

“Being Heard, Not Only Seen”: Intersections of Tea Partyism, Racism, and Classism in a Low-income Housing Struggle in Dekalb, Illinois

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Civil Rights struggles are waged locally but are always a part of, and impact, larger contexts. Eight years after the sub-prime mortgage industry’s collapse triggered the “Great Recession,” struggles for housing and neighborhood development are complex, diverse, and geographically dispersed. Small cities are increasingly becoming key Civil Rights battlegrounds as the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) implements a “deconcentration” agenda, displacing urban poor and gentrifying big-city neighborhoods. DeKalb, Illinois, an hour and a half west of Chicago and home to a large public university, was embroiled in controversy over the planned redevelopment of a HUD-subsidized housing complex. Large landlord opposition to the sale was racially charged, with public comments disparaging current residents, coalescing into a free-market critique of “big government.” A tenants’ association emerged to counter the rhetoric of landlords. These two discourses – racism and sexism on the one hand, and “local control” on the other – emerged in the process. After a yearlong struggle, the City Council passed a zoning variance to allow loans for new buyers to complete long overdue repairs. Thus, the victory for DeKalb residents sets an important precedent for other small cities. This article distills lessons learned, including the importance of community organizing, specifically being “heard” in addition to being “seen,” the confluence of racism, and “new federalism.”

Key words: housing policy, racism, deconcentration, community organizing, civil rights, local politics

“We’ll build a fence around the housing complex and install retina scanners,” said Leonard Dixon,¹ local large landowner and low-income housing opponent. “We don’t need you people here,” a City Council member intoned, opposing the presence of a company specializing in affordable housing.

In this article, we² describe the controversy centered on University Village (UV), one of the largest low-income housing complexes in the region located in the university town of DeKalb, Illinois. We first briefly provide background on the complex and its connection to the migration of largely African American residents from Chicago to DeKalb. Located only two blocks from the campus of Northern Illinois University (NIU), we describe how Kendall and Mark as faculty members became involved and then present the results of a series of individual and group interviews with tenants. During the course of Mark and Kendall’s work to better understand the experiences and views of tenants, they became aware of

the pending sale of the complex, which changed the direction of our work. Kendall and Mark turned to working with tenants to organize and facilitated a process by which their voices could be heard by the prospective new owners, the community, and city officials who had to approve a zoning ordinance variance in order for the facility to be purchased. We describe the nearly year-long local political battle that was fraught with racial under and overtones and Tea Party narratives, rhetoric that emerged most particularly from local large property owners who opposed the purchase and redevelopment. The tenants fought back with their own voices, forming an unlikely alliance with potential new owners, management, and later with existing owners (not management). We conclude with the final City Council vote, which narrowly handed the tenants a victory and discuss the larger significance of this hard-fought campaign. In the public discourse, other small cities in the area were cited as precedent for rejecting low-income housing. In effect, small cities are key battlegrounds in Civil Rights struggles. This case offers additional evidence of how the discourses of racism and “local control” are inextricably linked.

History of Housing Policy

Because of the “Chicago School”—a generations-long tradition of urban ethnography from the University of Chicago Sociology Department—the city, and particularly the South

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Side, is often considered a “laboratory” for urban social policy. Progressive journalists like Studs Terkel (1967; 1986) and Alex Kotlowitz (1991) documented the impacts of segregation and urban disinvestment following the “restructuring” of the economy that heralded the loss of living wage, blue collar jobs on Chicago’s Black community. Following University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987; 1996), Bill Clinton’s Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) argued that areas of “concentrated poverty” were the source of most urban ills like unemployment, drug use, and crime. It was an admission that their earlier strategies, such as the “New Urbanism” of the 1970s or the modernist, public housing buildings—disparagingly referred to as “Soviet-style” or “warehouses for the poor”—had failed, or at least they had serious unintended consequences. Most notorious was Chicago’s Cabrini-Green, a large, public housing complex near downtown profiled in many media accounts because of its high crime rates and other social problems. President Clinton seized upon Wilson’s “deconcentration” argument as justification for dismantling public housing. HOPE-VI was his signature housing policy, devised to “make public housing invisible,” through what was to become his trademark of “public-private partnerships.” Careful ethnographic work on the consequences of this policy, carried out by such anthropologists as Susan Greenbaum (2002) and Marilyn Thomas-Houston (2006), suggested that rather than providing higher quality housing for low-income tenants, HOPE-VI was actually an ideological cover for gentrification. These policies and practices are very real to Tiara and Valarie who agree with these anthropological analyses. They also point out that gentrification disrupts African American and Latino social support systems and breaks up families.

The move toward investing in gentrification peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s (Betancur 2002; Cahill 2007; Mumm 2008; Petterson et al. 2006; Wyly and Hammel 2001). Millennials discovered the advantages of living in the urban core: walkable neighborhoods; renovated historic buildings; and a dense concentration of retail establishments like coffee shops, art galleries, and trendy clothing shops all rendered urban cores in post-industrial cities like Chicago newly appealing. This resonated with the work of urbanist Richard Florida (2004), who recommended that what deindustrialized cities needed to revive their flagging fortunes was to attract what he called “the creative class,” consisting of designers, high-tech workers, artists, and others. In fact, his recommendation that cities reorganize their priorities to serve the fairly narrow consumer interests of “the creatives” resulted in the largescale displacement of working-class and low-income residents from core urban areas. Following the deindustrialization of Midwestern “Rust Belt” cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland—itsself caused by shifts in the global economy—capital interests found new uses for cities, as geographers David Harvey (2014) and Neil Smith (1984, 1996) point out.

Cabrini-Green, with its high rises and concentration of low-income, female-headed households had, for years, been described as an “eyesore” and an “utter failure,” and,

indeed, it is fair to say that it had more than its share of crime and violence per capita. Unlike the Dearborn homes along Chicago’s Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago’s near South Side, which remain standing today, Cabrini-Green is close to the city center, a short distance away from North Michigan Street’s so-called “Magnificent Mile—in other words, it was “prime real estate.” Following the demolition, median sales price for single-unit homes went from \$138,000 to \$700,000; and while 7,000 fewer African Americans lived in the area in 1990 compared to the 1980 census, the neighborhood gained 4,000 more Non-Hispanic Whites (Reed 2008).

One problem that housing advocates faced in the deconcentration agenda were unwelcoming responses from recipient communities where urban residents—largely African American and Latino—were going to be dispersed (Goetz, Lam, and Heitlinger 1996; Iglesias 2002; Zeidel 2010). Suburban communities, with considerable economic clout and where Non-Hispanic Whites predominated, often mounted successful efforts to stop what they saw as “invasions;” these reactions were largely racially motivated, but these activists cited the impact on their property values as justification for resisting these incursions. This “NIMBY” (Not in My Back Yard) phenomenon succeeded in stopping public housing dispersal in many communities. Predictably, the wealthier and the Whiter a community was, the more political clout they represented and the more successful they were at convincing policymakers to say no (Goetz 2006). Suburban refusal presented a core challenge to the logic and rhetoric of “deconcentration” that requires places for urban residents, mostly people of color, to relocate. Where were people to go?

Small cities surrounding metropolitan areas were the answer. These “peri-urban” areas such as Aurora, DeKalb, and Rockford in Illinois rapidly became more racially diverse as urban core areas of Chicago became “deconcentrated.” From 2000 to 2010, Rockford saw an increase of 4,928 African Americans, and Non-Hispanic Whites comprised a decreased share of Aurora’s population, from 68.21 percent to 59.71 percent during the same period. As such, small cities are, in many respects, new frontiers in the struggle for civil rights. Powerfully documented in Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Black communities have been struggling for the right to housing for decades. The financial collapse of 2008 caused by predatory lending to residents of minority communities, who could otherwise not qualify for conventional mortgages, exacerbated housing shortages as lower-income homeowners found themselves unable to meet the conditions of their loans and were foreclosed upon at an astronomical rate. Since then, smaller cities, with the loss of stable tax bases, have felt the pinch in terms of public services.

How We Got Involved

In the summer of 2014, Northern Illinois University’s (NIU) newly hired president convened a leadership retreat. Similar to other higher education institutional narratives, much of the focus of the retreat revolved around “engagement”

in its myriad forms. An important element of that discussion concerned the University's relationship, or lack thereof, with the surrounding community of DeKalb, particularly since the University is centrally located in this small, rural collar community situated sixty miles west of Chicago. The university is also the county's largest employer. With 20,000 students as of 2015, NIU also contributes much to the local economy (DeKalb has 44,000 residents). As enrollments at NIU have declined in recent years (to 19,000 as of 2016), and a greater portion of students have become commuters, the occupancy rates for neighborhood housing plunged. Two blocks north of campus is University Village (UV), initially envisioned to attract students and keep them living there after graduation, serving as a "starter home" as families transition into homeownership. Built in three different phases starting in 1969, the complex contains 534 units ranging from single bedroom apartments to three bedroom condos. It is surrounded by the University on the south, apartments on the west, a church and small mixed businesses on the north, and fraternities, a park, and middle-class residents on the east. As of 2015, the complex operated with nearly 90 percent Section 8 and low-income housing tenants, many of whom are from the south side of Chicago. For example, Tiara moved to DeKalb from the south side of Chicago for her first two years of high school, briefly returned to Chicago, then came back to DeKalb for college and never looked back. She looked forward to a safer living environment for her family. At the same time as these changes were occurring in DeKalb, tenants of a public housing development, located on a particular strip of land near Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, home to the University of Chicago and President Obama's former home, were "deconcentrated." Interestingly, many neighbors at UV hailed from that same four-block radius in Chicago. Many like Tiara settled in DeKalb, while others went back to Chicago as often as they could to stay connected with their families, churches, and social support networks. A significant number of families had to continue to travel to Chicago for basic medical care: the nearest "in-network" providers covered by Medicaid were forty-five minutes away and inaccessible by public transportation. This contributed to a continuous cycle of truancy that compromised the success of these families' children in the local school according to the principal of the elementary school where the majority of children in UV attended.

The leadership retreat noted the lack of connection between the University and surrounding neighborhoods, most notably UV, which is proximally close but culturally light-years away. In response, the Chair of the Department of Anthropology, Kendall Thu, volunteered to explore ways of understanding the culture of UV and the surrounding neighborhoods. NIU was already involved in a city-wide housing study and was interested in how the families living in UV and surrounding areas identified with their neighborhoods and the larger community. The assumption embedded in this top-down, demographic approach turned out to be largely irrelevant for UV tenants.

Kendall coordinated his Applied Anthropology class with an Ethnographic Research Methods class taught by faculty member Mark, who had previously been a community organizer, both with a neighborhood association and a tenants' union. Kendall and Mark's work began with informal discussions with NIU administrators, city officials, and stakeholders in the UV neighborhood. The latter consisted of meetings with local faith leaders, school officials, transportation system managers, and business owners. In the midst of this preliminary work, we became aware of rumors that UV was for sale. Kendall and Mark soon discovered that people living in UV were unaware of the potential sale let alone informed about who the potential buyers were. This illustrated the larger point that UV tenants were marginalized from the community, including city deliberations and decisions made by the existing ownership and management. The lack of communication fueled widespread speculation and rumors among UV tenants and other community members. As a result, Kendall and Mark arranged a meeting with the city attorney and city development manager to try to establish what was actually happening. That meeting revealed who the potential buyers were—Security Properties, a Seattle-based company specializing in low-income housing—and the central issue for city government was that they would need to get a zoning variance for the new owners of UV so that they could qualify for a loan from HUD. The reason for this was that UV was grandfathered into previous zoning density limits of eighteen units per acre and had been granted a variance from an ordinance passed in 1996 that restricted density to twelve units per acre. Consequently, a catastrophic event to UV like a tornado that struck Fairdale, a town less than 15 miles away, on April 9, 2015 in the middle of this process would mean that the UV could not rebuild to existing density, resulting in tenants losing their housing and the owners losing revenue, a prospect any lender would be unwilling to accept. A request for such a variance by Security Properties was made in 2014 and led to a year-long series of public hearings initially in the UV neighborhood, then with the Planning and Zoning Commission, culminating in a final vote of the City Council. This highly charged process, unleashing a torrent of racist commentary, was described by many involved, including the Mayor and City Council members, as the most contentious issue in city history. A history that includes the likelihood that DeKalb was, like many communities across the United States, only sixty years removed from being a sundown town. Sundown towns do not allow African Americans to be physically present, especially after the sun sets (Loewen 2005), by law or by practice. This was an eye opener for Tiara and Valarie. This history still finds its way into attitudes and practices in modern day DeKalb, including debates over University Village.

The first meeting to discuss the potential sale and related issues was held in the UV community room in the late fall of 2014. Introduced by the district's Alderman, the meeting was eventually led by a local Baptist minister. Pastor Joseph Mitchell headed one of two African American churches in

town. Being a “second generation” DeKalb resident (his father was also a pastor in town), he was often called into leadership positions within DeKalb’s growing Black community, serving on several public and private boards tasked with undertaking endeavors in the service of social justice. Attended by city representatives, approximately fifty UV tenants showed up to learn what was happening and ask questions. However, the meeting eventually morphed into a litany of complaints by tenants about the conditions in their apartments and the lack of response from management. Complaints ranged from paint and mold to management policies concerning such things as the “ban list”—a list of individuals not allowed on the property, shared with local law enforcement but not the residents, so they did not know who was on the list—parking policies, and feeling targeted by over-policing. For tenants, this was the first time their collective voices were heard, particularly with city officials. It was also the day when the largest number of residents gathered and felt as though their voices were being heard. People voiced concerns about specific issues in their apartments, while certain tenants wanted to discuss larger issues which wouldn’t be addressed until later. There was an overwhelmingly frenzied frustration with a variety of specific conditions with tenants feeding off each other.

With these issues clearly on the table, Kendall, Mark, and students focused specifically on University Village, documenting issues via interviews, focus groups, and surveys. During the first focus group discussion (results discussed below), residents learned from Kendall and Mark that UV was in the process of being sold. As a result, residents began organizing to discuss this major change and why it was happening without their knowledge. This launched numerous meetings to discuss residents’ feelings and concerns surrounding this development. This resulted in the origins of the University Village Tenants Association (UVTA). During this and subsequent focus groups, tenants heard that the city and others had known of this potential purchase for several months and that the buyer had been on the property. Tenants couldn’t understand why they were just finding out about it, why they were essentially the last to know about something that would affect their lives so drastically.

During the first few UVTA meetings, residents noticed that there were managerial staff lingering in the recesses of the public community room taking notes during tenant discussions. This sparked a series of problems with management, including intimidation that created fear among residents, discouraging them from participating in the meetings and speaking up. As a result, the UVTA noticed a significant decline in the number of residents attending meetings. Consequently, meetings were moved from the UV community meeting room to a nearby church so that residents could feel comfortable speaking without fear of retaliation, but this also presented a barrier for residents, so attendance dropped. Despite this, tenants continued to experience intimidation from management and staff. Residents began to see an uptick in lease violations notices. Notification of inspections had typically been attached to tenants’ doors. However, at least one tenant

Figure 1. Challenges according to UV Residents



had her notice mailed on a Friday and didn’t get it until the following Monday afternoon, the day of inspection. Mail doesn’t arrive until after noon, and the inspection took place that morning before the notice had arrived.

Interview and Observational Results

Over the course of the fall semester in 2014, Kendall and Mark and their students in two classes conducted fifty individual interviews and two focus groups with thirty participants for a total of eighty UV tenants. Additional interviews and meetings were conducted with UV stakeholders, including local faith leaders, school principals, transportation officials, and city officials. In addition, notes from meetings with University, county, city, and local student and civic organizations were discussed. The primary focus of the UV resident interviews was to better understand their experiences in the complex and identify their experiences with, and needs and views of, the surrounding community. Interviews with outside stakeholders primarily focused on their views of the Village and the types of services they could possibly provide. These discussions with residents constituted the backdrop for the arrival of a potential new owner and the political battle that ensued.

Interview and focus group results revealed nine primary thematic concerns (see Figure 1). These include: lack of transportation, concerns with management, the lack of healthy accessible food, safety, health care access, employment, racism, preschool and after school care for children, education, and feelings of isolation. These thematic findings were presented to, and vetted in discussion with, UV tenants to ensure accuracy at a December 2015 meeting.

A palpable sense of isolation was a pervasive feeling among tenants and is reflected in the following quote: “I feel more connected to people I meet on the bus than where

I live.” This sentiment is linked to how residents feel they are treated by the UV Management, UV owners, city and campus police, the University, local large property owners, and how their kids are treated in the neighborhoods where they go to school. The climate of fear and isolation resulted in a decline in UVTA participation. In addition, the city pushed back meeting dates on several occasions, which also affected the momentum of the organizing. When the UVTA posted fliers to alert residents about the meeting delays, residents began thinking that it was “just talk,” and they couldn’t figure out what was real.

Tenants felt that police patrols routinely targeted African American males gathering outside on sunny days. In one case, a young African American visitor to the complex was assaulted in a nearby neighborhood off UV grounds. While walking back to the UV, he called the police while the group of people who assaulted him followed in their car. Just before the police and UV security arrived, the assailants left in their vehicle. His arms bleeding, the police questioned the guest who was subsequently banned from the complex by UV security, despite the fact that he was the victim. The ban list dates back to 1998, and residents were under the false impression that police controlled it, when in fact it’s controlled by management. The ability of management and UV security to put people on ban lists with no conditions or review process reflects the asymmetrical power relationships that instill anger and a fear of retaliation among tenants. This culture of fear and isolation make organizing the tenants an even greater challenge. In an effort to build productive relationships and trust, the UVTA and community leaders met with local police to organize a basketball league.

The sense of isolation is exacerbated by the lack of city or county run public transportation. Instead of a single coordinated system, there are two nonprofit-run systems. While the University, via the Students Association, provides transportation that residents can use, the schedule and destination points are focused on students and don’t meet tenants’ needs. Buses are also on the university schedule, with limited to no service on summer, winter, and spring breaks and limited service on weekends. The local Voluntary Action Center (VAC) transportation system is a largely federally funded busing system that provides regular hourly routes at and near UV. At the request of UV residents in a meeting with VAC, they provided a special Saturday access route for UV residents to grocery stores and other retail outlets. The tenants appreciate the VAC efforts, but they are inadequate to meet resident needs to get to work, to health care providers, and other necessary services. The UV is located on the west side of DeKalb, while grocery stores and other shopping and service facilities are located miles away on the east and northeast side of the city. Bus drivers limit the number of bags that can be carried on. When mothers bring their children and strollers on board, bus drivers restrict the number of grocery bags they can take back, resulting in the need for more trips, which take up more time. Bus drivers’ response makes tenants feel as though they are not real people, disconnected from the community.

These challenges are inextricably linked to feelings of disrespect and being treated like second-class citizens, marginalized from the rest of the community. One example occurred when the White management staff took down Black History Month quotes, pictures, and flyers advertising literacy events, saying that this was inappropriate for a place of business. Ninety percent of UV residents are African American. The notion of “looking at us sideways” embodies the sense of discrimination the tenants feel, a perception of how they are viewed, and the expectations that people have for what kinds of behaviors to expect from them. For example, after Valarie spoke at the City Council meeting, one Council member praised her as being “articulate,” a veiled compliment indicating surprise that Valarie could speak well as an African American woman, echoing Joe Biden’s 2007 comment about Barack Obama (e.g., Thai and Barrett 2007 among many others). Sitting through the City Council meetings made Tiara and Valarie realize that their past experience was still real in 2015—even now, they are not looked upon as capable and competent adults. If the Tenants Association had not organized, they may well have gone through the entire sales process without their voices being heard and may not have even been informed of the sale in the first place.

The sale of UV demanded a turning point in our work. Mark and Kendall turned our attention to working with tenants to organize, engage with the potential new owners and management, and navigate the local political process, which required city approval before the purchase could proceed.

Potential New Ownership and the Ensuing Political Battle

The existing owners recognized the need to upgrade UV and desired to divest itself of the development by selling, rather than improving it. They received over thirty purchase proposals and decided the history and experience Security Properties had with low-income housing nationwide was the best fit. However, Security Properties needed HUD funding support to execute the purchase.

Parallel to the zoning hearings, Security Properties and the potential new management team, Evergreen Management, began reaching out to UV tenants. This occurred at the same time that UV tenants had begun to have regular meetings to better understand their own concerns and needs, in addition to becoming more informed about the purchase, potential new owners, and management. While Security Properties clearly wanted UV tenant support in the local political process, they also demonstrated they were willing to listen and clearly made decisions about the potential UV renovation plan based on tenant input. The leadership team from Security Properties and Evergreen Management met with the UV tenants on an ongoing basis and developed a rapport radically different than the existing relationships with ownership, management, and city leaders. It is noteworthy that the tenants felt more of a connection to a company based in Seattle and a new management team based in Chicago than they did to local

owners, management, and the city. By the end of the public hearing process, the UVTA began communicating with the current owners to address immediate issues concerning communication, management, repairs, isolation, and a lack of respect. This was the point when the UVTA began viewing existing owners in a better light because they were more active in meeting with tenants and responding to their concerns.

In the midst of the purchase process and public hearings by the Planning and Zoning Commission and the City Council, the UV tenants formalized a Tenants Association with the assistance of Prairie State Legal Services, who helped tenants with their leases and repairs in their units and referred them to the Shriver Center in Chicago. The Sargent Shriver Center on Poverty Law was created in the 1970s to advance justice and equal opportunity on a number of fronts, including low-income tenant rights. They helped the tenants formalize a Tenants Association with an appropriate voting process and organizational structure that gave it legal standing to assist with tenant fair housing grievances and secure a recognized position in the public hearing processes. The legal assistance also provided a mechanism for dealing with the fear and intimidation of an overwhelming political and policy process. Tiara was elected President of the UV Tenants Association, with Valarie as Vice President. Tiara and Valarie became committed leaders in the public hearing processes and in leading UV tenants and their families out of isolation, connecting them to the community, and giving them voice and agency.

Public Discussion

The sale unleashed a maelstrom of public commentary. While the official discussion was over whether or not to grant a variance in the local zoning code, the issue of density was most controversial, with thinly veiled racial under and overtones. DeKalb's daily newspaper, the *Daily Chronicle*, ran several long "public interest" stories, introducing the readers, long-term residents, many with ties to the local agribusiness economy—disproportionately White—to their "new" neighbors. Two City Council members and the chair of the Zoning and Planning Committee had been residents of UV in the 1980s. During the public hearing process, each described the complex as an ideal "starter" home for new families. The Zoning and Planning chair bought a house across the street, where he lived for thirty years.

The sale of UV represented an "opportunity" to some within the City of DeKalb to "clean up the place." There were six official public hearings, beginning with a special session of the Zoning and Planning Committee in a church adjacent to UV on a blistery cold day the first week of January 2015. From the point of view of many residents, the process was long and dragged out, with the decision finally made in mid-September. Additionally, two early public hearings originally slated for the winter had been postponed, which gave various impressions to UV residents. As Valarie noted, "There were

all these false starts. We would be telling people that it was really important to go to this hearing, and then the last minute, we would find out that it was canceled. This hurt not only the credibility of the City but also the Tenants Association as well. We had a hard time trying to get people to come after that." Indeed, participation by UV tenants dwindled as the process wore on.

All of the public meetings were covered by the *Daily Chronicle*. Each story triggered several letters to the editor as well as anonymously written comments online. The conversation quickly deteriorated into open expressions of racism and hostility about DeKalb's "new neighbors" like Tiara and Valarie. Tiara and Valarie had been living in DeKalb longer than many White residents, certainly students and many professionals, including NIU alumni and professors like Mark. The opposition to granting the variance was most vociferously voiced by local rental property owners. Two individuals' voices predominated. Leonard Dixon represented a "bad cop," focusing on the social ills caused by housing too many poor people. The other, Mike Westerbury, at least initially, presented himself as the "good cop." These represented two major discursive strands, which in the end merged.

In the penultimate meeting of the City Council in August, Leonard implored the City Council to "make DeKalb a better place." No longer tiptoeing around the issue of race, Leonard appropriated liberal discourses of "diversity" in the service of his clear preferences of who should live there. Referring to the demographic shifts to UV, when it was initially a mixed-income and almost entirely White neighborhood, he proposed to "bring back diversity to the project." Specifically, he said that "we need families and male figures." This preoccupation with the "absent Black father" figure was certainly not new. This discourse, the elephant in the room, demonized and blamed for the pathology of the Black families and communities, has had historical currency since the work of the sociologist Frazier (2000), and it was codified into social policy by anthropologist Moynihan (1965). Here, an intersectional approach is useful (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1983). Leonard and the anonymous commentators drew on racialized gendered discourses of female-headed households who supposedly disproportionately drained limited public resources through their needs along with those of their children. This narrative received support from Michael Welsh, the chair of the Zoning and Planning Committee, who spoke for twenty-seven minutes (the maximum time allotted was supposed to be two minutes) at this same August City Council hearing (Official City of DeKalb, Illinois Municipal Government 2015a).

While drawing on strength from intersecting identities as mothers, strong women, community leaders, college graduates, up-and-coming professionals, and activists trying to improve living conditions, Tiara and Valarie also had to confront multiple, interlocking stereotypes. At times, the intersection of oppression was just too much. Following the discussion about needing to have "male figures" during the meeting, Tiara, whose picture made it to the front page of the newspaper

following her testimony at the hearings, walked out. Tiara was one of “those people;” not only was she Black, but she was also a single mother. She left the building to break down and cry. As she retold her story, her UVTA associate Valarie and the other authors attempted to console her. She pointed out that wanting a better life for her family—opportunities that the White policymakers had shared in several testimonies—was exactly what she had wanted to do. An NIU honors graduate, Tiara was struggling to find a job as the economy was still only slowly recovering from the “Great Recession” begun in 2008. Valarie, who had just completed her master’s degree at NIU, could relate. The most difficult thing for Tiara was that she couldn’t bring her children to these hearings, to be proud of their mother, because she wanted to protect them, particularly her nephew that she’s raising, from hearing the racism. Eventually, Tiara composed herself, returning to the chambers to present. She pointed out the only difference between the Zoning and Planning chair and herself was her race and her gender—that they both wanted a better life and were grateful for the opportunity. Most importantly, she said that as residents of UV, they needed to be active participants in these decisions about their lives.

Mike’s “good cop” discourse explicitly drew upon HUD’s supposedly liberal language of “deconcentration.” Mike consistently said that the problem was that HUD was absent, and solving their urban problem by “shoving,” “forcing,” and “dumping” the problem (read: Black families like Tiara’s and Valarie’s) in the City of DeKalb. While Leonard’s approach was blustery, melodramatic, and caustic (he later became the host of a local right-wing AM radio broadcast, styled after Rush Limbaugh), Mike’s demeanor was calm and used fact, not fiery rhetoric, to make his argument. This “good-cop-bad-cop” approach succeeded in securing a “no” vote in a non-binding recommendation from the Zoning and Planning committee in May. But Mike’s tone became increasingly shrill in City Council as the political winds began blowing against him. In addition to calling HUD out for not following their own rules, he planted the seed of saying no to HUD. Mike also brought to the discussion examples of two nearby small cities, Aurora (population estimate: 199,963 as of July 2013) and Rockford (150,251), who refused. In his final speech, Alderman Baker intoned, “If we vote no, it’ll be just like Rockford, just like Aurora, HUD will have to come to the table.” Both cities had closed public housing in the years prior to the process noted here. The discussion was glazed with heroic terms, presenting a David-and-Goliath story against “big government,” which was repeated in the City Council vote in September. In his testimony, Zoning and Planning Committee chair Welsh specifically hailed Aurora, saying “They fixed it. They tore those units down.” This discourse against big government is a central theme within a neo-conservative “Tea Party” agenda.

Later in the process, as the final vote drew near, the discourses merged in both language and tone. As a company based in Seattle, Security Properties triggered a “buy local” discourse in rejecting their bid. “Buy local” has current resonance as a progressive political stance. This rhetorical

move placed Security Properties as the outsider, backed by HUD, whose rules about no-interest loans necessitated the vote change in the first place, which several citizens and policymakers described as “free federal money.” Alderman Baker said, “We don’t want you here.” Through this process of public deliberation, it was discovered that UV was covered under Low Income Housing Preservation and Resident Homeownership Act (LIHPRA) agreements with HUD. The City Attorney pointed out during September’s final public hearing and vote that the LIHPRA agreements obligated the property to offer “affordable housing,” whether or not the City Council approved the zoning ordinance allowing for Security Properties to purchase UV. And for an additional thirty years, as a vexed Alderman Baker complained, noting that: “It’s been pointed out that we’ve got ‘em for at least thirty years if nothing happens” (Official City of DeKalb, Illinois Municipal Government 2015b). The City Attorney also corrected the language of testimony, admonishing people to focus the discussion on the units themselves and not the residents and their racial characteristics, gender, and family status. To openly discuss such language would be to open the City to the possibility of a lawsuit for violating Fair Housing standards. So Mike’s “good cop” language and struggle against HUD fused with Leonard’s “bad cop” in his social engineering and “cleaning up the place.”

Pastor Mitchell’s testimony during the final City Council meeting on September 14, 2014 addressed the issue of racism head on. This occurred in the context of the events in Ferguson, Missouri, where an unarmed Black teen, Michael Brown, was shot and killed by a police officer in August 2014. A large and vocal social movement, Black Lives Matter, was catalyzed in response, bringing issues of racial justice, White privilege, institutional racism, and official government-sanctioned violence against Black communities, like Chicago’s, into mainstream discourse, freeways, malls, and universities like NIU. In an effort to ease these racial tensions, Pastor Mitchell co-organized a “Unity Walk,” bringing African Americans, Muslims (increasingly understood as an ethnic group), Latinos, and Non-Hispanic Whites together. In contrast to the public hearings, this was an event that Tiara could bring her children to experience Tiara’s community leadership without being negatively impacted by racial comments. This was the backdrop for Pastor Mitchell’s public comments:

I have been following, with growing concern, the discussion in our media. UV residents are described as thugs, criminals, the source of all crime in DeKalb. Some even suggested sending the monkeys back to Chicago. Even NIU’s CHANCE Program was blamed for all the crime in UV, a program that has existed for twenty-eight years that my father directed that produced lawyers, doctors, dentists, multimillionaires, MBA graduates, and NFL players. I’ve sat in this room listening to people speaking on this microphone referring to residents of UV as “those people” or “these people,” very elitist and very exclusive language. The racial overtones surrounding the purchase of UV by Security Properties have been irresponsible, insensitive, unnecessary, and downright disheartening.

This was not the first time racial animosity was unleashed and abetted by a City Council meeting. At the February 13, 2012 meeting, representatives of NIU's Center for Black Studies, who had expressed concerns about the location of the new police station directly across the street, were escorted out by police. They were presenting during the public comment period, and one had not ceded her time, just like the middle-aged White men during the University Village hearing process cited above. But unlike these other cases, the Mayor enforced the time limit for the younger African American students. Comments posted on the City's official YouTube site (DeKalbILLINOIS 2012)—and still visible, not removed by the City as of September 2016—include “tell the niggers to shut the fuck up.” And “these thugs must learn to be human.”

The testimonies of UVTA leaders Tiara and Valarie, both of whom are NIU graduates, that day were short and to the point. Tiara said, “We want Security Properties because they have reached out to us and gained our trust, including us from the ground floor about important decisions regarding their and their families' future.” Echoing Pastor Mitchell, Valarie began, “What I've heard so far is that UV tenants are a financial burden on the school system, the police department, the fire department, and the social system.” And then she took the conversation to her own preoccupations:

What I haven't heard is how our families will be mentally and socially impacted if our homes are destroyed and we have no homes to return to. Ever since the natural disaster struck our neighbors in Fairdale, I have been stricken with fear that a tornado or a thunder storm warning will turn into a catastrophe for our neighborhood. It feels like driving a car without insurance.... If there's an accident, I'm not covered.

Tiara concluded with the simple community organizing truism, *nothing about us without us*, saying: “We are looking to be included in the major factors that impact the residents of UV. We would like to be informed on matters that affect our families. We are asking for safe living environment for our families and children.”

The Final Hour

It's 11:00 P.M. People are restless, tired, anxious...the DeKalb City Council chamber room has emptied out of all but two dozen people who are directly interested in the issue. After all, the meeting began five hours ago, with two official motions to extend the discussion. This was the second reading and the final vote. Tensions were extremely high.

The Mayor and all but one of the seven City Council members had declared how they would vote on the measure. Michael Marquardt, who had just been elected in April, literally bobbed his head left and right, exhaling loudly, as he said he couldn't make up his mind. His predecessor literally walked up to the podium and handed Marquardt a paper during the vote.

Eventually, Marquardt announced his “yes” vote to the variance request, giving a majority of votes. Mayor Ray also added his “yes” vote, for a 5-3 total in favor, paving the way for Security Properties to purchase the building and seek loans to conduct the repairs and renovations. Local landlords were upset, suing the city for violating due process, but the case was eventually withdrawn.

Significance

As of the submission of this article, the process of ownership is nearing a close, with Security Properties having made their first payment to the City for social services. Like many organizations founded in the context of a particular struggle, the UV Tenants Association saw active membership dwindle after the immediate threat was resolved. Despite this, and while several issues remain, the September 14, 2015 City Council vote was a resounding victory for affordable housing and Civil Rights.

What lessons do we learn overall about this organizing effort and campaign? First of all, community organizing made all the difference. In Valarie's words, it's the difference between “hearing me and not just seeing me.” She continued: “Given the opportunity to engage, it changes perceptions. Because we stepped up, people began to view the village differently.” The area landlords, and certainly the chair of the Zoning and Planning Committee, were used to getting what they wanted. In addition to having been told this in meetings with public servants, landlords' testimonies and written comments displayed the kind of surprise and anger that comes from a sense of entitlement. Several comments underscored this, such as “this is our city” and “we will still be living here in thirty years.” When residents—citizens of DeKalb, who just happened to also be tenants and African American—spoke up for the record in favor of the variance, and for their own communities, elected officials had to uncomfortably acknowledge that in fact, DeKalb is already a multicultural city and that UV was a problem that they had let fester through lack of attention. With residents like Tiara and Valarie having the courage to speak for themselves and their children, several nonprofit agencies also began to show their support through attendance at meetings. Faced with the determination and testimony of people like Tiara and Valarie in the first City Council meeting, Mayor Ray made a point to identify Valarie's master's degree, claiming her as a citizen and “success story.” Tiara and Valarie wondered how many other UV residents were unspoken success stories.

Area landlords were backed onto the defensive. The opposition to the sale, initially coded in different terms—a “progressive” vision of “localism” on the one hand and a more explicitly racist one on the other, a “good cop” and “bad cop”—merged as the process wore on and tenants like Tiara and Valarie were gaining traction. These discourses are shaped by national events: the anti-“big government” and explicit expressions of racism as Black Lives Matter also has made White privilege more visible and challenged structural racism,

particularly police brutality. In DeKalb, these two discourses merged: in the end, it was the “good cop” who sued the City as a result of the vote. Nationally, these discourses have gained greater prominence, with the links between the two more visible. They have always been linked: the United States Civil War was fought to defend “states’ rights” to enslave African Americans, coming again to a head during the Civil Rights era, exemplified by Alabama Governor George Wallace defying Federal mandates for desegregation. The 2016 United States presidential election unleashed an open expression of racial animosity and xenophobia, as Republican candidate Donald Trump staked his claim on building a “giant wall” on the border with Mexico to keep out the “thugs and rapists,” tacitly encouraging supporters to commit violence. A *Slate* article details incidents of violence, mostly against African American women and Latinos (Mathis-Lilley 2016). One of the stakes in the election was the Supreme Court, with Justice Antonin Scalia’s seat kept vacant. For over a year, the Republican-controlled Senate blocked the nomination, leading to the possibility of tie votes, in which case local courts’ decisions stand.³

Not only shaped by national events, Tiara and Valarie’s victory also provides an important precedent. Granting this variance provides momentum for affordable housing, with protections of fair housing deployed to stop the racially-charged “NIMBY” backlash. Despite some of its good intentions and uses, zoning ordinances are often linked with reactionary goals, the legal tool to enforce segregation. The University Village Tenants Association’s victory provides momentum. Like other Civil Rights battlegrounds such as Selma or Topeka, DeKalb is not particularly unique. Its significance is in what it represents: reactionary, racist forces did not succeed. The events of DeKalb are part of a larger, national context as HUD implements a “deconcentration” agenda, based on neoliberal analyses coming from the “Chicago School.” Across the United States, the uneven development in urban cores forces thousands of low-income, largely Black and Latino, residents outside city limits and outside major metropolitan areas into small, peri-urban cities like DeKalb. This is the next “Great Migration” and the next wave of civil rights. While there are similarities, these patterns are different in the West, the other great migration, where racialization patterns and reactionary violence particularly target Mexican Americans.

However, racism still most definitely exists. Especially in the wake of the anonymous comments Pastor Mitchell alluded to, “University Village” has become an identity category. Children in the local school district have stigmas against “UV,” examples of “territorial stigmatization” (Wacquant 2007; Wacquant and Slater 2014). Valarie noted that sometimes other kids—even other African Americans—won’t play with her daughter. The isolation is still real. In a meeting the month we submitted this article, a city official again patronized Tiara, using the language of “articulate.” However, UVTA is forging ahead, meeting with local nonprofit leaders to identify resources for residents, identifying employers and solutions for residents to get there. While the City has been

slow to release the funds that Security Properties gave them as part of the agreement, and could certainly do a better job of consulting with residents, UVTA has persevered, now having biweekly meetings to plan City services.

Reflecting on the past two years, Tiara gave the following assessment: “Residents wouldn’t have been informed about the Village sale and renovation without everyone playing a key role. People were coming to us to talk with us outside the meetings, so we knew they were concerned. But because of fear, they didn’t want to come to the meetings and speak out.” Their victory at City Hall in the face of months of disparaging comments and discouragement made a difference. Valarie concluded, “If we continue to speak up, eventually we will be heard. As long as we continue to speak and ask to be at the table, we would become a part of the community.” As the history of desegregation, and the current mobilization of Black Lives Matter, demonstrates, this is a slow process. But they are undeterred, as Tiara concluded:

I couldn’t give up and stop participating and attending the public hearings. Even when residents stopped going, I couldn’t give up. Too much was riding on this, too many people will be affected by this demanding process. Giving up was just not an option. I thought about my ancestors and how they fought for change. I thought about what my grandparents went through and the stories they told me about the struggles they faced while trying to just provide for their families. I thought about my children and what they deal with often, living in an unequal and unfair world. For about two years now, I’ve invested my time, energy, and passion to this process in order to show my children that they deserve better. We all deserve the right to be treated fairly, and if that’s not happening, then we must stand up, speak out, and push through to the end. I couldn’t give up; there was too much at stake.

Notes

¹The names of landlords, not public officials, in this article are pseudonyms. The names of elected officials, the tenants, and community leaders are their real names because of the former being public, only quoted in public meetings, and the latter because of their preferences.

²“We” refers to all four authors. References to specific authors are indicated by names.

³Eventually, Trump’s nominee, Neil Gorsuch, was ratified in April 2017.

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