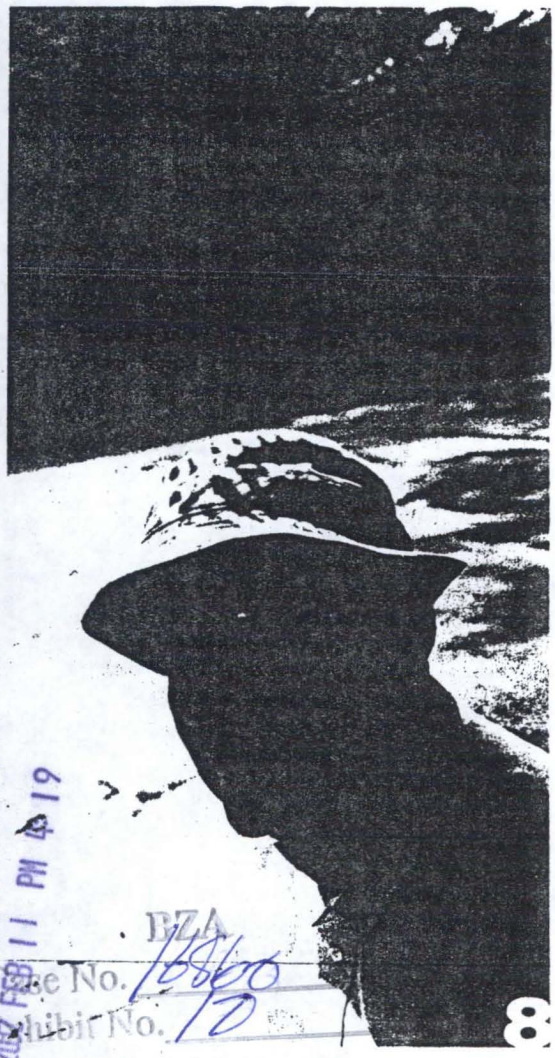
JULY 1, 2001

# The Washington Post Magazine

**KENTUCKY COURTS HAD BEEN TURNED INTO THE PERFECT FORTRESS; YOU COULD ELUDE POLICE BY RUNNING IN ALMOST ANY DOOR**
**PAGE 8**



© 2001 DUDLEY M. BROOKS; PROJECT: DAVID PERLES AT KENTUCKY COURTS BY DUDLEY M. BROOKS

RECEIVED
D.C. OFFICE OF ZONING
2001 FEB 11 PM 4:19
BZA
Case No. 16860
Exhibit No. 10

FEATURES

**REQUIEM FOR KENTUCKY COURTS**
**8** BY JIM MYERS
Despite this public housing project's hopeful beginning, violent drug dealers, neglectful government agencies and even pigeons helped push it into decay.

**FIVE FOR THE FOURTH**
**14** Recollections of the quintessential American moment by Ana Veciana-Suarez, Gene Weingarten, Hank Stuever, Tananarive Due and David Goldstein.

DEPARTMENTS

**2 20071**
Cultural Differences

**3 PLANET WASHINGTON**
Below the Beltway BY GENE WEINGARTEN

**7 SIDE STREETS**
The Teaching Curve BY KEVIN MERIDA

**21 DINING**
Marrakech for Less BY TOM SIETSEMA

**30 THE PUZZLE**
A Price on Their Heads
BY WANDA SMITH AND NANCY SALOMON

**31 SIGNIFICANT OTHERS**
Weather or Not BY JEANNE MARIE LASKAS

**32 WIT'S END**
Climb Every Mountain BY DAVE BARRY

ON THE COVER: PHOTOGRAPH OF KENTUCKY COURTS BY DUDLEY M. BROOKS; INSET PHOTOGRAPH (KENTUCKY COURTS IN 1964) BY BOB BURCHETTE

Send letters to: 20071, The Washington Post Magazine, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071. Send e-mail to: 20071@washpost.com. The Magazine is available online at washingtonpost.com.

EDITORIAL EDITOR: Glenn Frankel; MANAGING EDITOR: T. A. Frail; ARTICLES EDITORS: David Rowell, Margaret Shapiro; SENIOR EDITORS: John Cotter, Susannah Gardiner; DESIGN EDITOR: Jill Hudson Neal; STAFF WRITERS: Mary Battiata, David Finkel, Tamara Jones, Liza Mundy, Peter Perl, Paula Span, Bob Thompson; COPY EDITORS: B. F. Miller, Bill O'Brian; ART DIRECTOR: Brian Noyes; PHOTO EDITOR: Keith W. Jenkins; DEPUTY ART DIRECTOR: Lisa A. Schreiber; ASSISTANT PHOTO EDITOR: Jennifer Beeson; EDITORIAL PRODUCTION MANAGER: Leslie A. Garcia; ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT: Michele Capots. ADVERTISING GENERAL MANAGER: Leslie Morgan Steiner; ADVERTISING PRODUCTION MANAGER: Julie Gunderson; BUSINESS MANAGER: Douglas S. Dykstra; ADVERTISING SALES REPRESENTATIVE: Diane DuBois; ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT: Linda Baquet; ADVERTISING PRODUCTION: Kevin Blitzer, Paige Clifford, Carolyn Coleman, Willie Joyner; PRODUCTION ASSISTANT: Deborah Carroll. PHONES EDITORIAL 202/334-7585; MAIN ADVERTISING 202/334-5228, 5224, 5226; NEW YORK SALES 212/445-5050; ADMINISTRATION 202/334-6160; Magazine Market 202/334-7097. Copyright 2001 The Washington Post, 1150 15th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20071

1

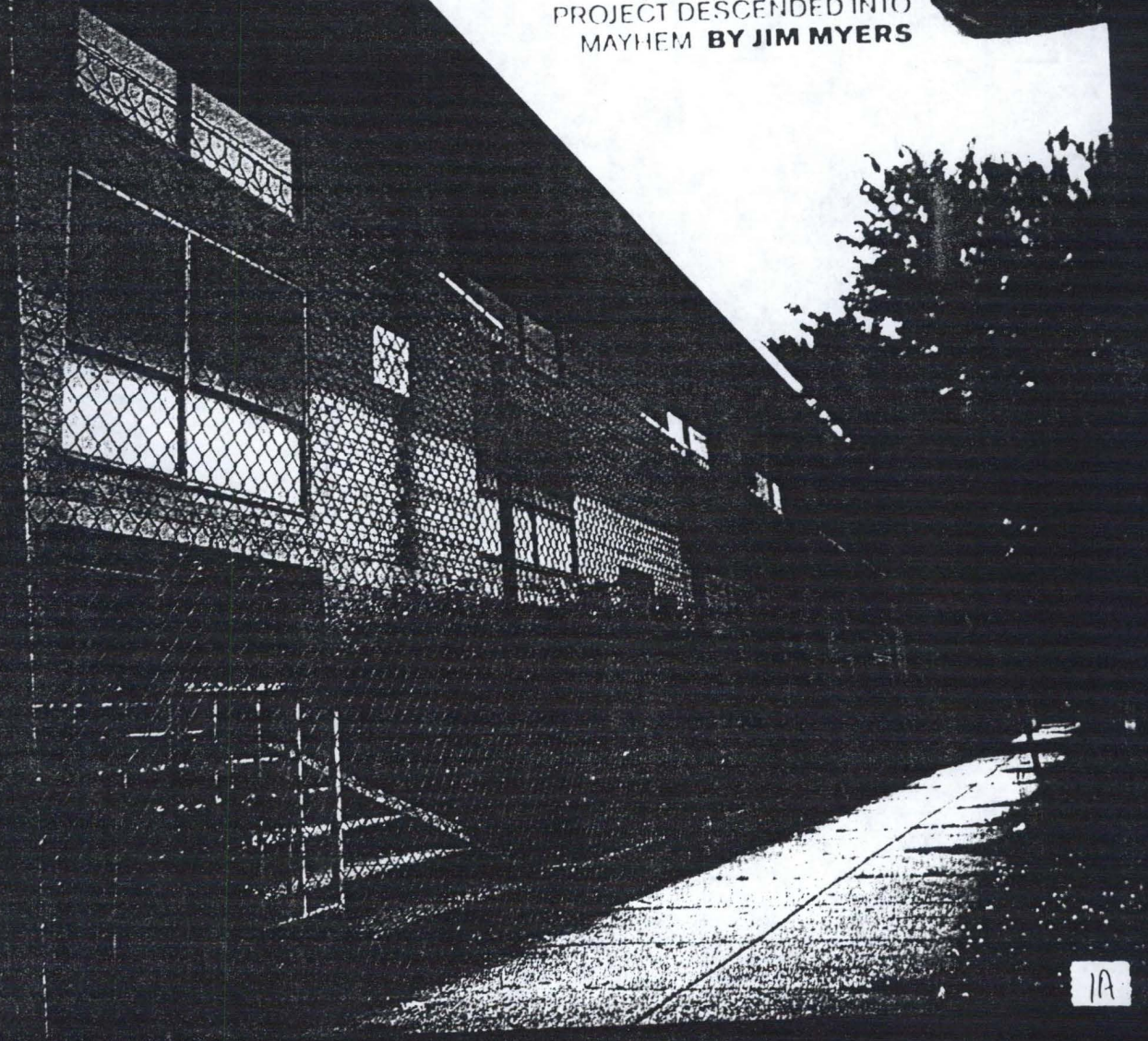
Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16860
EXHIBIT NO.10

PLUS: FIVE AMERICAN MOMENTS FOR THE FOURTH OF JULY

The Washington Post Magazine

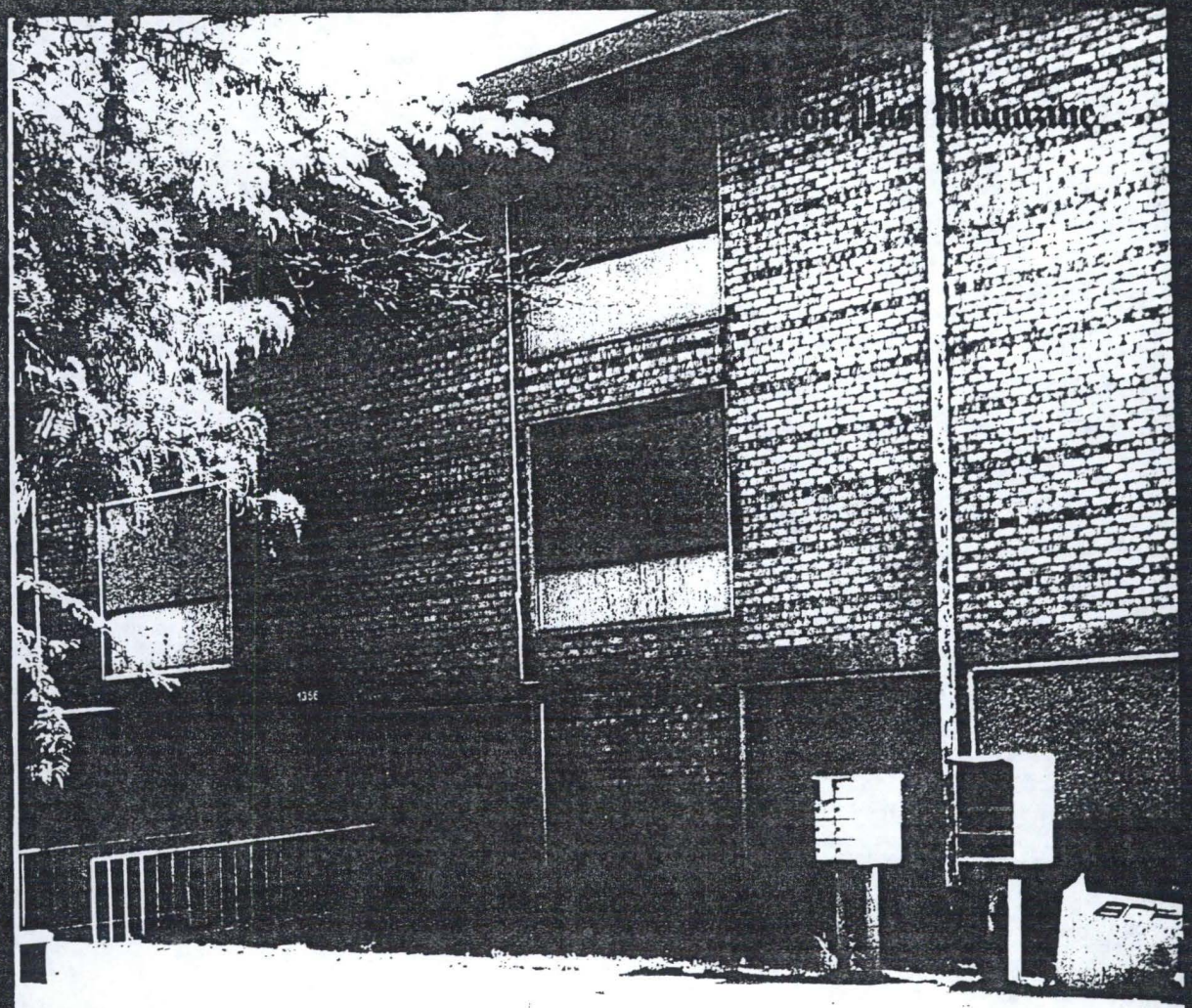
# SUCH GOOD INTENTIONS

HOW A MODEL PUBLIC HOUSING PROJECT DESCENDED INTO MAYHEM **BY JIM MYERS**



1A


REQUIEM




# FOR KENTUCKY COURTS

Most of the little world I'm going to tell you about is no more. It's shut down, boarded up, enclosed behind a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. You can't go there. It died. R.I.P. Soon they'll be tearing it down. But it should also be noted that this place was built with all the fine intentions that proverbially pave the by-ways to hell. It didn't start off as a hellhole; it only ended up that way.



SOMEBODY'S HOME: IN 1965, A TENANT COULD STAND ON HIS THIRD-FLOOR BALCONY AT KENTUCKY COURTS AND SURVEY THE NEWLY PLANTED TREES

## I: PIGEONS

YOU COULD TALK ABOUT Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis or Chicago's Cabrini-Green—the huge, otherworldly horror stories about public housing. But pick an awful story about crime, poverty or wretched housing—any story—and it was likely to have echoes at Kentucky Courts, a little 45-unit housing project down C Street SE from my house. Most people never even heard of Kentucky Courts, though it seemed to have the woes of projects 10 times its size.

In the early 1990s, Tom Foley, speaker of the House, kept a Capitol Hill home just up the street from this deadly pile of bricks and reinforced concrete. Surely, he must have heard the nocturnal gunfire like the rest of us.

The D.C. Department of Public and Assisted Housing, or DPAH (pronounced "DEE-paw"), ran Kentucky Courts but exercised little control over who lived there and no control over who came and went each day. The cops didn't have much control, either. Most were wary of entering the Courts without backup; others entered with guns drawn; a few just stayed away.

Meanwhile, I was working as a journalist. In the early 1990s, I would walk by Kentucky Courts on my way to and from work in the sports department at USA Today. On one occasion—one of a few occasions—I walked past a scene with yellow police tape and emergency personnel working over a young man who had been shot. He was breathing out a bloody froth. The juxtaposition of such scenes in my neighborhood and my professional reality started to bother me. Something was drastically wrong at places like Kentucky Courts, and I was writing about games. Another shooting, in 1993—this time it appeared that it was police who had sprayed bullets across the neighborhood—left me wondering whether there weren't wrongs that could be righted at Kentucky Courts.

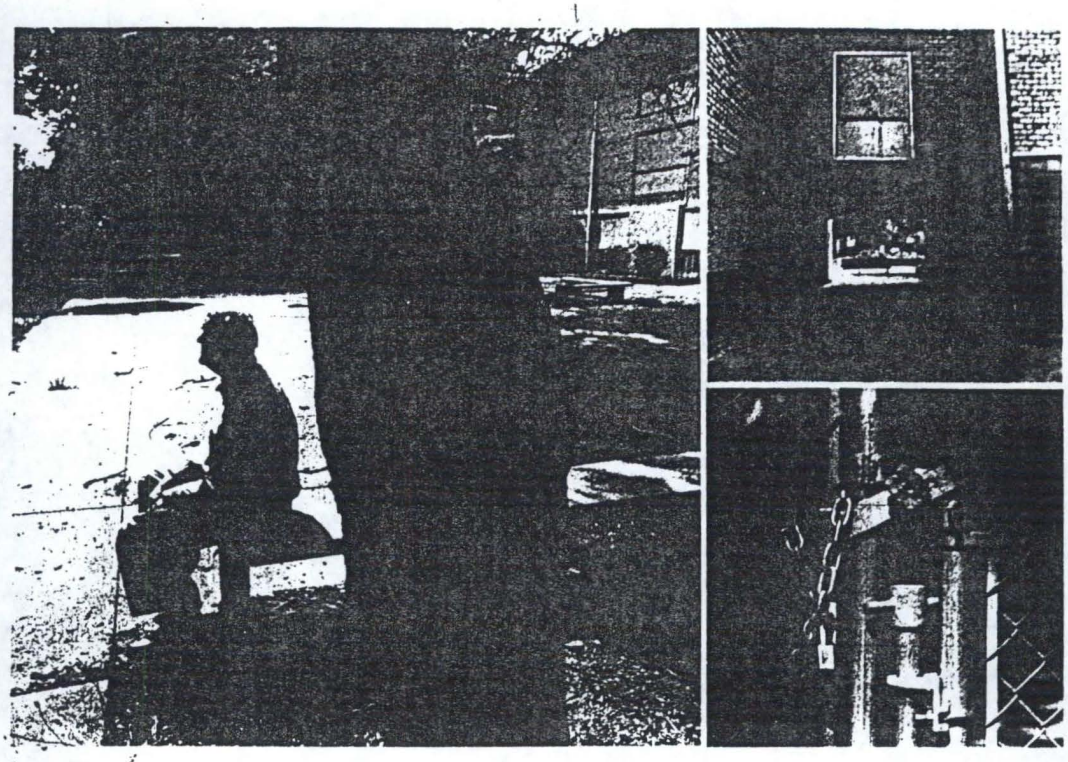
Why couldn't the broken, battered, bullet-riddled doors be fixed? Why did it have to be that addicts were sleeping in the hallways and using them for public toilets? And why did it seem that little kids were so often abandoned to their own devices day and night? Once within the Courts, I found that many residents wanted to talk; they wanted to tell someone about falling plaster or strange stains growing on the ceiling—and about their fears. A few residents had snapped Polaroids to prove that they weren't making things up or losing their minds.

Within weeks, I found myself in a delegation of residents and neighbors who took the Polaroids to DPAH headquarters, known as "eleven thirty-three," for 1133 North Capitol St. But immediately our group encountered an oddity about the elevators at 1133. When you pressed Up, the elevators went down; when you pressed Down, they went up. As a result, the doors kept opening on scenes of people who weren't getting anywhere they wanted to be. But that was DPAH.

In 1993, DPAH sank to the bottom of U.S. housing agencies,

**Jim Myers is a Washington writer. His most recent book is *Afraid of the Dark: What Whites and Blacks Need to Know About Each Other.* He will be fielding questions and comments about this article at 1 p.m. Monday on www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline.**

PHOTOGRAPHS ON PAGES 8-9 AND PAGE 11 BY DUDLEY M. BROOKS. THIS PAGE BY WALLY MCNAMEE / THE WASHINGTON POST



ARCHITECT DAVID YERKES, SITTING IN THE NOW-EMPTY COURTYARD; THE BREEZEWAY COY MASON STAGGERED THROUGH BEFORE DYING; A LOCKED GATE.

scoring a pathetic 22.38 on the Department of Housing and Urban Development's evaluation scale of 100, with 60 considered the passing grade. In 1995, DPAH was put into court receivership, and across Washington thousands of public housing residents said a quiet, "Thank you, Lord."

DPAH's mind-boggling dysfunction helped explain attitudes you found at places like Kentucky Courts. Living in surroundings that could normally produce anger, depression or despair, residents had long concluded that dysfunction was a way of life. The way of life could mean that when you skipped paying rent, not much happened. Or it could mean that when something was broken, it never got fixed. DPAH promoted a throwaway world in which nobody took care of anything.

Some residents at Kentucky Courts stopped paying rent when their ceilings collapsed. It was a classic DPAH mess: For want of a $25 screen—or whatever it would have cost to cover the small vents to the open-air spaces under the roof—pigeons were taking over, apartment by apartment. On August 20, 1994, a huge chunk of the ceiling in Vernell Moses's bedroom collapsed, dumping a disgusting mix of pigeon droppings, dead birds, feathers and rotten eggs on her bed. Moses immediately noted that it had been a year to the day since another chunk of ceiling had fallen, which had inspired her to stop paying rent. Third-floor apartments at Kentucky Courts were slowly being abandoned as ceilings collapsed, and the problem was spreading down inner air shafts to the lower floors, where pigeons would suddenly emerge from holes behind the bathroom sink.

DPAH officials generally insisted that if conditions at the Courts were so bad, surely the tenants council would have said something. But there was no tenants council. The Kentucky Courts seniors apartments a block away had a council, but at the family units with the pigeon problem, the council had died years earlier. So we got one going again and went back to 1133 with more Polaroids. This time, DPAH officials told us that dozens of projects in Washington were in much worse shape than Kentucky Courts; we would have to wait our turn.

AT THE SAME TIME, the 45 family units at Kentucky Courts were becoming a battlefield of another sort. Gunfights and car chases were almost nightly affairs on C and 14th streets SE; ambulances were regularly picking up bodies, dead or still breathing, off nearby corners. The complex, eight three-story buildings linked together around an interior courtyard, had been discovered as the perfect fortress for a drug gang. On that scale, it scored 100.

Actually, only seven people died violently in the immediate environs of Kentucky Courts in the 1990s, but there were also shootings from which victims survived. And other murders nearby were sometimes linked to doings at the Courts. Bodies were found, for example, on the Payne Elementary School playground diagonally across the street, and homicides elsewhere in D.C. and Maryland were suspected of being connected to the activities of a loose-knit gang called the Kentucky Courts Crew. "KCC" was scrawled all over the neighborhood, usually by younger admirers. Members of the crew could sashay into the city's go-go clubs with ever-increasing swagger; the band onstage

might even announce that "the whole Kentucky Courts" was in the house. They were starting to get known.

Originally, the presumed mastermind was Coy Mason, an enterprising young man who had just turned 20 when the police shot him dead at Kentucky Courts on September 19, 1992. Mason had become an almost mythic figure in the neighborhood, and his death was a landmark event.

Then, on December 30, 1993, Officer Jason White was shot dead on the steps of a house across from Kentucky Courts, and a KCC associate whose aunt lived in the project was arrested and charged with the murder. All hell broke loose at the Courts; more than 30 search warrants were executed at locales in D.C. and Maryland, including 11 apartments at Kentucky Courts that were linked to the gang. At the Courts, police found guns, bulletproof vests, drugs and other tools of the thug trade. Shortly thereafter, a federal grand jury handed down indictments against seven additional individuals on charges including conspiracy to distribute cocaine and use of a firearm during a drug-trafficking crime. Other gang associates were charged in D.C. Superior Court. Suddenly, with that many KCC members absent, the Courts fell strangely quiet.

Yet soon there was another late-night ambush and gun battle involving still more KCC associates and their enemies. It ended in a car crash on 14th Street. Witnesses saw various individuals escape into Kentucky Courts; one even ran back to retrieve a shotgun out of the crashed car. An upset neighbor, whose house had been sprayed with bullets, started yelling at the investigating officers: "We live here, too! We live here, too!" The officers threatened to arrest him; the next day, he put his house up for sale.



MARY THOMPSON NEAR HER OLD APARTMENT AT KENTUCKY COURTS, WHERE SHE SPENT HOURS TRYING TO FIND PRODUCTIVE THINGS FOR THE CHILDREN TO DO.

The summer after White was shot, a few of us, including my wife, Deborah, and Mary Thompson, who later became president of the Kentucky Courts Tenants Council, opened a stand at Kentucky Avenue and C Street where the kids could sell lemonade, hot dogs and watermelons on weekends. Monday was payday. After deducting enough for supplies, the take was divided into pay envelopes for the 20 to 25 kids who worked the stand. Payday was beautiful; the workers would all line up, one moment when all the kids stood still.

Miss Mary is one of the heroes of the Kentucky Courts story, because this mother of two spent hours every week trying to find productive activities for the youngsters at Kentucky Courts. Sometimes, an agency like the Metropolitan Boys & Girls Club would give her a tiny stipend to work with the kids; often as not she did it totally on her own.

The lemonade stand lasted three summers, about as long as our general hopes that conditions at the Courts might improve. DPAH eventually beat all hopes down. It kept moving what were referred to as "problem" tenants into Kentucky Courts—that was, tenants who soon proved to be drug users or associates of drug sellers. And once these problem tenants were in, you couldn't get rid of them; often chaos reigned in and around their apartments.

If the new arrivals were drug users, that fact usually became apparent within days, even hours. In one case, gunmen showed up almost immediately to collect old debts from a woman who was moved in after her apartment in another project had been torched. In better times, we had speculated that if only four or five apartments where hustlers, addicts or gunmen swarmed could be cleared out, Kentucky Courts would be a beautiful place.

But DPAH couldn't do that.

At one point in 1996, a few residents counted up the number of apartments where they suspected one or more residents were using crack cocaine. The total in the informal survey was 14 apartments, and curiously, it also seemed that there were about 14 low-level, crack-selling street pharmacists coming around, a one-to-one ratio.

They were not drug lords with jewels and fancy cars; they were ragtag hustlers who for the most part didn't even have a bicycle or a beat-up car, referred to as a "hoopty." Still, the shooting soon started up again. On June 4, 1997, Derek "Fray" Williams was ambushed and shot in the head next to a wall in the courtyard. The housing agency, renamed the D.C Housing Authority under the receivership, immediately responded by knocking down the wall. Then housing officials announced that Kentucky Courts was next in line for "occupied unit rehab," a federally funded "modernization" effort. First, the housing authority planned to remove the mountains of pigeon feces, at a projected cost of nearly $500,000.

According to the plan, hazardous materials teams would clear the ventilation spaces and air shafts while tenants were still living in the apartments. But when workers in hazmat protective suits started work, clouds of dust and pigeon feathers drifted across the neighborhood.

Sam Ford, a WJLA-TV reporter who lives on Capitol Hill, happened by. The next day a crew from WJLA captured video of the scene—the hazmat workers in their suits, the dust and little children below. The story was broadcast that night. Ford also contacted the health department. The following day, DCHA and health department officials met in the Kentucky Courts courtyard and agreed that the tenants should be relocated. The plan was to give them all Section 8 certificates, rent subsidies that most tenants considered a better deal than public housing because it would allow them to choose where they would live.

DCHA officials may have been angered that their plans had been upended publicly, but at least one saw a bright side. "It's an opportunity to get rid of those problem tenants," he told me.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DUDLEY M. BROOKS