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PHOTOS BY SARA STATHAS
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CHANGING
A Neighborhood

THE REBUILDING OF THE STATE'S BIGGEST PUBLIC HOUSING

PROJECT AIMS TO HELP A WHOLE SWATH OF THE CITY'S NORTHWEST SIDE.

One of the buildings in the old west side of Westlawn, before demolition began last year

Silver Spring Drive contains paradoxes within paradoxes. On either end of the thoroughfare (in Whitefish Bay and Glendale on the east, Merton and Sussex on the west), there is relative calm and quiet. At the center, in the neighborhoods that surround Silver Spring, there are signs of life – Havenwoods State Forest and (until recently) the ambitious urban farmers of Growing Power – but also decaying residences, drug houses and liquor stores and not many banks or decent grocers.

Yet, within the heart of all this, there are, improbably, fresh-looking townhomes in myriad colors, with pitched roofs and columned porches. Young maples grow in the neatly mown strips between the streets and sidewalks. Westlawn Gardens looks strangely, incongruously suburban, with its LED street lamps, subdivision-style streets and resource-saving green construction. At the corner of 64th Street and Silver Spring Drive, a bus shelter houses a first-of-its-kind, 24-hour lending library, operated entirely electronically, that dispenses books from Jane Smiley's novel *Moo* to seminal works like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. And there's a brand new sports area, financed by the Milwaukee Bucks and Johnson Controls. There's even a space for residents of the housing project to grow their own fruits and vegetables.

This $85 million makeover, completed in 2013, is phase one of the rebuilding of Westlawn, a public housing complex erected 60 years ago. As ambitious as this first phase is, phase two, part of an Obama Administration initiative to address poverty in both public housing and the surrounding neighborhoods, promises to be more so. The aim is for a "transformation – human and physical – of a community in distress such that its functionality as an urban neighborhood is restored," according to the application for the project's federal funding. Plans include improved access to health care and job training, plus improvements in the area from Sherman Boulevard west to 76th Street, and from Mill Road south to Villard Avenue – with Westlawn, and the rebuilding of 708 of its units, at the core.

"This is the gold standard," Tony Perez, executive director of the city's Housing Authority, says of the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative grant of $30 million. Milwaukee was one of just five cities nationally to win the grant in a competitive process in 2015 after being turned down twice previously. In the Choice Initiative's seven years of existence, 21 cities received grants. The program is taking a serious cut in the Republicans' federal budget, but Paul Williams, a

Eben Pindyck's last article for the magazine was "Scouting Around," in August. Magazine staffer Tom Tolan contributed to the current story.

Setting a High Bar

The city and the Housing Authority are aiming to hit these goals for the area by September 2022

POVERTY RATE:
Current: 29%
GOAL: 25%

PERCENT OF RESIDENTS WHO ARE RACIAL/ETHNIC MINORITIES:
Current: 88.5%
GOAL: 80%

PERCENT OF OWNER-OCCUPIED HOMES:
Current: 39%
GOAL: 48%

MEDIAN HOME SALE PRICE:
Current: $45,000
GOAL: $54,000

PERCENT OF WESTLAWN YOUTH WHO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL:
Current: Unavailable
GOAL: 85%

PERCENT OF WESTLAWN'S CHILDREN AGES 0-5 ENROLLED IN A HIGHLY RATED, EARLY-CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM:
Current: 32%
GOAL: 65%.

(Sources: Housing Authority and the City of Milwaukee, 2015 application for Choice Initiative funding; also, HACM's Paul Williams. "Current" refers to figures from 2014, 2015 and 2016)

spokesman for the Housing Authority, says that budget isn't likely to affect Westlawn.

Under the current plan the western section of the old Westlawn buildings (between North 64th and 68th streets, south of Silver Spring) is currently being razed, and will be rebuilt over the next five years, in an environmentally friendly, visually appealing manner similar to Westlawn Gardens, with both low-income and market-rate units. Gaps in Westlawn Gardens will be filled in with more townhomes, and 50 units will also be available for ownership. Part of the new development will be earmarked for veterans housing. In total, there will be 708 new housing units, complete with central air-conditioning and new appliances.

But the program's concepts are built on the premise that creating housing alone isn't enough. "There's this sense that there need to be a lot of synergies with the community," says economist Matthew Freedman, lead author of a study exploring the benefits of such redevelopments. "There has to be a buy-in from many different parties in the community, not just the developer, of course, but local governments, local business, for there to be really big positive effects of these programs."

Already, the project, led by the Housing Authority, has established numerous partnerships. Just a few: UW-Milwaukee's College of Nursing will provide health education and case management to chronically ill residents, and the Wisconsin Automobile and Truck Dealers Association will provide job training. The city's Department of Public Works committed over $6 million to improving local streets, and Milwaukee's Redevelopment Authority will make available $1 million in small business loans. The Housing Authority even donated bicycles to the local police precinct in order to step up beat patrols. In addition, the Authority's Williams is setting up an office in Westlawn Gardens, and he's established working relationships with economic development, community and public safety groups already at work in the area.

Ironically, a massive steel and wire encasement – something resembling a cage, really, although intended to be ornamental – sits next to the Milwaukee Public Express Library. A sign on the encasement reads, "Westlawn Gardens." Hundreds of red bricks from the houses that were demolished to make room for the redevelopment are heaped inside it. The old Westlawn is literally inside the new Westlawn. Will these bricks be a reminder of the complex's bad old days, before a concerted effort by policymakers and change agents transformed those bricks into gardens? Or will it stand as a testament to the complex's inescapable realities?

In the late 1940s, a farmer in the Town of Granville, northwest of Milwaukee, expressed a desire to sell his 81-acre property. The supervisor of Milwaukee's Division of Annexation, Arthur Werba, a notoriously aggressive annexationist, suggested to his boss, Mayor Frank Zeidler, that the city buy the property for use as a public housing project. The mayor and Common Council took Werba's advice, and, once the farmer's property was purchased and annexed, 149 row houses were built on it in the 1950s — a massive undertaking that provided housing for approximately 2,600 residents, dwarfing the capacity of any of Milwaukee's other public housing projects.

Organized in clusters, the two-story row houses had wood frames and brick veneers and contained a total of 181 one-bedroom units, 326 two-bedroom units, 181 three-bedroom units, and 38 four-bedroom units. Over 50 years later, however, "it was apparent that the buildings were distressed and unfit for renovation," according to the Housing Authority. Along with 60 years of wear and tear, there were mold problems in some of the units, likely abetted by periodic flooding from nearby Lincoln Creek.

The development, say its residents, had its social problems as well.

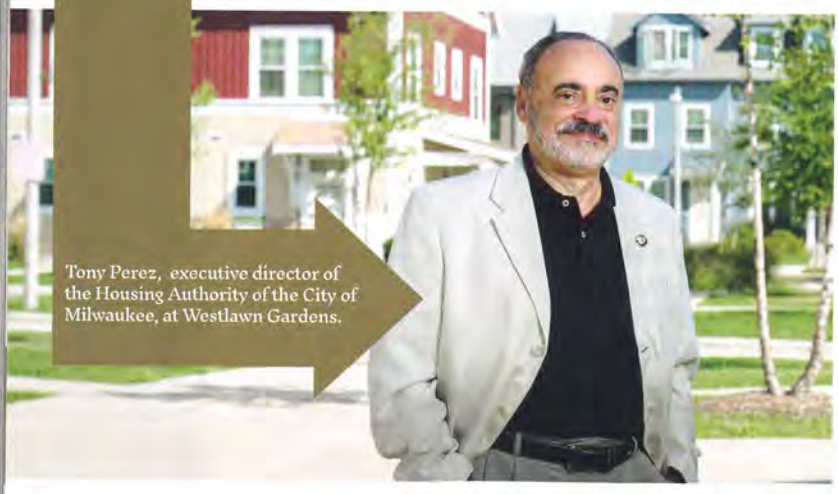
But it had its strengths, too, including a community center that served an area well beyond Westlawn.

A tall 27-year-old with a bushy beard and a broad smile, Chaz Gary was raised on 61st and Custer – just outside Westlawn's borders. Throughout Gary's childhood, he was a fixture at the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center, which sits on North 64th Street near the center of the housing complex. He attended preschool there and played on the basketball team; his family used its food pantry. "This was our safe space," says Gary, who later worked as the center's operations manager before leaving to resume a real-estate business, which he hopes to use to help develop the neighborhood. "I know I wouldn't be who I am without this place," he says.

The goal of the center, which serves over 8,000 people each year and has been around since 1958, is "to make individuals and families more self-sufficient," according to its director, Tom Ellis. Through the center, families can receive back-to-school supplies, substance-abuse support and meals on Thanksgiving. A daily class is offered for English-language learners, and on-site nurses provide care for the uninsured and under-insured.

Like Tony Perez at the Housing Authority, Ellis hopes to make the Westlawn neighborhood a desirable place to live – and a place to return to for those who beat the odds, like Chaz Gary. Gary would like to see basic additions to the area, like a store to buy a fresh salad for lunch. Currently, fast food makes up most options. "We have to find a way for people to take pride in their neighborhood," Gary says.

That view dovetails with the primary goals of the entire Westlawn rejuvenation project: to create "a more economically diverse community," according to the Housing Authority. The 20 non-subsidized housing units in Westlawn Gardens are one way the Authority is trying to do this; these one-bedroom apartments cost $705/month. The refurbishing of the west side of the complex will add another 121 market-rate rentals, and then there are the 50 planned owner-occupied units. "From door to door, you don't know who's subsidized and not," says the Authority's Williams. "It breaks down the stigma associated with poverty."



Tony Perez, executive director of the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, at Westlawn Gardens.

The 2013 creation of Westlawn Gardens was largely financed through the sale of nearly $76 million in tax credits to Pittsburgh-based PNC Bank, which has recently sought to establish a presence in southeastern Wisconsin. "It was the largest project we ever did as an institution and, by far, the largest one that's ever been done in the state," says Chris Goller, Wisconsin regional president for PNC Bank.

The sale of low-income housing tax credits has for decades accounted for the creation – or, as in the case of Westlawn Gardens, the redevelopment – of the vast majority of public housing in the country. The credits allow PNC to pay a dollar less in federal taxes for every dollar purchased. "For us, it was a great opportunity to make a great investment, but, more importantly than the investment, it was a great opportunity to revitalize that community," Goller said. "In terms of housing ... it was a walk-off home run."

Low-income housing tax-credit developments such as Westlawn Gardens are typically situated in high-poverty neighborhoods, because developers receive additional tax benefits when a development is located in such a neighborhood. "The developers try to target areas, not surprisingly, where they think they're going to make a lot of money," says Emily Owens, a University of Pennsylvania professor.

Or as Ulysses Brewer, a retiree who bought his home east of Westlawn in 2008, puts it, "What's coming back to the community? Is it benefitting the people living in the area or is it lining the pocket of those who are building it?"

But redevelopment projects like Westlawn Gardens have, in fact, been shown to effect some positive changes within their communities nationally. Studies have shown that low-income housing tax-credit developments lower crime rates and bump up nearby property values. When situated in low-income neighborhoods, they also contribute to greater diversity in terms of race and income.

In the case of Westlawn, some crime and quality-of-life indicators show positive trending, although the project is just one of myriad factors that may be in play. The median asking price for homes within a half-mile of the development increased 10 percent to $45,000 between July 2013, shortly after Westlawn Gardens opened, to January of 2015, according to the Housing Authority; and the rate of Group A offenses like homicide, car theft and assault have fallen slightly in District 4, a wide region that includes Westlawn, in four of the five years since 2012 – there was a spike in 2014 (full-year 2017 figures weren't available at deadline). The same is true of the two census tracts that contain Westlawn. Rose Sandrone, a neighborhood activist in the area to the north of Westlawn, says that her neighborhood has felt safer in recent years. Her philosophy for her home turf: "Don't move. Improve."

Chasity Jackson, who's lived on the east side of Westlawn since the late 1990s and was one of the first to move back after the Westlawn Gardens project was completed,

calls the place peaceful and quiet, especially when compared to the Hillside Terrace housing project near Downtown, where she lived with her children while Westlawn construction was under way. The crime in Hillside was "horrible," she says. "The kids couldn't go outside; I was so afraid to sleep downstairs because of the shooting going on." Now she's got a four-bedroom apartment that's a little the worse for wear after five years, but it's a stable place for her while three children, including a 13-year-old son who plays on the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center basketball team (just as Chaz Gary did when he was a boy), are still in school. She's got a job at a West Side grocery store, and she's planning to study culinary arts at the Milwaukee Area Technical College starting this month.

There is little evidence that building in high-poverty neighborhoods increases the concentration of poverty; in many cases, though, it does limit the access of public housing residents to better jobs and schools, which tend to be sparse in low-income areas before and after redevelopment projects.

For its part, the business community on the Northwest Side is bullish about the changes to Westlawn and sees possible jobs for residents. "We're very supportive of the Choice Initiative," says Stephanie Harling, director of the Havenwoods Economic Development Corp. The mix of incomes, as well as the chance to buy some units, bodes well for local businesses, according to Harling, who focuses on an area that stretches north from Westlawn to Good Hope Road. "Part of our neighborhood is a huge industrial complex with jobs waiting to be filled," Harling says.

Brady Corp. and Direct Supply are among the companies headquartered in this area that are currently hiring, but, according to Harling, "there's a disconnect between those looking for employment in Westlawn and those getting employed." Job applicants with criminal backgrounds, a spotty history of employment and a lack of training for the available positions are often problems, she says.

But there are local efforts underway to address that as well. Froedert & the Medical College of Wisconsin is partnering with the Bucks to open a facility at nearby Carmen High School's northwest campus that will train students but also adults for positions in health care, including certified nursing assistants, medical assistants and IT support.

"You've got to have the community. That's really where our hope is for this," PNC's Chris Goller says. "The issue with housing is it's new, it's cool and it's shiny, but 10 years from now, it's not new, cool and shiny. You've got to do more than just build nice buildings."

Westlawn Gardens resident Chasity Jackson with her daughter Kristina

Photo by Tyler Yomantas

Last September, 56-year-old Pearlee Piggue moved out of her one-bedroom unit on the soon-to-be-demolished west side of the complex. "When I found out I had to move, I couldn't wait," Piggue told me. "Westlawn is a very scary place to live." Situated on a main street within the complex, Piggue's front yard served as a proving ground of sorts. In summer, large groups would face off on the sidewalk. Piggue tells of a young girl who stripped off her shirt before squaring up to box. "The kids were running rampant. They were fighting every day," she says.

Chasity Jackson, who lives in the new east side development, says there are still fights in the summer in Westlawn Gardens, but it's not as bad as it was before the new places went in. "There is no perfect area to live in," she says, "because people are people. ... So in the summertime, the kids may fight outside. They're teenagers. They're young." But she feels the rules in Westlawn Gardens are stricter than they were before, and the complex's management is working hard to keep crime down.

As for Piggue, the Housing Authority paid for her moving expenses and expedited her application, helping her to move into a two-bedroom unit in a Housing Authority building. With the extra space, Piggue's grandkids can spend the night without the entire family cramming into a single bed. Piggue also feels safer, although her new home is less than two miles from Westlawn. "I'm very happy," she says.

Residents displaced by the redevelopments of Westlawn, such as Piggue, have the option of returning once the project is complete as long as they remain in "good standing" by paying their rent and not racking up complaints. For her part, Piggue, a nursing assistant who hopes to retire in a few years, hasn't ruled out a move back. "What's attractive to me is everything is brand new," she says of the appliances in the refurbished units. There will be central air-conditioning, and a dishwasher and garbage disposal in the two-bedroom units. Having seen the already-renovated units of Westlawn Gardens, Piggue is torn. "Those are beautiful houses. [But] it's still Westlawn." ◆