

Creative License

BEHAPPY4

Thirty years ago Eva Pallas of Patchogue was a young, single mother of two children and holding down a full-time job. When she would cry to her mother about her plight, she would get this response: "Eva be happy!" She and her friends would joke about the advice and began calling themselves the "Be Happy Club." The "4" refers to her birthdate.

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Who's Cooking: Christine Fox makes hunter's stew. **G11**

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A slice of town history finally gets its facelift

■ **North Hempstead's oldest housing project, historic black enclave, set for first major fixes since being built in '50**

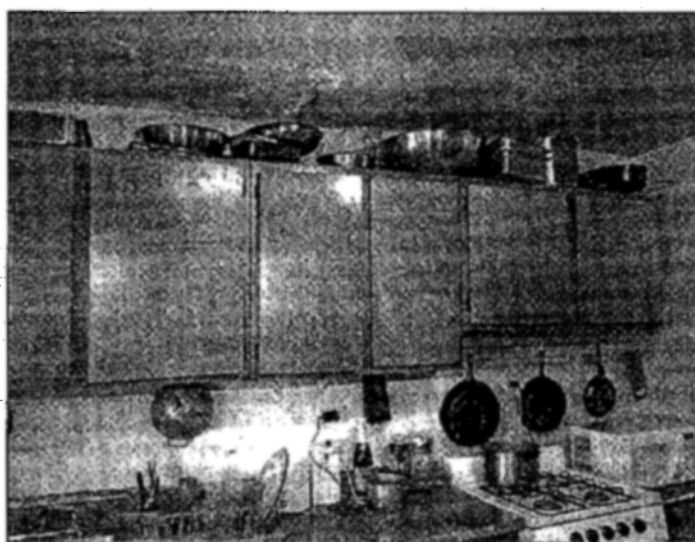
BY CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ
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Spinney Hill Homes, the public housing complex that sits on the Great Neck-Manhasset border, houses low-income tenants who say for years they have endured leaking ceilings, a faulty heating system and broken handrails.

The housing project, 10 two-story town house buildings with 102 units, has not had a significant renovation since its construction in 1950. And because of funding shortages, repairs have been limited.

"These apartments are like a Third World country," said resident Ruth Freeman, 62, tenant representative to the North Hempstead Housing Authority, which runs the project and operates under the auspices of state and federal agencies.

Now, nearly 60 years after it was built, North Hempstead's oldest and largest housing project is being renovated — a \$40-million undertaking made possible by funding that includes tax credits for businesses that invest in the project. And with more federal money promised, housing authority officials



PHOTOS BY FRANK KOESTER

Among the common problems at the housing complex, this kitchen ceiling has been left to leak and mold begins to grow.

hope the renovation marks a turning point.

"It seems like there's finally a light at the end of the tunnel," said Matthew Cuomo, housing authority vice chairman.

The housing project came into being after a 1947 survey of substandard housing in the town showed that nearly 200 public housing units were needed in Manhasset, mostly in the predominantly minority neighborhood bordering Great Neck known as Spinney Hill, according to a forthcoming book by town historian Joan Kent.

Three years later, with state funding, Spinney Hill Homes was built.

In a community where former slaves once worshiped and where the domestic workers of grand, nearby estates once resided, Spinney Hill Homes became an enclave of the black working poor in one of Long Island's wealthiest towns — a distinction that remains today.

Complex makeover

Three other housing projects were built a few years later in the town: 52-unit Pond View Homes in Manhasset, 66-unit Laurel Homes in Roslyn, and 66-unit Harbor Homes in Port Washington. All three were recently renovated.

Because it was considered the most structurally sound and, sitting on a steep incline on Pond Hill Road, was the most difficult and expensive to repair, Spinney Hill Homes is the last slated for renovation, officials said.

It has taken about three years for the housing authority and the renovation developer, the Lake Success-based Whitney Capital Company LLC, to amass the funding needed to overhaul Spinney Hill Homes. While money comes from state and federal grants, about half of the work will be paid for by tax credits, officials said.

The state grants tax credits to housing authorities, which sell the credits, typically to corporations that get to write off the payment. The money from the tax credit sale funds the housing project.

"Without the tax credits," Cuomo said, "we're half short."

North Hempstead has used tax credits before, and housing authorities across New York are relying on them more, said Adam Glantz of the state office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "What they're doing may be the wave of the future."

To participate in the tax credit market, Spinney Hill Homes had to be privatized, Cuomo said. It was sold to a new limited partnership, in which the housing authority board of directors became the company's board and general partner and



PHOTOS BY FRANK KOESTER

Ruth Freeman, 62, a tenant representative to the operator of Spinney Hill Homes, keeps warm by a space heater because of problems with the town house heating system. At right, steps to a unit have been left to crumble.





JMS ARCHITECT AND PLANNER

An artist's rendering shows what Spinney Hill Homes, right, will look like after its first major renovation in the six decades since it was built. It has taken about three years for the housing authority and a developer to amass funds to begin the \$40-million makeover.



the private investor that bought the tax credits became limited partner. The property will remain an affordable, low-income housing project and will still be run by the housing authority board, Cuomo said.

Even as officials were garnering the money to overhaul Spinney Hill Homes, the buildings were falling further into disrepair and getting minimal maintenance.

The housing authority, which collects rent, depends on the rent money to fund repairs. The rent roll often is insufficient because tenants make 40 percent to 60 percent below the area's median income; the income of a single

tenant ranges from \$27,200 to \$40,800.

Apartments in disrepair

At Suzanne Hampton's apartment recently, brown tape along the doorway and ceiling covers cracks on the white interior walls. In the kitchen, leaking water has caused tiles on the floor to crumble, creating a hole that Hampton, 55, covers with cardboard.

"They should have kept these places up," said Hampton, who has lived in the apartment for several decades.

For the renovation — expected to last 20 months — the buildings will be gutted, leaving only the foundation and

framing. The 157 tenants will be moved to buildings that officials have allowed to go vacant or to apartments in other housing authority units.

While they're gone, the red brick and brown siding on the outside walls will be traded for vinyl siding of yellow, blue and other colors. Flat roofs will be replaced with pitched roofs. Windows, doors, plumbing and electricity will be new. Appliances will be Energy Star rated. "The place is going to be transformed," said David Gallo, vice president and principal of Whitney Capital.

And officials say the buildings will stay that way. The state Division of Housing and

Community Renewal is increasing the number of Section 8 vouchers to the housing authority from four to 80 — the "guaranteed source of income" it needs to keep Spinney Hill Homes in quality condition, said board member Bette Segal.

The vouchers guarantee that the federal government will pay the portion of the market rate uncovered by rent, which is 30 percent of a tenant's income. The number of vouchers is based on project cost and how much money is needed to keep the units affordable, officials said.

"Everything will be new, from the walls in," Segal said, "and we should be able to maintain it."

An enclave of history

Spinney Hill was named for the farming family that lived there centuries ago, said North Hempstead town historian Joan Kent.

In the 1830s, freed slaves were among founders of the Lakeville AME Zion Church in Manhasset, bringing an influx of blacks.

In the next century and beyond, more black residents moved to Spinney Hill, many serving as domestic workers on nearby estates, Kent said.

By the time a low-income housing project was built there in 1950, Spinney Hill was one of the town's predominant minority areas.

In the 1960s, the Manhasset school board was among several on Long Island to resist state recommendations to bus students to integrate schools.

The next decade, Cleveland Brown's running back Jim Brown, a Manhasset High School graduate who grew up in Spinney Hill, was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

— CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ

Preserving heritage on film

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Dedrick Johnson and Lloyd Means want to use a documentary film to memorialize the African-American history of Spinney Hill before it's too late.

The men grew up in the neighborhood that straddles Manhasset and Great Neck and say they have watched as black residents have moved away.

"The population of African-Americans has really diminished," said Johnson, 43, of Manhasset. "That's sad because we have such a rich history there."

Since 2007, Means, a Cablevision engineer, and Johnson, a transcriptionist, have spent hours researching and conducting more than a dozen interviews for the documentary they plan to release this year.

Though the film will focus on the

1950s, '60s and '70s, it will also explore recent developments, as blacks have left Spinney Hill for more affordable Hempstead and Roosevelt.

The most recent census figures available support their thesis. The number of white residents in the census tract that includes Spinney Hill increased to 3,696 in 2000, from 3,523 in 1990. During the same period, the number of blacks dropped to 995, from 1,179.

Means, 42, is among those who left the area despite his fond memories there. "Growing up on Spinney Hill," he said, "you walk into any establishment . . . they knew who you were."

But Means, who moved to Baldwin to raise a family, said Spinney Hill "wasn't an affordable community."

Nevertheless, he wants residents to know their "history is now preserved" in film. "If the demographics totally change," Means said, "it's preserved."



NEWSDAY PHOTO / ANA P. GUTIERREZ

Documentary by Lloyd Means, left, and Dedrick Johnson may be released this year.



NEWSDAY PHOTO / 1951

Jim Brown as a player for Manhasset High