

Commentary

Residents' Journal: Voices need amplification

The needs of the poor get short media shrift in a nation obsessed with stock market averages, a \$363 million lottery jackpot and relentless reminders of our booming economy. So what better time is there to address problems of poverty than when the nation is flush with discretionary wealth and budget surpluses?

Residents of the Chicago Housing Authority live within 11 of the nation's 15 poorest census tracts, according to Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Andrew Cuomo; they are among the poorest of the poor. But since poverty is bad for ratings in a media system devoted to market logic, we can easily ignore their worsening conditions.

"We're going to pay a very steep price for neglecting this rare opportunity to build housing and provide social services in a time of plenty," predicts Ethan Michaeli, founding editor in chief of Residents' Journal, a publication, distributed primarily among CHA residents, that focuses on those folks we'd prefer to ignore. "Instead of doing what we can to narrow the wealth gap we're widening it. That's very dangerous."

Although Michaeli is seldom quoted in stories about public housing, there are few "experts" more knowledgeable than he. When he says, "if we ignore this problem today, we are creating the conditions for

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a chaotic future," his voice should be amplified.

The 4-year-old Residents' Journal is a product of his unique vision; a newspaper reported, edited and designed by CHA residents. Under Michaeli's stewardship, the publication has become an authentic voice of public housing tenants. He was hired by Joseph Shuldiner, a HUD official and former CHA overlord, after interviewing him for the Chicago Defender. For four years, Michaeli, a Jewish guy from upstate New York, wrote excellent copy for the black-owned Defender.

Before taking the CHA position, Michaeli insisted on editorial independence, and his victory is spelled out in the paper's mission statement, which declares, among other things: "the Chicago Housing Authority will not censor this publication in any way ..."

But the bimonthly publication is not a mere gripe

sheet. Rather, it has become many things: a training ground for unlikely journalists; a force for people living in far-flung public housing developments; a source of reliable information for a population commonly ignored by the mainstream media; a source of authentic information about CHA residents and a symbol of pride and accomplishment for folks who generally are disdained by the larger society.

"When we talk about public housing residents, we're talking about low-income African-American women with children," Michaeli notes. "They live where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, on all the hot-button, public-policy issues. I'm often in awe of them in their ability to succeed in raising their children under such adverse circumstances."

He need only point to Mary C. Johns, the publication's new editor in chief, to make his case. Johns is a resident of public housing and a single parent who not only was lacking previous journalistic experience when she came to the publication but had never before held a steady job.

After about six months of dedicated volunteer work, Johns started earning a small paycheck. "We had to pay her something," Michaeli says. "She was doing more work than all of us." Johns soon began writing stories and shooting photographs as if she were trained for the job. "If it wasn't for Ethan's patient instruction and encouragement, I would never

have learned these skills," Johns explains. She has high praise for Michaeli and says other residents are similarly appreciative of his efforts. "I always make sure I acknowledge the God that I serve, as well," she adds. "It's through his grace that I've made this progress."

Readers of the publication will be rewarded by the insights residents regularly provide. In the February edition, for example, reporter Jacqueline Thompson revealed a graphic example of disparities in resource allocation with a simple story about problems in the Harold Ickes Homes.

Residents' Journal will part ways with the CHA on July 1 and become part of an organization called, We The People Media, which will attempt to create a new kind of community-based media.

This is a precarious step for a publication nurtured and subsidized by a public agency. But that public agency, the CHA, is in a period of turmoil. Phillip Jackson, the energetic and well-intentioned but ultimately ill-equipped head of the agency, has resigned and mayoral supplicant Terry Peterson has been hastily drafted to take his place.

Michaeli thinks Peterson is as ill-equipped as Jackson and predicts the turmoil will increase. Residents' Journal may have gotten out just in time. Too bad the residents can't do the same.

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