

RENEE LEWIS GLOVER

Giving Hope to All Atlantans

The goal of the Atlanta Housing Authority's strategic revitalization program continues to be creating communities where Atlanta's families from every socioeconomic level can live, learn, work, and play as they pursue their vision of the American dream.



RENEE LEWIS GLOVER has been chief executive officer of the Atlanta Housing Authority since September 1994. The model she created at AHA of introducing mixed-income communities into cities is now used as the redevelopment blueprint by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

THE FRONT PAGE of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on September 18, 1990, boomed: "World Class! Proud City Brings Home the Gold." Indeed, Atlanta had scored big, winning the contest to become the host city for the centennial Summer Olympic Games in 1996.

Seven pages back in that same edition of the newspaper, one of the city's major hurdles was irrevocably linked to the games. An event with so much promise for Atlanta had to uplift all city residents. The article read: "Jubilant Atlanta and Fulton County officials vowed today to overcome the city's image as a poverty-stricken crime capital, make the city safe, and deal with the area's social problems as preparations for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games mount in the coming years."

That article trumpeted what would become a transformational challenge for both the city and the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA). The race was not for gold medals, but for the betterment of Atlanta and its poorest residents. After all, in 1990 a larger percentage of residents lived in public housing projects in Atlanta than in any other major metropolitan area in the nation.

Early Successes

During the Great Depression, when the nation was in dire need of decent housing for the one-third of its citizens who lived in urban slums and rural poverty, Atlanta was the first to respond with public housing. Techwood/Clark Howell Homes was built on 60 acres (24 ha) of blighted land near Georgia Tech. At about the same time, University Homes was constructed in southwest Atlanta



near the Atlanta University Center, which includes Morehouse College, Morehouse Medical School, and Spelman College.

Without a doubt, these projects did help people. As was the case with all public housing built in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, these were transitional homes where hard-working people could take a step on the ladder toward fulfilling their dreams. And the people were incredibly successful.

By the 1960s, however, as a result of a series of less-than-thoughtful policy shifts that forced the working poor out of the projects, the nature of public housing had dramatically changed. The projects had become islands of despair where Americans were trapped in poverty, joblessness, and poor options for education. People who lived in the housing projects were structurally locked out of mainstream America.

There was plenty of blame to spread around, but at the heart of the problem was failed public policy. As the great academic and U.S. senator Daniel P. Moynihan wrote in his 1968 book *Understanding Poverty*, "The misfortunes of the

poverty program are perhaps best visualized in terms of a downward spiral: a shaky start, followed by political trouble, leading to underfunding, followed by still more difficulties in performance."

By the time Atlanta was scrambling to become an Olympic city, it was abundantly clear that the time was long past to remedy the horrible conditions of the projects. This was not the Atlanta that saw itself as the capital of the South, a city of promise for *all* its residents.

What Atlantans had to face was the truth that if people were segregated into warehouses of poverty, they would fail. It is not that the people were flawed; rather, it was that the environment was toxic. The projects were plagued by crime, low educational attainment, and high unemployment. AHA had been mismanaged and was in a state of financial collapse when I took its helm in 1994.

A New Direction

My urgent priorities were twofold: improve the squalid living conditions in the public housing projects, and address the management

breakdowns and begin to reposition AHA as a professional real estate company. AHA had an absolute duty to its clients to ensure that they had decent housing in good neighborhoods free of crime, and that their children had access to good schools—and thereby break the cycle of poverty.

Coming into the agency, I had informed the mayor, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Board of Commissioners, and other significant stakeholders that the agency had to conduct its business in a fundamentally different manner. The only solution to AHA's multifaceted problems was to cease concentrating low-income families in distressed and obsolete housing projects. The challenge was how to do this responsibly and quickly despite a very politically charged environment filled with distrust.

I proposed that these desperate public housing projects be transformed into healthy mixed-use, mixed-income communities using the funding and regulatory freedom of the nascent HOPE VI program. The AHA board of directors and I decided there were three critical ingredients in this transformation:

- ▷ Residents of the public housing projects must be allowed to relocate to their choice of private housing (using housing choice vouchers to close the gap for the cost of housing and utilities), and the families must be provided with long-term counseling and access to supportive services;
- ▷ The distressed and obsolete housing projects must be demolished and the sites remediated and prepared for development; and
- ▷ Through true business partnerships with private sector developers who had proved themselves in the marketplace, high-quality market-rate, mixed-use, mixed-income communities must be developed.

The goal of AHA's strategic revitalization program was—and continues to be—creating communities where Atlanta's families from every socio-

economic level can live, learn, work, and play as they pursue their vision of the American dream. AHA believes that every person has unlimited human potential and promise, but that the quality of his or her living environment affects the outcome.

By the time the world arrived for the Olympic Games, Techwood Homes was gone, and in its place was the first phase of what is now called Centennial Place, a vibrant master-planned, mixed-use, mixed-income community whose residents range from the affluent to former residents of Techwood/Clark Howell. Centennial Place was the first such community in the nation. Since then, AHA has followed the Centennial Place model throughout the city.

The Results

Since the mid-1990s, more than 10,000 households in Atlanta have successfully relocated from the housing projects and entered mainstream America. AHA has sponsored the creation of 14 mixed-use, mixed-income communities, leveraging more than \$300 million in HOPE VI and public housing development funds, creating projects with a projected economic impact topping \$4 billion.

Last year, AHA began closing the final chapter on Atlanta's housing projects. HUD approved the demolition by June 30, 2010, of the remaining large family housing projects because of their deteriorating condition.

AHA has faced some opposition. Some of it is political: there are always those who will seek to preserve their power by keeping others in misery. Also, legitimate questions have been raised about mainstreaming the former residents of the housing projects, roughly 80 percent of whom are women and children. In response, AHA has taken great care to provide programs that prepare the residents for new—and much better—lives.

AHA is working with all the families to ensure that they are able to find housing of their choice—housing that will meet their needs

in good urban Atlanta and suburban neighborhoods. By using rental vouchers, those families will not pay more for housing than they did to live in the housing projects. All they will lose is the crime, the lack of job opportunities, and the terrible schools associated with the projects. It is worth emphasizing that every resident will have a home; the only ones excluded from the voucher program are those whose criminal activity or refusal to comply with work or education programs would make them ineligible to live in the projects.

As the projects have come down, AHA's efforts on behalf of Atlanta's poorer residents have broadened. The authority today serves 6,000 more residents than in 1995, and those people live in a substantially healthier environment. AHA has challenged the residents to meet higher expectations and standards, and they have been tremendously successful in responding.

Georgia Tech economist and professor Thomas D. Boston has measured the impact of what AHA has done. Before redevelopment, the violent crime in Techwood/Clark Howell Homes in 1990 was 35 times that of the rest of the city, which that year was determined to be the most violent in the nation. After redevelopment, crime in that neighborhood dropped 91 percent.

Even more important than crime is what redevelopment has meant to children. Boston found that in 1995 just 10 percent of the students at the neighborhood elementary school passed a basic writing skills test. By 2002, after a new neighborhood school had been constructed, new leadership appointed, and a new curriculum adopted, 62 percent of the neighborhood children passed a basic writing skills test—a level that was about 50 percent higher than all elementary schools in the Atlanta system.

Eliminating the projects is an achievement with ramifications for the entire city. People are returning to Atlanta, which in recent years has



Techwood/Clark Howell Homes (facing page), the first federally funded public housing to be constructed in the United States, was replaced with Centennial Place (top and above), the first HOPE VI mixed-income community in the country.

experienced significant population growth for the first time in a generation. That resurgence would not have occurred if blighted housing projects still dominated Atlanta's landscape.

During the Great Depression, it was in the finest American tradition to help our neighbors by building good housing for the beleaguered residents of that era. Likewise, it is in the country's finest traditions to recognize the benefit of tearing down antiquated housing projects when circumstances have changed. Atlantans have learned that to be successful, the ideas have to be bold. **UL**