What started as a rent strike revolutionized public housing

By Harper Barnes, special to the Beacon Date: 11.13.12

One rainy day in the late fall of 1968, a young black woman named Jean King was looking out of the window of her apartment in the Darst public housing project just south of downtown when she noticed a little boy pick something up from the ground. He put it in his mouth and she realized it was a soggy piece of bread. She ran out and took him by the hand and led him to his mother and told her what had happened. King still remembers the boy's name -- Andre Smallwood.

The rent strike and beyond

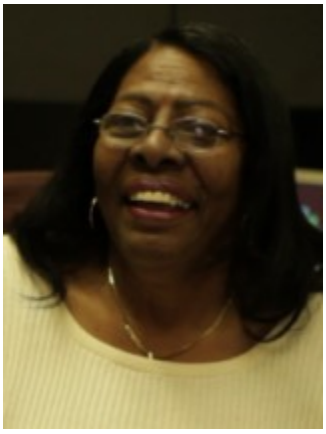
"Envisioning Home" will be shown at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Hi-Pointe as part of the Whitaker St. Louis International Film Festival. Richard Baron, Jean King and Daniel Blake Smith will be present, along with director Jason Epperson and assistant professor Molly Metzger of the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University.

"His mother started crying," King recalled. "She said it was because he was hungry. I said, 'Well, don't you get a welfare check?'

"She showed me a letter," King said. "Her rent was going up to $165 a month. Her welfare check was only $134 -- for a family of four." Jean King was astonished. "I didn't know it was so little. My husband and I were both employed, we had one child, and we were planning on moving to Laclede Town" -- an innovative new low-rise housing development that combined private funding with government subsidies.

King had seen leaflets calling for a public housing rent strike, and she decided to go to a tenants' meeting and gather information to share with Mrs. Smallwood. King is not known for holding back her opinions, and the next thing she knew, after she told the story of the boy eating the bread off the ground, she was elected leader of the strike.

The meeting was held at the old Blumeyer Housing Project in Midtown. Ironically, more than four decades later, Jean King's office is in almost exactly the same spot, on the first floor of what is now called the Blumeyer Apartments, and that is where we sat as she shared her story.



Jean King

I asked her to expand on some of the topics she speaks about in a fine, provocative new documentary called "Envisioning Home," which focuses on the long collaboration between King and a highly innovative St. Louis-based real-estate developer named Richard Baron. We were joined by the producer and screenwriter of the movie, Daniel Blake Smith, a former history professor turned author and filmmaker who moved to St. Louis in 2009.

Richard Baron

Daniel Blake Smith

Baron was out of town, as he frequently is: The firm he heads, McCormack Baron Salazar, has built and manages almost $3 billion worth of housing developments in 38 cities. More than a dozen of the developments, several thousand units, are in St. Louis.

You can see them all over town, brick townhouses and small, low-rise apartment buildings with well-trimmed lawns in what used to be severely dilapidated neighborhoods. Sometimes, the dilapidated neighborhoods still exist, just a block or two away. But sometimes, as in the Westminster Place townhouse development just east of what used to be Gaslight Square, and in others elsewhere in the city, the new housing has helped spur renovation of the neighborhood.

But back to the rent strike. Present, in addition to Jean King and a roomful of disgruntled tenants, was Richard Baron, just out of the University of Michigan law school and working for an anti-poverty agency, Legal Services. Baron had been assigned to be the lawyer for the rent strike. King was 32, a tall woman with an Afro that made her even taller, Baron was 28 and looked younger, though his blond hair was already beginning to thin.

Jean King recalled, "I thought, 'My God, what am I going to do with this kid.' It turned out that he was everything I needed and more."

In the movie, Jean King recalls, "I had and still have a terrible temper. When I get passionate about something I get impossible to deal with." Baron acted as a calming influence, King says. And at times, when King's temper got her into trouble -- as when she got into a shoving match with drug dealers and refused to back down when the police arrived -- Baron got her out of jail.

One night, after a rent strike meeting, a shot was fired that just missed her head. The attack came from a drug kingpin who was trying to control sales in public housing. Baron says, "The last thing they wanted to see was an organized public housing community and someone like Jean King, who was an extraordinary force for change."

King and Baron and the tenants' organization, after withholding rent and putting it into an escrow account for almost a year, won the rent strike, and at the time, King said, not inaccurately, "St. Louis has set the pace for the whole country." Baron said of the agreement to end the strike, "This document is revolutionary."

The rent strike was not just about rent money. The housing projects were terribly maintained, and security was laughable. The agreement called for tenants to play an active role in management, as well as for rent to be set at a maximum of 25 percent of income.

That was in 1969, and it was a signal victory. But the days of high-rise public housing projects were numbered. They were riddled with crime and drugs, in deplorable physical condition, and mired in poverty. The end was symbolized by the infamous 1972 dynamiting of the huge Pruitt-Igoe project in north St. Louis.

A new housing model

In the 1970s, federal and local governments pretty much gave up on large public housing projects. So Richard Baron, with his late partner Terry McCormack, became a real estate developer, with King as a prime associate. The idea was to rely on both public and private funding, and to combine market rate and subsidized housing in low-rise developments, developments that were well-maintained. Tenants, poor or middle class, could be evicted if they abused the property or their neighbors.

"This idea of building our own housing," King recalled, "came because we saw that the government was not going to build affordable housing. O'Fallon Place was the first one."

The 675-unit complex on North 16th Street was begun in the late 1970s and completed in 1982, with 675 units. Many developments have followed, here and around the country.

As the movie notes, mixed-income, low density housing developments have partially solved some problems, but others persist. Susan Popkin of the Urban Institute, who spoke to the filmmakers while visiting the Renaissance Place development, which is just east of the old Blumeyer project, observes that one of the goals of mixed-income housing was to "improve people's quality of life and help them move toward self sufficiency."

She asserts, "It did help most of them to improve their quality of life -- they are much safer, living in better places. What it didn't do is help them move toward self sufficiency. It didn't address the tougher issues of deep poverty. A place like where we're sitting now is not going to be sucessful if you don't deal with youth violence.
"And it did not ultimately address race."

Work remains

Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institution adds, with an ironic smile, "We are not a post-racial society."
Katz and Popkin give perspective to Dan Smith's overwhelmingly favorable portrait of the work of Baron and King. So do, among others, former secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros, and former Missouri Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond.

Some of their criticisms are undeniably valid. But most of what Cisneros and Popkin and the others say is strongly positive. They agree that, in great part because of McCormack Baron Salazar, the state of public housing in American is much better now than it was in 1968. That was the year, as producer-screenwriter Daniel Smith puts it in "Envisioning Home," that "two unlikely allies came together and forged a vision that was to change the way we live in America."

He adds, "Their collaboration began in St. Louis, but their pioneering efforts to revitalize public housing would lead to profound changes across the country."
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