

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN THE JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH COMMUNITY:

A Case Study

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The Richmond Jewish Family Services (JFS) and a for-profit owner of multi-family real estate have developed a partnership to provide a full range of supportive social services to the apartment tenants. In addition to improving the lives of those tenants, this social investment has had economic benefits for the real estate company—increased occupancy rates, less vandalism, and decreased tenant turnover. For JFS, this venture has provided an excellent opportunity to contribute to the healing of the social fabric of the Richmond community.

Social investment as the greatest form of *Tzedakah* is an often-neglected concept that only recently has been addressed in the literature (Dekro & Bush, 1997). Efforts to stimulate increased institutional investments targeting housing and economic development in low-income communities across our community have met with varying success. Recent studies do, however, show that many Jews describe social action involvement as a key element in their Jewish identity (Sternberg, 1992). The project described here, which began in February, 1996 in Richmond, Virginia, demonstrates successful social action at work. To the best of our knowledge, it is the only example of a partnership between social service agencies and a for-profit owner of multi-family real estate.

THE BEGINNINGS

Renovating and rehabilitating low-income housing are the “bricks and mortar” of what Earl M. Ferguson, a member of the Richmond Jewish community, does as president of The Artcraft Companies. The company, which bought its first property in October 1993, now

owns and/or manages 3000 apartment units in Virginia.

In the summer of 1995, Mr. Ferguson began on a small scale to make a social investment in the lives of his clients. He sent 25 children living in one of his recently acquired and renovated apartment complexes to a summer camp run by a nearby church. When attending a housing conference in Washington, D.C. and learning of a successful program in Atlanta that involved a social service agency and a nonprofit owner, he approached Jewish Family Services (JFS) of Richmond seeking ideas on supportive social services.

Together we decided to target children between the ages of 5 and 18 living in one of Artcraft's Richmond apartment complexes. Jewish Family Services introduced the concept of partnering with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Richmond as a means of initiating home-based support programming. The Boys & Girls Clubs had extensive experience providing similar services in governmental housing initiatives.

Within two months, Mr. Ferguson had renovated a 1500-square foot maintenance

building at a cost of \$12,000 and opened the first privately funded Boys & Girls Club in the country. In addition to providing startup costs, the Artcraft Companies fund the activities of the club and the services provided by the Boys & Girls Club. The ongoing support (nearly \$50,000 per year) provides a monthly stipend to the Boys & Girls Club to defray their staff, materials, transportation, equipment, and administrative supervision.

The Lincoln Manor Club opened in June, 1996 and within thirty days had a membership of about thirty-five children. Today, that number is in excess of 150. Programs include "Power Hour" (when homework must be done each day before play is allowed), athletic events, and social skills programming provided by JFS. Lincoln Manor also has a choir that performs at local civic functions. During the summer as many as sixty to seventy children are at the club every day. Field trips, social skills programming, and just plain fun are the order of the day for those summer months. In addition, through a program with the City of Richmond, the children at Lincoln Manor Club receive a free lunch. Positive parental feedback focuses on the value of the club in setting an example of the importance of scholarship and giving back to the community.

In the two years since the first club began, The Artcraft Companies has funded one more club in nearby Newport News, Virginia with the same success. "It's the right thing to do, and it's the way we want to run our company," Ferguson said. "But it's also not totally philanthropic; it's a good mix of economics and common sense" (*Virginia Daily Press*, 1996). The company's bottom line has improved. There is less property damage and fewer instances of crime and vandalism, and occupancy rates have increased. In fact, the occupancy rate has stabilized at 10 percent higher than before the club's opening, and rental delinquencies are down dramatically. In addition, resident turnover has decreased from a norm of 60 percent to a much more stabilized 35 percent. The numbers speak for themselves.

SOUTHWOOD

Most recently, The Artcraft Companies, The Boys & Girls Clubs, Jewish Family Services, and Community Research and Development Group, a national nonprofit organization working to provide low- to moderate-income households with supportive and human services, have partnered to develop additional services for low- to moderate-income residents living in Southwood, a 1286-unit apartment complex in Richmond. A local minority community development corporation was also brought in to provide locally based community support.

These five groups, as well as an aggressive lending institution, the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, local law firms, and consultants, teamed together to buy and renovate Southwood. Over \$2.5 million will be spent on property improvements, and a \$750,000 Community Center will be built to house the new Boys & Girls Club and other support services. This 15,000-square foot center will house a full range of services, including the following:

- full-scale Boys & Girls Club
- JFS' vocational counseling services for the residents
- neonatal classes
- teenage babysitting classes
- dental screening

The long-term benefits of these support services for the Southwood residents are improved employment opportunities and income, enhanced feelings of self-worth, and a strengthening of families and communities. A more intangible result of this social investment will be the increased faith of the economically disabled residents that there is good in society; there will be an increased willingness to build bridges between the many communities in Richmond. Attempts to right some of the less-than-successful aspects of our country's housing policies are in line with a key principle of *tzedakah*—that of righting previous wrongs.

THE FUTURE

The Community Research and Development Group and the Southside Community Development and Housing Corporation, two nonprofit owners of Southwood, will receive annual cash flow profit from the transaction—projected to be substantial. They both have plans to reinvest these sums into similar properties in Virginia and elsewhere. The Artcraft Companies prospers in its role as fee developer and fee manager. In addition, the principals of the non-profits and Artcraft have been asked to present this model to other interested groups, and media exposure has been strong. For JFS, this venture continues to be an excellent opportunity to contribute to the healing of the social fabric of the Richmond community.

One of the interesting side benefits of the Artcraft Companies' involvement is a new program to begin in the summer of 1998. In collaboration with JFS, it is funding the cost of field trips for its teenaged residents to the

Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. This venture can only strengthen the bridges we have begun to build.

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