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Living at Legacy: New Public Housing Apartments in the Hill a Dignified Testament to Its Jazz History

By Kevin Kirkland

Not long after they moved into The Legacy senior apartments in the Hill District, Dorothy Fryer and Betty Brown saw some old friends.

Many of Ms. Fryer's new neighbors are her old neighbors from the nearby Lou Mason Jr. high-rise, which The Legacy was built to replace.

For Mrs. Brown, the familiar faces were in framed black-and-white images lining the billiards room. The names that went with some of those faces are etched in stone on the building's Wylie Avenue side: Billy Eckstine, Mary Dee, Ahmad Jamal, Walt Harper.

Mrs. Brown met these jazz legends and dozens more when she and her late husband, band leader Leroy Brown, lived in an apartment above the Crawford Grill, directly across Wylie Avenue from The Legacy. In the community room, four trumpets are imbedded in the fireplace mantel, next to a Stanley Turrentine saxophone-turned-sculpture by local artist Biko. Jazz makers and lovers are immortalized inside and outside The Legacy, whose name reflects the Hill's musical history.

"There's the Savoy Ballroom - what a place!" Mrs. Brown said as she leaned closer to one of the Teenie Harris photos of the billiards room, also used for prayer services and Bible study.

"There's Billy Eckstine, and that's Joe Westray with the guitar. He's gone - they're all gone."

Despite its jazzy tributes and

decor, The Legacy is no monument to the dead; it's public housing with the look and amenities of a luxury apartment complex. And the people who live there - some of whom have lived in housing projects most of their lives - have found a comfortable home at The Legacy.

"It's nice here and there's always something to do - bingo, arts and crafts, a doctor's office, an exercise room," said Jackei Broughton, 63.

One of the nicest spots is her nearly 700-square-foot apartment, where two beige sofas form a conversation group beneath a large window looking onto The Legacy's patio and Centre Avenue. A black bookshelf holds her books (she's particularly into E. Lynn Harris these days). On the wall and on the tables are pieces from her large elephant collection interspersed with colorful prints, jazz musician drawings by nephew Raymond Davidson of East Liberty and a floral painting by local artist Marian Bass.

Ms. Broughton said she finds most of her affordable decor on shopping trips to Macy's, Gabriel Brothers and other stores. On the walls of her bathroom are grouped images by Atlanta artist Kevin A. Williams (Wak). Looking at his stylized painting of black men, women and children - all framed and matted by Ms. Broughton - you'd never guess they came from a calendar.

During The Legacy's grand



opening celebration in September, nearly 200 people toured Ms. Broughton's tastefully decorated apartment. One government official motioned her over.

"Can I ask you a favor?" said the woman. "Could you come over and help me decorate?"

Although she had always helped friends and family, Ms. Broughton never imagined being a decorator. She worked as a personal care aide and in a hospital laundry before retiring. She grew up in East Liberty and lived for a time in St. Clair Village near Mount Oliver and in Bedford Dwellings and Addison Terrace, both in the Hill District.

"I've been in the projects most of my life," she said. "The Hill just

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feels like home to me.”

Ms. Fryer, her longtime friend, urged her to apply for an apartment in The Legacy. Ms. Fryer had lived for nearly three years on the 11th floor of the 15-floor Lou Mason high-rise. The yellow-brick building, visible from Ms. Broughton’s window, was badly deteriorated and is slated for demolition. About 70 of its approximately 80 residents moved to The Legacy. Most of the other were too young; age 62 is the cutoff. Ms. Fryer is 53 but was allowed in because she had lived in Lou Mason for more than two years. Her mother, Pearline Fryer, was living in Oak Hill before moving to The Legacy.

“She wanted to come down here to pester me,” she joked of her mother, adding that it was really because The Legacy was more centrally located and on a bus route.

Developer McCormack Baron Salazar and the Pittsburgh Housing

Authority began construction in December 2005 and finished this spring. Residents began moving in June. All 108 units are occupied and 76 people are on a waiting list, according to property manager Melanie Brown of McCormack Baron Ragan Management Services. Rent, which includes all utilities, is based on how close a resident’s income is to \$24,300 the maximum for a one-person household. The top rent is \$651, but residents typically pay between \$250 and \$375.

Mrs. Brown says her rent isn’t much more than she paid to live above the Crawford Grill, her home for more than 50 years, and that didn’t include utilities. Although it’s smaller than the old apartment, her new home has 12-foot ceilings and a bathroom “big enough to have a beach party in.”

The bathrooms were designed to offer plenty of turning radius for a wheelchair, and the showers (no

tubs) have a low lip to allow easy access.

“We wanted to provide a place where everybody can age in place and live an independent life,” said project manager Max Dizard.

Residents said the only downside so far has been some false fire alarms. Mr. Dizard said those typical new-building kinks were being working out.

He noted that The Legacy’s residents have an important legacy of their own: They include people who have lived in the Hill District longer than anyone. The oldest is 97.

“Some of them can name everyone in those Teenie Harris pictures. Their stories are just remarkable.”