

## Howard U.'s Houses Become Homes; Woman, 82, to Get Neighbors at Last

[FINAL Edition]

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D.C. Mayor-elect Anthony A. Williams (D) was at the housewarming party yesterday, and so were the heads of Fannie Mae, Bell Atlantic Corp. and Howard University.

But the real star was 82-year-old Lillian Robinson, who has lived on tiny Oakdale Place NW, near Howard, for more than a decade alone -- her row house surrounded only by rundown, abandoned homes. Robinson's tenacious refusal to leave helped spark the renovation of one of Washington's most historic neighborhoods, LeDroit Park.

Within days, Robinson will have neighbors. People are moving into homes newly renovated under a multimillion-dollar project undertaken by Howard University in a partnership with Fannie Mae, the nation's largest provider of home mortgages, and other organizations. Officials hope it will serve as a national model for community revitalization in urban areas.

"I think I saved the block," Robinson said proudly as she sat in a heated tent where D.C. political and business leaders gathered to mark the completion of the first of 10 homes being renovated on Oakdale Place, a block once littered with dirt but now filled with construction material.

"It would have been a vacant lot if I left," she said as guests visited the 700-square-foot, two-story renovated row houses near her well-tended home. "People would always say to me, 'Aren't you afraid to live on this block all by yourself? Shouldn't you leave?' And I always said, 'No.' If I had moved out, this wouldn't have happened."

If her comments were an exaggeration, it was understandable. Robinson's symbolic role was so powerful that D.C. Mayor Marion Barry (D) declared yesterday "Lillian Robinson Day," and Bell Atlantic-Washington President Marie C. Johns addressed her remarks "to Mrs. Robinson and the other dignitaries assembled today."

The party was a long time coming for LeDroit Park. For years, Howard owned 28 unoccupied, boarded-up properties and 17 vacant lots on five blocks in the area -- and ignored them, fueling a reputation as a lousy neighbor among those who live near the prestigious, historically black university.

But President H. Patrick Swygert, who came to Howard in 1995 with a reputation for fostering strong ties to the community around the Albany, N.Y., school he previously headed, changed all that. He began by seeking help from the business community.

Fannie Mae climbed on board, investing more than \$20 million to provide a range of services. It helped provide financing for the development and construction of the properties and joined with the D.C. Housing Finance Agency to provide mortgages for home buyers at below-market interest rates.

Howard, with Fannie Mae's help, will pay up to 3 percent of the purchase price of the homes, which begin at \$70,000, for university staff members. And Howard extended that same offer to D.C. police officers, firefighters, teachers and others who already live in the neighborhood and are members of local civic organizations.

Bell Atlantic agreed to help, too, with state-of-the-art telecommunications links to the area installed at cost.

"At first, I didn't believe it could happen," said Ruby Farmer, a Howard University employee who now lives in Southeast Washington and has put a down payment on a house in LeDroit Park. "But then they had all these meetings, and each time it seemed a little more real."

There were many skeptics when Swygert proposed the plan for LeDroit Park. "This is a community that has heard a lot of promises," said Jamie Gorelick, vice chairman of Fannie Mae. "Patrick Swygert and I felt the most important thing we could do is keep a promise."

LeDroit Park first appeared on a District map in 1873, when a Howard University trustee hired an architect to design homes. When racial barriers fell in the 1890s, elegant houses there became home to Washington's black intelligentsia, including poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and civil rights activist Mary Church Terrell. But over the decades, as the District lost population, the area became a marginalized urban neighborhood.

Two years ago, Howard undertook the physical rehabilitation of a section of Georgia Avenue. Howard University Hospital's emergency and trauma center was renovated for \$6 million, and a liquor store was converted into a police substation. The school also opened a community association in what used to be a convenience store.

With dozens of homes to be completed next year, Swygert is making plans to do more. He wants to turn fenced-off McMillan Reservoir into a public park with trails and landscaping, create a cultural district around the Shaw Metro station at Seventh and S streets NW and attract other business to the area. He also hopes to attract the proposed National African American Museum, which originally was intended for the Mall.

Annie Coleman, soon to be a neighbor of Robinson's, said she was overwhelmed by the chance to be a homeowner.

"If you had asked me a year ago whether I would have been able to afford a mortgage or own my own home, I would have said no," said Coleman, who praised Fannie Mae and Howard for spearheading the program that has made it possible.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer