted the first housing discrimination protections: “All citizens of the United States shall have the same right, in every State and Territory, as is enjoyed by white citizens thereof to inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold, and convey real and personal property.”

The Act went largely unenforced. In 1968, Congress passed Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in housing based on race, color, religion and national origin. In 1974, the Act was amended to include sex as a protected class, and in 1988 to include disability and family status. Locally, in 2012 the city of Syracuse amended Local Law 17, the Fair Practices Act, to eliminate discrimination in housing based on individuals’ “actual or perceived sex, or their gender identity or expression.”

— CNY Fair Housing Report

LAW AND ORDER

Housing discrimination lawsuits help hold landlords accountable



> Conor Kirchner, staff attorney at CNY Fair Housing, handles 10 to 15 lawsuits at a time. | Jessica Iannetta, Staff Photo

By | Jessica Iannetta
Urban Affairs reporter

Few lawsuits are filed because of the lengthy process and amount of paperwork involved

It should have been a straightforward case of housing discrimination, the type of case that gets resolved in just a few months. Instead, it’s dragged on now for almost eight years.

The basic facts in the case are simple: A single mother inquired about renting an apartment in Baldwinsville for herself and her young son. She arranged an apartment viewing but no one showed up. When she called the landlord, he was blunt: He didn’t allow children to live in the apartment she wanted to rent.

That statement touched off a housing discrimination complaint that would make its way through both a federal agency and a state agency before ending up in state court, where it has been for the past five years.

Although the case seems like an obvious example of discrimination against families with children, the lawsuit has continued for this long because the landlord has been uncooperative and appealing everything, said Conor Kirchner, staff attorney at CNY Fair Housing, a non-

profit organization that works to end housing discrimination in Central New York. The organization has been representing the woman in the lawsuit.

“This is a pretty basic case, he’s just been dragging it on,” Kirchner said as he flipped through the thick case file at CNY Fair Housing’s office in Syracuse. “That’s a straightforward one that would usually settle very quickly if they were reasonable about it.”

CNY Fair Housing offered the case details, as well as the court filings to validate them, to myhousingmatters.com. We agreed not to name the woman because settlement talks continue, and CNYFH does not want to jeopardize ongoing settlement talks.

Though the case is unusual in its length, it illustrates two obstacles many housing discrimination complaints face: time and red tape. The National Fair Housing Alliance estimates that there are about 4 million housing discrimination violations each year. But in 2013, only 27,352 of these cases were ever reported — or just one in every 7,000.

THE PATH TO RESOLUTION

Complaints that are filed can take a variety of paths to a resolution. In this case, the woman filed a housing discrimination complaint with the Office of Housing and



MyHousingMatters.com

Urban Development. HUD referred the complaint to the New York State Division of Human Rights, which found “probable cause” that the landlord engaged in discriminatory practices, according to the lawsuit.

The Division of Human Rights dismissed the complaint two years later at the woman’s request so she could sue the landlord in state court.

This case is one of about 10 to 15 lawsuits and HUD complaints that CNY Fair Housing currently has ongoing, Kirchner said. Many people who choose to file lawsuits or official complaints are often experiencing ongoing discrimination where they live, he added.

For example, a person in a wheelchair may want to stay where they are but need better accessibility to do so, Kirchner said. In fact, 60 percent of the complaints CNY Fair Housing receives are disability-related. The next two highest categories are family status and then race.

CNY Fair Housing receives about 350 complaints a year. Very few of those complaints — Kirchner estimates about 10 percent — ever make it to his desk. Many complaints can be resolved through mediation between the landlord and the tenant, and some complaints don’t turn out to be housing discrimination issues at all. The cases that do make it to Kirchner have already been investigated by CNY Fair Housing’s enforcement officer and his group of housing testers to make sure there’s enough evidence to pursue.

PURSuing A CASE

Once all the evidence has been gathered, CNY Fair Housing has several routes it can take to pursue a case. The organization frequently files with HUD, which charges nothing to file a complaint compared to the hundreds of dollars it can take to file in state or federal court. Complaints filed with HUD are also usually settled faster because the complaint process involves both sides sitting down with a mediator who tries to help the two sides resolve their differences.

CNY Fair Housing recently settled a HUD complaint about disability discrimination in less than six months — and got a settlement of \$1,250, Kirchner said. The complaint was sparked by a housing ad that said, “No animals, no exceptions.” CNY Fair Housing did testing to see if exemptions were made for service animals — something required by law — but found that no accommodations were made.

Although the settlement was small, it will help to deter this type of behavior in the future, Kirchner said. Settlements in state or federal court are usually much larger. In 2012, CNY Fair Housing won a \$12,000 settlement in a federal court case involving Marillac Apartments in Fayetteville after about two years in court.

The apartment complex was discriminating against families with children and, in addition to the monetary settlement, also agreed to market toward families with

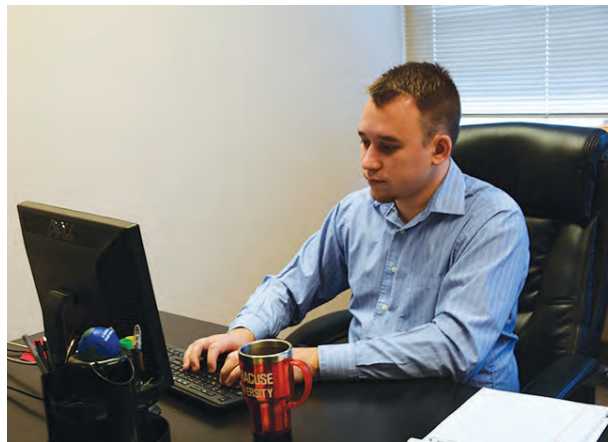
children, participate in educational training on fair housing and keep copies of prospective tenant applications and tenant files for CNY Fair Housing to review upon request, Kirchner said.

WINNING SETTLEMENTS

Much of the settlement money the organization wins goes toward future court costs, which can be substantial even if a case doesn’t drag on for years. While filing a complaint with HUD is free, the initial filing cost for state court is around \$200, and it’s around \$350 for federal court. By the time a case ends, filing fees can be in the thousands of dollars, Kirchner said. CNY Fair Housing will pay the filing fees if a client can’t afford to — and most clients can’t.

If the organization wins a case, it’s often awarded attorney fees, which help cover the costs of court filings and staff salaries. If a client gets a large settlement, CNY Fair Housing will work out a deal with the client to receive a certain percent of the settlement. Clients are never charged if they lose their case, Kirchner said.

Mounting court costs mean that settling court cases or HUD complaints quickly is a big plus. When a case is settled fast, court and staff fees are minimal, which



> Conor Kirchner, CNY Fair Housing staff attorney, works in his office on James Street. | Jessica Iannetta, Staff Photo

helps keep costs down, Kirchner said.

But even some processes meant to encourage settlement such as mediation, which is required in federal court, cost extra money. Mediation often leads to settlements though, so CNY Fair Housing will file in federal court instead of state court if it thinks the defendant is likely to settle, Kirchner said.

FAIR HOUSING LAWS

The main law that allows all these lawsuits to proceed is the Fair Housing Act, a section of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which was passed just one week after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. The act prohibits housing discrimination on the basis of race, religion and national origin and was later amended to include discrimination

COUNTY TRENDS

Varying levels in family composition across Onondaga County can lead to discrimination based on familial, gender or marital status.

In the city of Syracuse, 21 percent of households are single-mother-headed and 24 percent are married. Comparatively, in Onondaga County as a whole, 14 percent of families are single-mother-headed and 43 percent are married.

The number of households with children is fairly even in the city of Syracuse and Onondaga County, but within city neighborhoods the percentage of families with children varies. On average, 29 percent of households in the city have children, whereas neighborhoods such as the South Side, Near Westside and North Side are in the 43 to 58 percent range.

— CNY Fair Housing Report

ENFORCING THE LAW

CNY Fair Housing accepts about 350 complaints each year. About 75 percent of these come from Onondaga County and about 40 percent come from the city of Syracuse. The majority of complaints relate to landlord-tenant issues, rather than fair housing, and involve habitability, evictions and privacy. CNY Fair Housing advises these tenants of their rights. CNY Fair Housing does investigate to determine if the problems are a result of discrimination when the complainants are members of a protected class as defined by law.

In 2013, CNY Fair Housing, under contract with the city of Syracuse, tested familial status discrimination in the Syracuse University neighborhood. In eight out of the 10 instances that were tested, there was some evidence of disparate treatment of families with children. In three out of the 10 tests, the instances were severe enough to warrant legal action. CNY Fair Housing says it has worked to educate these landlords about the law; it may pursue legal action if things don't improve.

— CNY Fair Housing Report

based on gender, disability and family status.

The act has been somewhat effective in stopping housing discrimination, said John Yinger, a Syracuse University economics and public administration professor who studies housing discrimination. The main reason it works, Yinger said: The law allows private fair housing groups to sue on behalf of their communities rather than depending on complaints.

The special status given to fair housing organizations led these groups to start doing housing audits or tests to see if people were being discriminated against. By the 1990s, as courts became more comfortable with the idea of testing, fair housing groups were getting settlements in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, Yinger said.

Testing remains the biggest factor in building a successful housing discrimination case, said Ronald Van Norstrand, an attorney who founded CNY Fair Housing.

"Without it, as is the case too often with all forms of discrimination, it's a spitting match of 'he said, she said'," Van Norstrand said. "It's so difficult to pursue a case without the testing evidence."

Van Norstrand attributes most of the progress he has seen in stopping housing discrimination to these testing programs. Still, discrimination has become subtler since he founded CNY Fair Housing in 1991, he said.

"It's a constant struggle," Van Norstrand said. "It may have improved some but we have to struggle for that ultimate goal."

SUPREME COURT DECISION COULD AFFECT FUTURE HOUSING LAWSUITS

Fair housing advocates have a few choice words to describe a housing discrimination case currently before the Supreme Court:

Huge. Incredibly important.

And tragic — if they feel the decision goes the wrong way.

"It may seem alarming but yeah, I would say devastating," said Ronald Van Norstrand, an attorney who founded CNY Fair Housing, a nonprofit organization that works to eliminate housing discrimination.

The Supreme Court heard arguments in the case, *Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs v. The Inclusive Communities Project*, at the end of January and will likely issue a ruling this summer. At the heart of the case is whether the Fair Housing Act allows people to bring lawsuits based on a concept called "disparate impact."

Disparate impact refers to practices that don't intend to be discriminatory but have a bigger effect on one group than another. To understand how disparate impact works, consider which of the following scenarios qualify as examples of discrimination.

- A landlord charges extra money when an apartment has more than three occupants.
- A lender requires a record of employment history to qualify for a mortgage or loan.
- A landlord tells a black woman over the phone that an apartment is available. When the woman shows up at the office, the landlord tells her the apartment is no longer available.

Most people would agree that the last scenario is a clear example of discrimination. But the first two scenarios are also examples of discrimination, though in a more subtle form.

Charging extra money for more than three occupants can discriminate against many families. Requiring employment history for a loan or mortgage discriminates against people with disabilities who may not have a steady job but have other sources of income.

The first two scenarios are prime examples of disparate impact and right now, lenders and landlords can be sued for disparate impact. But depending on the Supreme Court's ruling this summer, that could change.

Not allowing disparate impact cases would really take away "a lot of the teeth" of the Fair Housing Act, said Conor Kirchner, staff attorney at CNY Fair Housing. Disparate impact is often the sole basis for many cases, especially those dealing with unfair lending and mortgage practices, he added.

A Supreme Court ruling against disparate impact would be a major step backward for housing discrimination laws in the U.S., said John Yinger, a Syracuse University economics and public administration professor who studies housing discrimination.

"The Fair Housing Act's a pretty amazing piece of legislation," Yinger said. "Most countries don't go that far and it's made a big difference but it's still always under assault and with the court we have now it would just be tragic if we undermined it or backed away from it."

RESOURCES FOR YOU

Local organizations provide services, answers and help of all kinds

By | Trevor Hass
Urban Affairs reporter

If you are experiencing discrimination, there are many resources in Syracuse to help.

CNY Fair Housing works closely with many of the following organizations and can help identify and solve specific problems. The majority of these organizations do not work exclusively with housing, but they could help if your problem falls into one of these categories.

“We do our best to help every person who calls, which can include providing referrals to many of the great community resources that are out there,” said Sally Santangelo, CNY Fair Housing executive director.

Added Karen Schroeder, CNY Fair Housing assistant director: “Help is out there, and it does exist.”

HELPING OTHERS

“There’s a lot of ways people can help. We are always looking for housing testers for helping in our investigations. People can sign up right on our website. There’s always an opportunity to attend one of our fundraisers or donate to help support the cause as well. People can always spread the word,” Santangelo said.

Housing testers role-play as renters looking for a place, and try to determine if there’s discrimination at play based on how landlords treat them and the answers they get.

CNY Fair Housing hosts an annual fundraiser. This year was the 4th annual Bird Houses for Fair Housing Auction and Reception.

In 2014, the event raised \$7,000 at the auction.

ALL ABOUT ARISE

One specific organization that CNY Fair Housing works closely with is ARISE Child & Family Service. ARISE, a nonprofit based in Syracuse, works to make sure “everyone, regardless of disability, has the power to make life choices and achieve their dreams.”

Phil Prehn, statewide system advocate at ARISE, said



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the objective is to help people overcome the barriers that keep them from living in the community and living an independent life.

Prehn has worked at ARISE for less than a year, but has been involved in housing in the Syracuse area for more than 20 years.

Prehn said he’s been temporarily stalled on one goal: getting a law passed that would ban landlords from refusing tenants who receive federal Section 8 subsidies that pay two-thirds of their rent. Almost 4,000 people receive Section 8 in this area. Right now, neither the city nor the county has a law banning discrimination based on Section 8. It’s legal to do so.

In the meantime, finding affordable housing for Syracuse residents is Prehn’s main focus.

“It’s exceedingly difficult for people to find housing that’s both accessible and affordable,” Prehn said.

Two- or three-year waiting lists make finding a place to live tiring and time-consuming. Some people are forced to rely on shelters. ARISE tries to help seniors stay out of nursing homes and live independently, but sometimes that’s just not feasible.

Prehn said it is important to address housing issues as individuals and as a society.

“I think you have to do both,” he said. “You can’t just turn away from people who are having real serious problems. They’ll be homeless. We’re struggling to try and reduce that in our community. But in order to make a real long-term solution, you have to start engaging the institutions that are doing this.”

HOW TO FIND HELP

CNY Fair Housing
(315) 471-0420
cnyfairhousing.org

SENIORS

Office for Aging Services
(315) 435-2362
Christopher Community
(315) 424-1821

DISABILITY

ARISE: (315) 472-3171
Access to CNY
(315) 455-7591
AURORA (deafness and blindness)
(315) 422-7263
Liberty Resources
(315) 425-1004

MINORITIES

NYCLU: (212) 607-3300
La Liga: (315) 475-6153

REFUGEES

Interfaith Works
(315) 449-3552
Catholic Charities
Onondaga County
(315) 424-1800

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Onondaga County
Department of Social
Services
(315) 435-2884

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STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

1. Person calls CNY Fair Housing asking about their rights
2. CNY Fair Housing employee explains their rights and gets the facts of the situation
3. Employee judges whether or not it is worth pursuing via a test
4. If the occurrence could be discriminatory, a test is done
5. Greg Ayers calls one of the testers, finding someone who can fit the profile of the person potentially being discriminated against
6. Run the test via phone and/or in person
7. Review the findings
8. If there is discrimination that violates a law, the agency will consider filing to state court, federal court or administratively through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development

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GOING UNDERCOVER

Greg Ayers teaches housing testers how to pursue fairness



> Greg Ayers paces around a table, teaching his newest group of housing testers at a meeting. | Trevor Hass, Staff Photo

By | Trevor Hass
Urban Affairs reporter

Incoming group at CNY Fair Housing learns the do's and don'ts of discrimination testing

Greg Ayers methodically paces around the table of 12, right hand resting in his pocket and his left clenching a clicker.

Ayers, who stands 6-feet-4 and goes 265 pounds, commands everyone's attention. He's dressed in a blue polo and dark jeans, sporting a pencil-thin mustache, sleek glasses and black boots with a skinny electric pink stripe.

"What would you ask?" Ayers says.

"Is there parking?" one of his students says. "Is that parking included?" chimes in another. "Are people there 24 hours a day?" inquires a third.

Ayers nods his head approvingly. "It's OK to write these things down because you're looking for an apartment," he says.

Ayers, 33, works at CNY Fair Housing at 731 James St. in Syracuse as the enforcement manager. His main task is to coordinate housing tests to ultimately expose and curb housing discrimination throughout Central and Northern New York.

This particular exchange is part of a crash course.

Over two hours on a recent early evening in February, Ayers educates the agency's newest crop of housing testers. The 12 testers — seven females and five males — learn the process step by step for their roles posing as "real" renters searching for apartments. It's a part-time gig, but their work involves undercover investigating and can lead to lawsuits and settlements.

Ayers, who is African-American, says Syracuse is the ninth most racially segregated city in the country. Then he rattles off ways discrimination occurs.

One woman had to pay an additional fee because "Spanish people tend to fry a lot of food." Landlords lie about availability based off a person's race. They refuse to rent apartments that are open. They engage in sexual harassment. Disability, familial status and race are the top three reasons landlords discriminate, and race is often tied closely to familial status.

That's where the testers, who must remain anonymous in this article to not give them away to the people they call, come into play. The purpose of a tester, Ayers says, is to gather credible and objective evidence. Testers, who are paid \$25 per phone call and \$50 for each in-person visit to a rental unit, must complete each test within 48 hours.

Ayers receives complaints from people who say they were discriminated against, and the testers check them out — though some tests are random as well. In the case of complaints, the testers simulate the same situation to either corroborate or disprove the accusation. There is also a second tester for each test called the “control” tester. The goal is to see whether the tester who fits a certain stereotype is discriminated against compared to the control tester.

This discrimination can be very subtle, and oftentimes testers don’t even know they are receiving unfair treatment. For example, sometimes certain testers are asked about criminal history whereas other testers are not.

In 2014, the agency ran more than 150 tests. There isn’t a set number of tests per week — rather, the number fluctuates and depends on the number of complaints. Ayers estimates about three of five visits lead to some form of discrimination. According to Karen Schroeder, assistant director at CNY Fair Housing, just under a quarter of the agency’s tests have findings allowing them to move forward with some type of legal action.

STUDYING UP

At the meeting, Ayers hands each new tester a white envelope with forms and information inside. The neat part for some of the housing testers is that they’re essentially working as spies. They adopt a fake identity in order to support a bigger cause, and that often involves taking on a new persona on a phone call.

“How will you sound over the phone?” Ayers asks the group. “Will you be nervous, will you be calm, will you be confident?”

“Gotta be confident,” one tester replies.

“Exactly,” Ayers says.

Testers call the phone number provided by dialing *67 on their phone and then the number. Ayers gives them a fake name and identity. They ask questions about the place and take copious, hand-written notes. They call or meet with Ayers to discuss their findings as well as the best way to proceed.

Ayers tells them to leave their real cell phone numbers in voicemails to landlords. Testers change their voicemails to a standard voicemail in case a landlord calls them back. To constitute a test, one has to call three times or until someone answers. They are instructed to wait 24 hours between calls and to leave a voicemail the first and second calls but not the third. Even if no one answers, it still counts as a test for payment purposes.

Ayers and one of the testers, a middle-aged woman there with her daughter, simulate a phone conversation in the latter half of the meeting. The woman is supposed to have two children in the example.

“Hi, I’m interested in a two-bedroom apartment,” the woman says.

“Two-bedroom deluxe, or just two bedroom?” Ayers responds.

“Two bedroom. Do you have one available?”

“We do. It will be available on May 1.”

They thank each other and end the conversation. One tester, a middle-aged woman, interjects.

“What if they said it wouldn’t be for you because you have two children?” she asks Ayers.

“That would be discriminatory,” he responds.

The woman shakes her head in disgust and pounds the table with both fists. “Ugh! That happened to me so many times. Where were you when I was a foster adoptive parent? So many people said ‘no.’ I wish I had an organization like this to help us.”

IN ACTION

If the landlord says the apartment is available, the tester, with an alias, goes to the location as the person they’re pretending to be. They can’t get flustered, and even if they’re blatantly discriminated against they’re instructed to remain poised and neutral. If there’s an issue at the scene, they should contact Ayers rather than act hastily and irrationally. If they are discriminated against, they are told to report back to Ayers, who will then send the case to Conor Kirchner, staff attorney at CNY Fair Housing, if a lawsuit should be pursued.

On visits, Ayers instructs them to keep their audio recorder in a breast pocket or somewhere similar. The testers laugh as Ayers shares a story about how one tester started the recording 10 minutes before she saw the apartment and got tons of excess noise. One tester had the recorder on while using the restroom. Another kept it in her purse, which muffled the sound entirely.

He tells them they will never “ever, ever, ever, ever, ever” fill out an application. They write up a detailed — but not too lengthy — report for Ayers’ reference.

“I’ve had English majors come and go. ‘It was a dark and stormy night,’” Ayers said with a grin. “We don’t want that. We just want the facts.”

Ayers said that in early February there were about 25 testers on roster, and about 10 were active. With his new group from the evening’s workshop, there were 37 in total. The meeting was lively and moved briskly, and overall the fresh recruits seemed to be engrossed by the organization’s mission.

One African-American woman, an employee of Syracuse University, said her niece faced discrimination. The apartment was advertised as available, but her niece went to look at it and the landlord said it was taken.

The woman signed up as a tester to help fight discrimination, but she notes that the idea of acting in secrecy is fascinating in itself.

Discrimination is all over. That’s why it’s imperative testers prepare diligently for their assignment.

“You may be called as a witness when you’re a tester,” Ayers said. “This stuff is evidence at the end of the day. You have to make sure your stuff is on point.”

IS TESTING FOR YOU?

If you’d like to know more about how to become a housing tester, contact CNY Fair Housing Enforcement Manager Greg Ayers at (315) 471-0420 or gayers@cnyfairhousing.org

DISCRIMINATION COMPLAINT?

Contact CNY Fair Housing Enforcement Manager Greg Ayers at (315) 471-0420 or email him at gayers@cnyfairhousing.org

A TELLING QUOTE

“Greg has developed a great rapport with our volunteers and individuals in need of service. He works every day with people from every background.”

— Karen Schroeder, CNY Fair Housing assistant director

FINDING HIS HOME

After overcoming obstacles, Greg Ayers helps those trying to do the same



> Greg Ayers aspires to help others like him who have faced discrimination with housing. | Trevor Hass, Staff Photo

By | Trevor Hass
Urban Affairs reporter

Greg Ayers found inspiration from his life to help those with housing needs in his community

Buffalo-bred Greg Ayers, 33, remembers standing with his sisters at age 13 and watching construction workers build his new home.

Ayers' parents had decided this development was a good place to start fresh. They previously lived in a home Ayers' grandparents owned and knew it was time for a change. The second home was where he made many of his fondest childhood memories.

“That was the life,” he said.

But just four short years later, his home had fallen apart. Today, 20 years later, he's put it all back together, helping others find homes of their own, sometimes in the face of discrimination and unfair practices.

The imposing Ayers — who stands 6 feet, 4 inches, 265 pounds — is the enforcement manager at CNY Fair Housing in Syracuse. He helps coordinate housing tests that the nonprofit runs to see if landlords are discriminating against renters, particularly the disabled, minorities and families with children. Ayers is responsible for handing out assignments and matching testers to cases

based on their backgrounds and characteristics. Testers pose as actual renters. If they uncover problems, CNY Fair Housing steps in to problem-solve and even pursue legal action.

When he's not coordinating tests, Ayers takes phone calls, files paperwork and analyzes tests, among other tasks.

He started as a fair housing investigator in April 2012, and was promoted to enforcement manager within the year. He relishes the role and balances a busy workweek with caring for his son in stretches and bowling competitively.

Ayers struggled to find himself for years, but he has groomed himself into a strong-willed leader.

A 17-year-old Ayers came home one afternoon to find his mother, Antionette, packing her belongings. He was confused, and his confusion quickly turned to bewilderment.

“What do you mean you're packing up?”

“Your dad asked me to leave.”

“OK, so where are you going?”

“I don't know yet, but a moving truck is coming in the next hour, so this is probably the last time I'm ever in this house. ... I just want you to know this wasn't my decision.”

Ayers was a senior in high school. He noticed his par-



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ents arguing, like most couples do, but he never expected them to split.

"I'm living life," Ayers said. "Playing basketball with my boys and videogames, trying to sneak girls in the house, just being a typical teenage boy. You come home and half the house is gone."

"I was floored."

MAKING IT WORK

Going into his senior year, Ayers was 11th in his class of 52 at Leonardo Da Vinci High School on the lower west side of Buffalo. He'd seen family members go to jail for drug dealing, and he knew he didn't want to travel down that path.

But during his senior year, his grades dwindled and he had "mental anguish." People assumed he was OK because of his macho bravado and cool demeanor, but inside he was torn up.

Who am I doing this for? What's the point? What am I going to do with my life?

"By the last semester, I was failing," Ayers said. "I don't know. I always knew better, but I felt like no one cared. That's what drove me into a downward spiral."

Ayers' parents didn't pay for him to go to college, so he used student loans and a job at AccuMED Technologies, Inc. to pay his way. He struggled mentally.

"I think what got me through a lot of it was my personality," Ayers said. "Just (BS-ing) my way through a lot of it, to be honest with you."

During his college years that spanned 2002-2010 at D'Youville College in Buffalo, Ayers did finally find his niche — Students in Free Enterprise. SIFE is an entrepreneurial-based organization that teaches students about free enterprise and helps struggling members of the community become independent. He started out as the "clicker," simply pressing the space bar to go from one slide to the next in others' Power Point presentations.

He gained the trust of his colleagues, and as long-time members departed, they chose Ayers to be president. "I was always the guy who wanted to be behind the scenes," Ayers said. "I never looked at myself as a leader."

But he blossomed into the role, helping his team go to the national championship in a competition and place in the Top 20 despite being outmatched by larger schools with more money.

Ayers moved on to graduate school at SUNY Binghamton, starting in 2011, where one class assignment was to find a news article that generated a talking point related to public policy. He chose an article about how residents in New York City housing projects were treated.

Ayers said the research really moved him, and he knew he'd found his calling.

It was his girlfriend who found the job at CNY Fair Housing on Craigslist. He applied, interviewed and was hired April 12, 2012, two days before his 31st birthday.

The move to Syracuse also put him closer to his son.

Halloween night, 2004, Ayers' life changed considerably when his son, Donnel, was born. Ayers was still an undergrad, "living the party life," as he put it.

But he had prepared for the role of being a father for years. He often took care of his cousin, Stefen, because Stefen's father wasn't around and his mother couldn't drive. Now Stefen is 14. His voice is squeaky and he's entering puberty. Donnel is 9 and lives with his mother in Buffalo. Donnel spends most of the year there, but he and Stefen live with Ayers in Syracuse during school vacations and over the summer.

"He's a good kid," Ayers said. "It sucks that he doesn't have the two-parent household he deserves. It's just the situation at hand. He understands. He loves coming here and being with his dad."

He admires Donnel's drive for perfection — a trait Ayers admits he didn't have growing up. Sometimes Donnel cries when he makes a mistake, but Ayers advises that it just means that he cares.

And when they tell Donnel he looks just like his dad, he nods in agreement, but adds, "Kind of, but I'm my own person."

"I feel that you have to do what's right for yourself first," Ayers said. "I never was. I always felt like I was doing things for everyone else or so that I wouldn't be labeled."

"Even when you achieve all of those things society says you're not supposed to achieve, you're still running from a label."

GIVING BACK

One label today is "ace bowler."

When he's not working or hanging with Donnel, Ayers may well be at the bowling alley, toting his 15-pound ball and pursuing a passion introduced by his grandmother.

"He owns more bowling balls than many sporting goods stores," jokes Karen Schroeder, assistant director at CNY Fair Housing. Ayers' average is 206, and he's bowled five 300s.

Ayers has experienced discrimination firsthand. When he moved to Syracuse, he had trouble finding a place because landlords assumed he had bad credit because he's African-American. He thought he would be entitled to a discounted rate, but instead a landlord told him the special was based on credit, credit he assumed Ayers did not have. It helps in his work today to know the feeling.

"He's much better at coordinating tests than I was, so I'm glad he's doing it and not me," said staff attorney Conor Kirchner. "He's good at keeping in touch with the testers and making sure they do what they need to do."

"He seems very passionate about what he does," adds a housing tester Ayers has trained.

"I dealt with a lot of adversity," Ayers said, "and I'm here now pushing forward for more."

WHAT DRIVES HIM

At a job fair that Greg Ayers organized, some ex-cons approached and asked for advice.

"Greg, I can't find work," they said. "Nobody wants to hire a felon. I don't want to go back to the streets."


Today, Ayers recalls:

"From there, I'm just like, 'The community needs me.'"

RETURN TO KIRK PARK

Watch a video of Parks and Recreation Commissioner Lazarus Sims, as he returns to the South Side's Kirk Park for the first time in two years.

The video is at myhousingmatters.com and also at mysouthsistand.com

 A sneak preview in photos:

HOMECOMING GAME

South Side native Lazarus Sims strives to restore quality of parks



> Lazarus Sims grew up two blocks away from Kirk Park, where he'd play after school. From playing basketball in Kirk Park to the Carrier Dome at Syracuse University, Sims is now Syracuse's parks and recreation commissioner. | Alfred Ng, Staff Photo

By | Alfred Ng
Urban Affairs reporter

In South Side neighborhoods, parks serve greater role for improving people's lives

For some on the South Side, a local park is a lot more than a playground.

Syracuse has 52 parks across the city, but the South Side is home to Syracuse's three most spacious parks, including Kirk Park. Funding and resources for the city's parks have increased in the past five years, according to Syracuse's budget reports. But while funding for South Side's parks have improved, there is still a lack of engagement and involvement in the community — one the new parks commissioner hopes to bring back.

Lazarus Sims, the recently appointed parks commissioner and former point guard at Syracuse University's men's basketball team, said he wouldn't be where he is today if not for Kirk Park. He grew up on Mark Avenue on the South Side, about two blocks away from the park.

Sims said he remembers that every day after school, he would rush home to do his homework, and then rush right back out to the park to play.

"I grew up learning and loving basketball through the parks and rec system," he said. "We didn't grow up a rich family, we didn't have a lot of money, so the parks were my avenue to participate in sports."

As a child, he learned to play basketball by practicing on the makeshift hoops on the monkey bars at the playground. The park had a three-tier ranking for basketball players, he recalled: monkey bars for the children, a separate court for up-and-comers and the big leagues court for the best players, which they called "the NBA court."

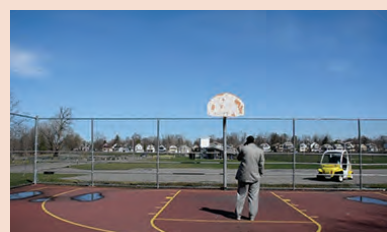
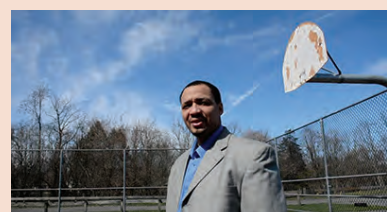
"Probably my finest memory was to get on that so-called NBA court with all the good players," Sims said. He remembered being very nervous that game, with the bigger players telling him he could only dribble and pass.

Sims went from Kirk Park to the Carrier Dome, and eventually traveled the world playing basketball. But he said none of it would be possible without the park.

Sims fondly remembers Mike Kitts, a Kirk Park aide. One day, Kitts challenged Sims to a friendly wager: a game of basketball for a can of soda.

They played once a week, with Sims getting really focused on basketball, he said.

Sims added that his proximity to the park was a great



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benefit during his childhood. He would go to the park immediately after school, and the walk home was never an issue — it was only two blocks away.

He remembers playing “night ball” with his friends, when younger kids had to go home after dark, and he would play until about 2 a.m.

When Sims was growing up, it was safe to play in Kirk Park past midnight. Today, it’s very different.

When he visited the park in April, the basketball court he played on growing up was missing its rims, and it was locked. The courts were taken away as a response to a rash of violence, he said.

While South Side parks have about the same, or sometimes more, funding as other parks, there is a high difference with violence across the 52 parks in Syracuse. This inequality, has been scaring parents and kids away from fine parks, Sims said.

Sims wants the park back to the way it was when he was a kid — when his parents weren’t worried about how late he was out.

“Most parents move to areas where there’s parks, whether they want to say it or not,” Sims said. “You want your kids to go have fun, you want your kids to go running around and be kids, and not be cooped up in the house.”

In Wilson Park, the recreational center has served as a de facto community center for residents in Pioneer Homes, especially as an outreach for the youth. Wilson Park has the third highest funding for recreation centers, at \$10,000, according to Syracuse’s budget report.

“Most of the kids that go to Wilson Park are from Pioneer Homes,” said Linda Campbell, Pioneer Homes manager. She is planning a community garden, where the goal is to teach nutritional value and healthy eating to children in Pioneer Homes. To do that, she’s getting the word out through Wilson Park.

Aldrine Ashong-Katai, a community engagement specialist, said Wilson Park is a significant part of their community garden planning, because the park always provides an influx of children wanting to be involved.

The park’s rec center has children coming in every day for various activities, which is how they find out about these outside programs.

Last year, when he reached out to Wilson Park, Ashong-Katai said it was a huge success — 22 children joined the community garden effort. They met a cook and made their own bread.

“Wilson Park’s become the hub, it’s the incubation where a lot of kids attend,” Ashong-Katai said. “It’s a dynamic partnership.”

CENTER FUNDING

Here are the top five funded parks community centers, three of which are on the South Side.

1. Southwest Community Center: \$20,000
2. McChesney Park Recreation Center: \$13,0753.
3. Wilson Park Community Center: \$10,000
4. Bova Park Center: \$9,078
5. Seals Community Center (Kirk Park): \$8,000

Source — city of Syracuse proposed 2015-2016 budget

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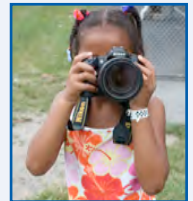
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ON THE SIDE

MORE ON HOUSTON

Visit mysouthsidestand.com for previously published **videos** featuring Jeffrey Houston, as well as a **Friendly Five** column about him that appeared in September 2014.

SPEEDING TRAIN

Musician Jeffrey Houston passes away after leading a life filled with love



> Jeffrey Houston lived for 57 years and touched the Syracuse community with his music. | Photo provided

POPS IN THE PARK

Music starts at 7 p.m.

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- July 28 – The Stan Colella Orchestra

The Pops in the Park concert series returns to Onondaga Park in July. For this free concert, bring your favorite lawn chairs or blankets. Sponsored, in part, by Price Chopper. Onondaga Park is located on Roberts Avenue in the Strathmore neighborhood. Call (315) 473-4330 for more information.

By | Reggie Seigler
A Friendly Five Columnist

Jeffrey Houston’s love lives on — even in a dream about a fast train with no start or end

It is said sometimes that the heart is where love resides, but sometimes I think it could be the other way around. “Love is where the heart resides.” I say that because when one heartbeat stopped — the heartbeat of my good friend and musical brother Jeffrey Houston — love continued on.

The love was present at 11 a.m. on April 13 for his homegoing services at Bethany Baptist Church. The love he held for his children, family, friends and those countless others who were encouraged by him as he smiled his way through his struggles with lung cancer and life. It was there. The love of his life was there also. That was the love he had for his guitar, his music and fellow musicians and fans. That love was all there in abundance. That love is alive and well and looks as if it will live on forever.

Jeff and I were very good friends. In fact, we called

each other brothers. Like many brothers, we didn’t see each other every day, but we always knew that we were connected somehow.

Jeff’s heart stopped beating early in the morning of Tuesday, April 7. He was 57 years old. I had a dream on that morning. It woke me right up out of my sleep at about four-something. It was one of those dreams that seemed real. I dreamed I had been on a shuttle bus. There were a bunch of people on the bus, and we were all on our way to catch a train. I couldn’t make out the people, but I knew that they all seemed happy.

The bus had an accident and some of the people didn’t survive. I didn’t know who had perished, but I knew that there was a train to catch and we had a certain time to be there. So I began to run, and I never looked back. In the dream, it felt as though someone I loved dearly was running right beside me. I thought maybe it was my wife. I had a feeling that she was going to make it there but not me. I was losing my breath and gasping for air but I knew I had to keep on running because I didn’t want to be separated from her.

It seemed like it took an eternity to get to the train,

but at the same time, it felt like we got there in an instant. The train was moving extremely fast and it never stopped. It looked like a streak of light. The train didn't travel on rails, and it had no beginning and there was no end. I felt enveloped by love as it swooped by me. In that moment, I knew that my loved one had made it onto the train without me. And even though I didn't want to be separated, I felt OK with it.

That's the point when I woke up. I just lay there for a few minutes thinking about the dream.

"What was that all about?" My wife, thank God, was still there with me sleeping by my side. But I still felt a little weird.

A little while later, I got a call from Jeff's brother, Mike. By then it was a little bit after 5 a.m. At that time of morning, I felt that his phone call wouldn't be good. He uttered the words that I dreaded to hear. "Jeff passed. It happened at about 4:15 or 4:20 this morning."

"I'll be right there," I said.

I rushed up to the hospital. When I got there, Jeff was in bed. He looked as if he'd just been running a race and had been losing his breath. At the same time, he looked peaceful. As if he'd won the race. As if he'd been victorious.

I stayed for just a minute and embraced Mike and the family as I went away thinking about what I had just witnessed. God had revealed to me my brother's passing, and I know now what our connection was. It was spiritual.

When Jeff was diagnosed with Stage IV Lung Cancer a couple of years ago, I was one of the first people he told. "Don't worry about it," I remember him saying. "God's got this." He was telling me then that he knew how to deal with it. And I saw how he dealt with it. He just kept right on living and giving thanks for each passing day and looking ahead towards the next. Jeff didn't bother wasting precious time wallowing in self-pity, at least not publicly.

A country singer named Tim McGraw wrote a song called, "Live Like You Were Dying." The song talks about forgiving, doing new things and living life to the fullest in the face of dire news. Jeff's last few years were the epitome of that song's lyrics.

Jeff kept it moving. The doctors said they had an experimental treatment, so he let them do what they thought they could, and he did what he could.

He found a new love and became engaged, and he worked on his music and completed a song called, "Reminisce." He took tons of pictures and attended family functions. He danced at benefit concerts, played gigs and drove his mother to the grocery store. Basically, Jeff plugged his life into his guitar amp and turned it up on 10. He also expressed his feelings a lot. "I love you Bruh. I love you, too." Those would always be our parting words.



> Jeffrey Houston will be remembered for his musical talents and wise outlook on life. | Photo provided

In one of our very last conversations, when he was in his hospital bed slowly transitioning from Earth to glory, he said to me, "Reg, some things you've got to learn to live with." I had been trying to comfort him by keeping things conversational, so I had just been telling him about my constant battle with my weight.

Those were not his last words to me, though, because I did see him again. But his advice from his deathbed is what I hope to always remember. You see, he knew he had cancer, so he learned to live with it. What he didn't do was live on it.

He lived with it until his heart stopped that fateful morning. But until then, he never stopped looking ahead. In fact, just five or six days before he passed, he was talking to me about getting his car fixed and helping to organize JAMS. That's an organization of musicians and artists that he and I, along with some others, formed a few years ago.

I think in the past couple of years of Jeff's life, he was able to demonstrate through his words and actions the type of person he was and his purpose in life. Jeff's purpose was to bring us this message.

I believe Jeff would want us all to learn something from it. "Some things you got to learn to live with."

So let us examine ourselves. Let's look at what's important in life and live for it. And as for the rest of it, we just have to let do what it do!

Have A Friendly Five suggestion? Contact Reggie at reggie@softspokenband.com or (315) 479-9620.

COLUMN EXCERPT

From the Friendly Five column about Jeffrey Houston that appeared in September 2014:

The doctor accepted Jeff's choice and gave him some advice: Don't quit playing music.

"I remember the doctor actually coming out to one of our gigs at Top Cat Lounge," Jeff said. "He pulled the band together, told everybody how important it was that I continue to play. The music was as much a part of my therapy as the radiation."

The band members knew that music was medicine for the soul, but the doctor helped them understand what an important part it was for Jeff's complete healing.

After his treatment, Jeff went into remission for 22 years. He continued to play his music and eventually formed his own bands.

— Reggie Seigler



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