

Rev. George Nicholas Keynotes 52nd Annual Meeting

By Alyssa Bergsten



In recognition of 52 years of service, supporters from all over Western New York joined together once again for HOME's Annual Dinner during fair housing month in April 2015. This year's event took a slightly different approach, celebrating for the first time at downtown Buffalo's Hotel Lafayette and featuring a rousing call-to-action in the form of a keynote address by Reverend George Nicholas. Pastor of the Lincoln Memorial United Methodist Church in Buffalo, Rev. Nicholas effectively portrayed to the audience in his speech the links between our country's legacy of discrimination, recent instances of racial conflict, and the subsequent protests that have taken off throughout the nation. His words allowed the audience to see how—in one of the nation's most segregated metropolitan areas—we face acute challenges in moving towards a more egalitarian community.

Rev. Nicholas began by describing his and his family's excitement over the election of our country's first African-American president. He, like many others, felt at the time that "if a Black

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Client's perseverance wins justice

By Miata Wright

As a new Section 8 housing voucher participant, Naima Stewart came to HOME seeking assistance with finding housing through our mobility program in December 2007. As she began her housing search, she found an ad on Craigslist for an apartment on Huntington Avenue in North Buffalo in a four-unit apartment complex. It was well within her budget and located in a neighborhood where she could feel safe.

Ms. Stewart set up an appointment to view the unit and was shown the apartment by Victor, an employee of University Property Management (UPM). It was everything she wanted in her first apartment: spacious rooms, lovely landscaping with a beautiful tree in the backyard, and situated in a secure, multi-cultural neighborhood — features that were very important to her. Eager to make this apartment her own, she contacted UPM's office and spoke to Ashley Roe. When Ms. Stewart told Ashley she had a Section 8 voucher to help pay the rent, she was told that it would not be accepted. "I was devastated" Ms. Stewart said. "It made me feel like I was nothing, even when I was trying my best to make a better life for myself. It wasn't fair."

A bit hesitant at first, Ms. Stewart did not want to pursue the discrimination she experienced because, understandably, she didn't want to live where she wasn't welcome. But after considering it some more, she decided to contact HOME. Immediately after opening the case, HOME sent fair housing investigators to the property. The investigator who identified herself as a Section 8 participant was told that her housing assistance would not be accepted and was turned away. However, another investigator who said that she was not receiving Section 8 housing assistance was not denied and was even shown a second apartment.

Armed with evidence of discrimination, HOME filed a complaint with the City of Buffalo in February 2008. When the City took no action, HOME pursued the case in NYS Supreme Court. Ms. Stewart was represented by Grace Andriette and Bernadine Butler of Neighborhood Legal Services while HOME was represented by Joseph Kelemen of the Western New York Law Center.

The case dragged on and, in 2011, Ms. Stewart considered withdrawing her complaint of discrimination because she felt nothing would result from the case considering the amount of time that had passed. Realizing the importance of doing the right thing to protect herself and others, she ultimately decided to not withdraw her complaint.

More time passed due to repeated changes in defendants' counsel. Defendant University Property Management merged with Lighthouse Properties in early 2013. A small step towards justice was taken when the property manager agreed



Huntington Avenue in North Buffalo

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FROM THE DIRECTOR:**A year in review**

By Scott W. Gehl

HOME continues to do remarkable things with remarkably few resources.

In 2014, our hard-pressed staff responded to 5,625 individual requests for service—18 percent more than the year before. This number doesn't include the 2,354 participants who attended one of 194 educational presentations or the tens of thousands reached through HOME publications or our HUD financed billboard advertising campaign with the theme "Housing discrimination: Ignore it and it won't go away".

Sadly, reported incidents of housing discrimination increased by 30 percent. Seventy-six percent of reported incidents occurred in Buffalo, 19 percent in other Erie County communities and five percent outside the County.

Again last year, the most frequent reason families were turned away from housing was their source of income, which was involved in 44 percent of all reported incidents. This percentage has increased significantly in recent years from 26 percent in 2011, to 30 percent in 2012, to 41 percent in 2013.

The increasing prevalence of discrimination due to source of income — often used as a pretext to discriminate for reasons prohibited by federal or state law — is one reason that HOME is working with the Erie County Fair Housing Partnership to propose passage of a county-wide fair housing statute.

In terms of reported incidents of discrimination other leading bases were familial status (24%), disability (22%) and race (17%). Last year HOME also recorded cases of discrimination due to age, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, marital status, gender identity and religion.

Other services

Although assistance to victims of discrimination consumes a disproportionate share of agency time, HOME also served more than 5,400 clients who came to us for other types of assistance. We provided paralegal counseling to nearly 1,500 landlords and tenants; information about fair housing law to 1,502 clients; and technical assistance

to 160 government agencies, housing or service providers, and government officials.

HOME's Greater Buffalo Community Housing Center assisted 155 clients, 15 of whom chose to enter case management. Additionally HOME served 45 clients in the concluding months of Buffalo's Rapid Re-Housing Program, and provided general housing or human service information and referral to more than 2,000 callers.

The fact that so many clients were served — so many lives touched—by a staff of nine is testament to the dedication of people who work at HOME.

An unexpected passing

I want to acknowledge the sudden and unexpected passing of David Nestico, who kept HOME as well supplied as our lean budgets would accommodate for many years. When construction finally got underway at Main & Ferry, I told Dave that HOME hoped to acquire some new furnishings and equipment and, once our budget was finalized, I wanted his company to submit a bid.

Taken by the Main-Ferry Project, Dave instead proposed to broker donations of gently used furniture from for-profit customers of his. Thus it was that Shannon Koehn or I would accompany Dave to look at furniture, which Integrity Office Supply would then disassemble, pick-up and store (for many, many months). In February of 2012 tens of thousands of dollars of desks, tables and chairs were delivered to HOME's new offices—for only a nominal set-up fee. This generous in-kind contribution has allowed us to provide services to our clients on professionally matching furniture.

As I stood in a long line of mourners to pay our respects on the night before HOME's 52nd Annual Meeting, it was apparent that this good and generous man had touched many lives.

Meet Dan Corbitt, HOME's fair housing attorney

After interning with HOME during his time in law school, Dan Corbitt rejoined HOME's team as staff attorney in April 2015.

What initially led you to HOME?

I think my commitment to social justice issues goes back to my interest in history and archaeology. I was always fascinated by historic preservation and basically wanted to be Indiana Jones as a kid. I went on to study anthropology while at Buffalo State College for undergrad, and my studies in this field really went hand in hand with an interest in social justice. I was also influenced by my time during undergrad working for the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPiRG), where I was exposed to consumer based and other social justice issues.

**DAN CORBITT**

Fair Housing Attorney

How are things going so far?

Things are going very well, I really like what I'm doing here and I enjoy working with everyone. After my internship, I felt confident and familiar enough with fair housing to jump right back into it.

What does a typical day look like for you?

It really depends. It could include a number of different tasks, including meeting with clients, reviewing cases, filing complaints, or coordinating with other attorneys. I also assist coworkers with any legal questions that come up in addition to coordinating HOME's testing (investigation) process.

Since coming back to HOME, has anything made a big impression in your mind in terms of the discrimination reports received?

A few cases have really stuck out. One case I reviewed involves what appears to have been a hate crime against a man who had recently immigrated to the United States. The case was so egregious and shocking, and the delays and recesses granted throughout the case are very frustrating. It's sad that something like this could happen, but that's why HOME does what it does, and why it's so important.

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Poetry with a purpose

By Alyssa Bergsten

In recognition of Fair Housing month in April, the Erie County Fair Housing Partnership (ECFHP) extended its educational efforts for another month with the 2015 Poetry Slam held May 14th 2015 at the Gypsy Parlor in Buffalo. The event was the brainchild of the ECFHP Fair Housing month planning committee, several members of whom had connections with Buffalo's slam



TEAM FINKS,
1st place winner

poetry community. After meeting with enthusiastic members of the Pure Ink Poetry Group, the committee was sure that the skills and interests of the group and other local poets would lend themselves perfectly to the civil rights and fair housing themes that the Partnership aims to promote.

Hosted by emcee Brandon Williamson of Pure Ink, the evening began with an open mic, with ECFHP member Angela Woodson-Brice of HUD performing her poem about housing discrimination and unfair treatment by housing providers. Five random audience members were then selected as judges, each tasked with the responsibility of scoring the performers 0-10 based on the content, performance, and relevance of their piece to the theme of civil rights and fair housing. Throughout the night, other poets went on to discuss topics of LGBT awareness and acceptance, racial and economic injustice, and the need for decent,

affordable housing. Some spoke from personal experience, while others addressed the issues in a more abstract fashion.

The overwhelming talent presented made for a difficult judging, but ultimately it came down to the judges' gut reactions. Before the final scores, the group treated the audience to a haiku contest between performers, each of whom were required to improvise a haiku within 5 seconds of their competitor finishing. After countless rounds, Pure Ink's inexhaustible Tom Dreitlein came out on top, winning a gift basket donated by People Inc. Afterwards, the overall winners were announced, with Team Finks taking 1st place, Ben Brindise coming in 2nd, and Nick Givechi placing 3rd. Each winner received a cash award as a token of appreciation from the Partnership for their participation.



BRANDON WILLIAMSON
emcee

Overall, the poets provided a great night of entertainment for guests at the Gypsy Parlor, and Partnership members were excited at the response from everyone involved. The Gypsy Parlor proved to be a great location for the event, and their support for the cause and flexibility in hosting were much appreciated. After this year's success, look forward to future events coordinating the skills of Buffalo's local poets and the promotion of social justice issues!

Segregation's effect on health

By DeAnna Eason

Is it possible that the communities in which we live can have a negative effect on our health? Absolutely.

Perhaps we live in close proximity to a factory that emits pollution, or maybe our neighborhood has a high crime rate; research shows that these factors can negatively impact the health of residents within a community. Amongst the prevailing struggles for residents living in segregated communities is that people who live in high poverty communities experience poorer health. Research indicates that there is a relationship between disadvantaged communities and health issues. The effects of segregation are damaging and numerous, and segregation's effect on health is one clear demonstration of disparately negative outcomes for those residing in low-opportunity areas.

Food deserts

A food desert, as defined by the Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a census tract where 33% of the residents live more than a mile from a grocery store in an urban area or more than 10 miles away from a grocery store in a rural area. At least 20% of the residents are living below the poverty line in these communities. In 2008, the USDA conducted a one year research study and found that food deserts exist in racially segregated urban areas that are also characterized by income inequality and a lack of transportation options.

Recent studies have shown that residents of food deserts have substantial difficulties in buying a affordable and healthy food options. These areas are often found to have a limited access to nutritious food but a greater access to fast food restaurants and convenience stores where food options lack in quality, variety and economic feasibility. As a result of these challenges, obesity and diet-related diseases are widely seen health problems that are apparent in these communities. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention states that African Americans have the highest overall death rates in the country.

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Segregation's effect on health

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Crime

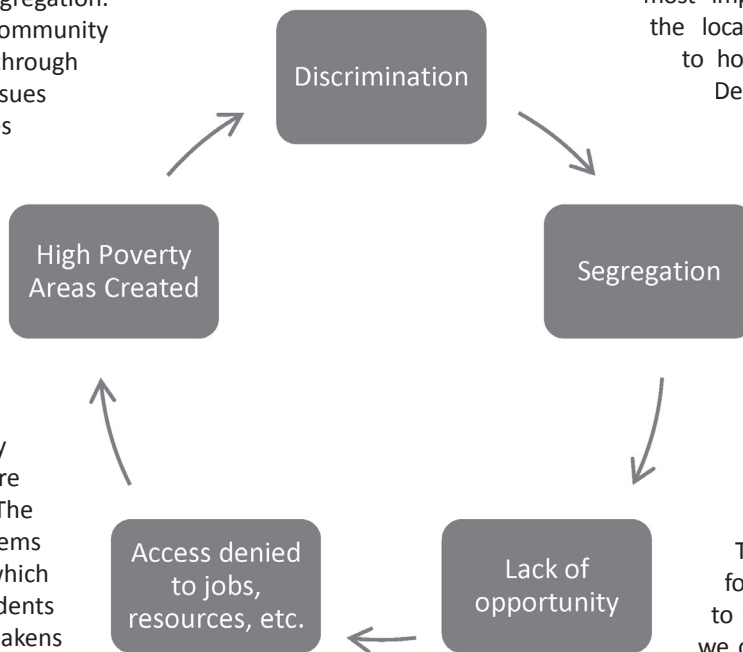
Various studies have referenced a correlation between economic and racial segregation and crime, but what may be more difficult to determine is whether segregation affects crime or crime affects segregation. At any rate, crime in any community affects the health of the residents through anxiety and other mental health issues that can lead to physical issues such as hypertension, ulcers, or migraines. Individuals who have been victimized by or witnessed crime run the risk of developing post-traumatic stress or other psychological issues resulting from the trauma. These effects are only exacerbated by the evident distrust between community residents and the very law enforcement officials who are tasked with ensuring their safety. The reluctance to contact police stems from a fear of bad treatment, which undermines safety for both residents and law enforcement, and weakens efforts on both parts to eradicate crime.

recreational facilities in the community, and access to medical care. Accordingly, individuals and families residing in segregated areas have severely restricted access to the types of public services that would allow for upward mobility.

neighborhoods are grouped throughout the US around industrial sites, truck routes, ports and other air pollution trouble spots.

Moreover, a study by the Commission for Racial Justice found that race was the single most important factor used to determine the location of toxic waste sites. Closer to home, according to the Erie County Department of Health, "nine of the county's zip codes - 14201, 14207, 14208, 14209, 14210, 14211, 14212, 14213, and 14215 - have been designated by the Department of Health as 'Communities of Concern', where children are at exceptionally high risk for lead poisoning." This information, while upsetting, should come as no surprise to an area that is a part of the 6th most segregated metropolitan area in the US.

That is why HOME continues the fight for fair housing. Because for all citizens to truly enjoy equality of opportunity, we cannot accept that so many people are held back by a factor as seemingly arbitrary as their zip code. Every person should be afforded the opportunity to thrive. If we continue to allow the disparate conditions caused by our history of segregation, our entire society will continue to pay the price.



Lack of public services

Although some may assume racial and ethnic minorities become sicker and have shorter life expectancy rates than non-minorities because of a lack of medical insurance, unhealthy lifestyle choices and socio-economic statuses, residential segregation also plays a part in the health concerns of minority communities. A study conducted by the University of Michigan concluded that segregation effects economic status, educational opportunities, access to employment opportunities, the number of

Environmental hazards

A study conducted by Yale found that residents of poor, non-White communities breathe more hazardous air particles than residents of affluent white communities. This phenomenon may occur because of the community's vicinity to the source of pollution, poorenforcementofenvironmental regulations in minority communities, and the lack of response to community complaints. As a result of increased housing costs, a lack of safe and affordable housing and historical discrimination, low-income and minority

Looking for more ways to strengthen your commitment to equality and support fair housing in Western New York? Join HOME's monthly giving club, HOME Builders, and help sustain the efforts to create a more diverse and prosperous community. Join online at www.homeny.org or by calling (716) 854-1400 ext. 17.

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family could move into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, then certainly a Black family could move into any house in any neighborhood in America". Reality, however, fell far short of these expectations. The speaker went on to say that "the Obamas may be in the White House, but the Johnsons are still looking for a house", explaining that housing policies today, a reflection of hundreds of years of institutional and cultural racism, still present a nearly insurmountable challenge in eradicating discrimination and segregation.

Rev. Nicholas continued on to demonstrate the connection between prejudicial public policy and the reaction to violence against countless unarmed African Americans residing in segregated communities. He quoted Richard Rothstein, senior fellow of the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, as saying that hundreds of years of evidence show that "St. Louis was segregated by interlocking and racially explicit public policies of zoning, public housing, and suburban finance, and by publicly endorsing segregation policies of the real estate, banking, and insurance industries". When public officials decided to raze the highly-segregated slums that resulted from these policies, displaced African Americans moved to the only available nearby areas, "converting towns like Ferguson into new segregated enclaves". A failure to reverse or even halt this progression of racial seclusion throughout the 1900s has left us with communities experiencing extreme racial tensions. These conditions are apparent in recent incidents prompted by the deaths of unarmed African Americans like Michael Brown of Ferguson, Eric Garner of Staten Island and 12-year-old Tamir Rice of Cleveland.

Rev. Nicholas went on to explain how events like this could happen in

Buffalo, where "40% of [the African American] population lives in poverty and an overwhelming number of men are unemployed". Housing discrimination, he asserted, "feeds the concentration of poverty in poor communities", and so we must closely examine decisions with the potential to change these conditions. This is why "today more than ever we need organizations like HOME". Our situation requires those of conscience to join together and demand equality in our community. For "we will not have truly... one Buffalo until we eliminate discriminatory housing policies, practices and behaviors...[until] quality affordable housing fills the eastside like it does on the north side". We must strive toward a Buffalo where, despite your location, you have opportunities and the chance to succeed.

The speaker concluded by urging his audience not to become content in our relative comfort as others struggle to find theirs. Rev. Nicholas emphasized that if part of our community is failing to thrive, it is in all of our best interest to address the existing challenges and take action to move forward without repeating the unequal and unwise policies of the past. We must accept these challenges, seek to understand them better, and take prompt action to reverse societal ills and prevent them from perpetuating into the future. After bringing the audience to this crucial point, Rev. Nicholas left us to reflect on the words of Dr. King: "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is time for vigorous and positive action".

HOME

Housing Opportunities Made Equal

Meet Dan Corbitt, HOME's Fair Housing Attorney

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You originally interned with HOME during law school. Talk about your background and interests before then.

I am originally from Rochester, but came to Buffalo to attend Buffalo State College. I graduated in 2010 and began law school at the University at Buffalo in 2011. Prior to this I spent about six and a half years serving in the US Marine Corps specializing in communications. Aside from my educational and professional history, I'm also really passionate about music. I've played guitar for about 20 years and am looking to get back into a band. I try to attend as many concerts as possible, especially down at Canalside. In addition to the music, I really appreciate Buffalo for its many cultural and historic assets.

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Please join **HOME** on the VIP platform at Shakespeare in Delaware Park on Sunday, August 9th at 7:30 pm, for a performance of Twelfth Night. Cost is \$15 for HOME Members and \$20 for non-members (those who sign up to become members at the event will receive the discount). Ticket price includes food and drink!

There is limited seating on the platform so please reserve your spot by e-mailing Samantha at: slong@homeny.org or calling (716) 854-1400 ext. 17.

Client's perseverance wins justice

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to settle. In October 2013 State Supreme Court Justice Patrick NeMoyer ruled that the defendants had discriminated against Naima Stewart; he also ruled that HOME had independent standing under the City's fair housing law. But the Court postponed ruling on the issue of damages for another 18 months.

In March 2015 Justice NeMoyer issued a decision setting the cost of the defendants' acts of discrimination at \$51,840. Defendants Donald and Christine Peterson moved to settle on behalf of the California based Peterson Family Trust (which owned the Huntington Avenue properties). HOME continues to pursue collection from the remaining defendant.

Ms. Stewart stated during the case that the denial of housing at the North Buffalo residence forced her to move into a neighborhood overcome by drugs, prostitution, crime, and pest infestations. She expressed her frustration at how someone could have the power to alter another person's future. "I'm traumatized. I'm

skeptical when I'm applying to apartments now because there's a chance I may not even be considered based on [my qualifications] or my income level. What's stopping other landlords from [discriminating] just like UPM and the Peterson Family?"

Source of income discrimination has become the highest reported discrimination in Western New York and Buffalo, surpassing racial and familial status bias over the last few years. Since source of income discrimination is not prohibited by federal or state law, landlords utilize negative stereotypes associated with receiving housing subsidies which often exclude minorities and families with children. The impact housing discrimination has on its victims is substantial as it can be difficult to heal from being denied the right to live in a community that could ultimately improve someone's quality of life.

Following the March 2015 ruling over damages, Ms. Stewart was recognized for her perseverance in fighting for justice at HOME's Annual Dinner in April. Ms. Stewart

appeared overcome by support as over 200 guests honored her with a standing ovation at the Hotel Lafayette. That single moment helped make Naima Stewart whole again. "When you experience discrimination, it's always in the back of your mind. It trickles into other parts of your life and it makes life even more difficult when you're aiming to expand your horizons."

Ms. Stewart hopes the decision in her case will inspire to challenge housing discrimination. HOME's members and staff, grateful for her perseverance in this case, will remember Naima's struggle as they continue to fight discrimination by protecting each individual's civil right to be able to live and thrive in the community of their choice.

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