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For Publication

**The Social and Developmental History of
Public Housing
in the City of Gainesville, Georgia.**

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Social and Developmental History of Public Housing in the City of Gainesville, Ga.

Prior to World War II, the Gainesville, GA area existed much as it had when European settlers arrived in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Residents maintained a self-sufficient lifestyle, coaxing beans, grains, tobacco, cotton and corn from the rocky soil. Naturally secluded in the Appalachian foothills, the Hall County area was additionally insulated by a lack of infrastructure that would permit access to relatively close, higher-populated areas such as Atlanta or Athens. By the 1870s, railroads gained a foothold through the region, making it easier for farmers to deliver bulk farm crops such as cotton to markets faster and in greater quantity. By the turn of the 20th century, the Gainesville area's railroad-boosted economy brought a newfound prosperity. ***(PHOTO #1: Gainesville 1909).***

Little changed in the area over the next three decades. Then, in the wake of World War II, this agrarian lifestyle quickly ground to a halt. Still reeling from the Great Depression, the destruction of the tornado of 1936 ***(PHOTO #2: Tornado)*** and the calamitous implosion of the cotton farming economy, the Gainesville area suddenly found itself sliding from agricultural prosperity to a struggle for survival.

The high post-war birth rate further agitated the situation, and by the late 1940s, these elements had festered into a tangible dilemma: There were suddenly a lot more people than there was housing available for them. Additionally, with the cotton economy ruined, there was a severe shortage of cash and goods. While the Post-War era had brought manufacturing and distribution prosperity to much of the nation, the Gainesville area remained economically rooted to its agrarian lifestyle that had long since withered.

Available housing and the ability to afford it suddenly became a dire issue, and the area became increasingly dotted with substandard housing. ***(PHOTOS # 3 and 4: Shack 1 and Shack 2).*** Lacking insulation, adequate sewer, running water, and in many cases, electricity, these dwellings sat along dirt or gravel roads that turned to mires in wet weather.

The area's housing situation was so deplorable that, according to a 1950 federal survey, of 2,800 dwellings recorded in Gainesville, 1,600 (57 percent) were considered substandard.¹

These conditions gelled into the public's general recognition of a need for more housing, and especially affordable housing. Other municipalities facing the same situation in Georgia had turned to federal assistance to help solve this problem; Gainesville followed the lead of those fifty-plus other Georgia towns and cities and applied for this assistance, too.

In accordance with the Housing Act of 1937, the city of Gainesville inaugurated the Gainesville Housing Authority (GHA) on August 15, 1949. **(PHOTO #5: First Step)** The GHA was the fifty-ninth housing authority in the state and then-Gainesville Mayor Bill Rogers framed the authority's challenge: "there are certain unsanitary or unsafe inhabited dwelling accommodations located within the city that should be eliminated and replaced with modern, safe, low-rent units."

Rogers appointed John W. Jacobs, Charles Hardy, Dr. Clarence Butler, Carl Romberg Sr. and Henry Washington as board members of the new authority. **(PHOTO #6: Board Members)** Activated by a federal low-interest loan of \$70,000 for surveying and planning expenses, the board envisioned a modern efficient housing community in Gainesville, comprised of 700 household units.

Due to federal budget constraints, however, the proposed 700 units were slashed to 200 – of which 120 were then designated as "white" housing and 80 designated as "negro projects." Despite a general acknowledgement of the need for more area public housing, there remained some public skepticism that the units could be filled. But, any lingering doubt about demand for these new units was quashed, in early 1950, as 1,326 hopeful applicants applied for the 200 units available.² **(PHOTO #7: Survey)** Additionally, there was a sudden flurry of ideas on *how* the units ought to be designed and constructed. In December 1949, following the approved federal startup loan of \$70,000, the GHA called for public proposals and bids for the two-part project to be called Melrose Homes and Green Hunter Homes. By late 1949, over 80 diverse proposals were entered by builders, architects and developers.³ **(PHOTO #8: Bids)**

¹ *The Daily Times*, Jan. 24, 1950, "Rotarians Here Hear USPHA Official Talk", regarding U.S. Public Housing Authority field economist Martin Handrick's report from 1950

² *The Daily Times*, May 4, 1950 "Survey Reveals Heavy Need for Low-Rent Housing Here"

³ *The Daily Times*, Nov. 20, 1950, "Survey To Be Next Housing Move Here"

Empowered by public support and a federal loan, the GHA moved ahead with plans for the 200 units, estimated for completion at \$500,000, (a figure that had been approved by the U.S. Public Housing Administration (USPHA) on Oct. 6, 1949). As an interesting footnote, later project estimates were adjusted from \$500,000 to \$2,000,000, a figure that was rejected by the USPHA. Ironically, later still, when the final costs were tallied at project's end, it did indeed cost almost \$2,000,00.

From the proposals received, the massive project was awarded, on January 4, 1950, to Atlanta architect William J.J. Chase, (**PHOTO #9: Architect Chase**). The Southern Construction Company started clearing the land and pouring foundations for the Melrose site in July 1951. The Authority then set resident income limits and standards in 1951, which specified that a family must have at least two members whose combined annual income does not exceed \$2,200. The family would be permitted to remain in the unit until its income exceeded \$2,750 annually. The admission maximum was set at \$2,750.⁴

As construction for Melrose got underway (**PHOTOS #10, 11, 12, 13, 14: Melrose Foundations, Melrose 9, Melrose 22, Melrose 14 and Melrose Truck**), attention turned to planning for Green Hunter Homes which was the 80-unit "Negro Project" still in its planning phase.

The first requirement was removing nine existing dwellings that occupied a portion of the land where Green Hunter Homes would be built. These houses were auctioned off individually, with stipulations that buyers had to immediately remove them within days of the purchase. Several of these houses were dismantled into sections that were used "for remodeling, for chicken houses and for resale as used lumber." The houses sold at prices ranging from \$10.00 to \$187.50 per house⁵ (**PHOTO #15: See Nine Houses**).

Green Hunter Homes were named after Green Hunter, a man regarded as "a leader among the colored people of the City of Gainesville and Hall County"⁶ (**PHOTO #16: Green Hunter.jpg**).

As the Atlanta Street landscape changed, residents watched the coming apartment complex reshape the neighborhood.

Freddie Nicely was raised as a child in a house on Atlanta Street (beside current 'Pepper's Grocery') and she lived beside Green Hunter Homes for many years after its construction. She recalled that the apartments brought more improvements to the area than problems. She recalled Atlanta Street as a peaceful neighborhood.

⁴ *The Daily Times*, Sept. 11, 1951, "Authority Sets Income Limits"

⁵ *The Daily Times*, July 9, 1951, "Nine Houses Sold: \$495"

⁶ Resolution 80A, from *The Housing Authority of the City of Gainesville's Board Meeting Log*

Back in the 1940s and 1950s, a cluster of shops and businesses were located along Atlanta Street near its intersection with Athens Street – the main thoroughfare that led from Gainesville to Athens. This local strip was the community’s gathering place for adults and children alike. Ms. Nicely learned to skate on Athens Street as a child, soon after it was paved, she said. She also remembers a popular ‘peanut stand’ she frequented, called “Cripple Willie’s” (at the present location of the Kangaroo store), where residents would play “a piccolo” (jukebox) for a quarter, and “dance the jitterbug.” (*PHOTO #17: Freddie Nicely*)⁷.

Ms. Nicely also recalled a general positive feeling regarding the announcement of the coming of Green Hunter Homes in the early 1950s. After all, few people disapproved of removing the dilapidated houses in the Atlanta Street area, because, as Ms. Nicely described, “some of them was rough.” Additionally, there was no electricity in the neighborhood, and almost everyone used kerosene for heating and lighting. After a downpour the neighborhood roads were impassable. “If it rained, we had to walk in ruts where the cars had been,” she said. The general condition of homes and roads improved gradually after the construction of Green Hunter Homes in the early 1950s, Ms. Nicely recalled.

At the time of construction of Green Hunter Homes, other aspects of living were not improved as quickly, but had ups and downs, as described by Ms. Nicely. For example, the overall relationship between whites and blacks – though occasionally tense – was generally respectful and cordial. Ms. Nicely recalled, though, on occasion, that the “the Ku Klux Klan would ride through, and Mama would get us in the house and close the doors and turn out the lights.” As shared by Ms. Nicely, this sort of activity declined as black residents, who had had enough of such demonstrations, gathered together and met the KKK with resistance.

Overall, Ms. Nicely said that the racial tone was peaceful. “There wasn’t many whites on Atlanta Street, except at one end. Everybody got along. We’d walk to school and back, over the Fair Street, and there wasn’t ever any trouble,” she said.

Ms. Nicely recalled that the nursery services at Green Hunter Homes (begun by the Junior Service League) were quite popular within the entire community. Two of her children attended this nursery, and she recalled being impressed with the facilities and the people running them. The focus of the nursery was solely on the children’s best interest and not on any political or social issues, she said. (*PHOTO #18: Green Hunter Nursery*)

⁷ Interview with Freddie Nicely, Feb. 26, 2013, Gainesville , Ga.

As Public Housing became a reality in Gainesville, most were supportive of it – or at least acquiescent – though not everyone. As early as 1951, a group of citizens opposing public housing filed a legal challenge in the Hall County Superior Court. The plaintiffs, represented by attorney J. Ernest Palmour, requested a restraining order for further construction and a special hearing to determine if the city of Gainesville had acted within the law by establishing the authority. The plaintiffs contended that the City, in forming the authority, had acted illegally and unconstitutionally because it deprived plaintiffs “of their constitutional rights.” Numerous neighboring property owners claimed that the project would cause their property “to decrease in value and be made less desirable for residential, church, and business purposes.” After review, however, the Hall County Superior Court upheld the constitutionality of the housing authority’s inception and denied any injunction to prevent further work. ⁸

By April of 1952, 84 of the 120 units at Melrose Homes were spoken for, with the move-in set for May 1, 1952. As the project neared completion, the City of Gainesville eagerly watched. **(PHOTO #19: Inspection)** The housing authority offices were located within the Melrose Homes site. Later that same year, the authority advertised to sell public bids for \$1,907,000 in bonds, to cover the costs of construction for the 200 units, backed by a federal loan that covered up to 90 percent of the initial cost.⁹

The authority again revised and made final adjustments to the income limits and rent policy in 1952, setting the maximum annual income of a family at \$3,500. Disabled veterans, families of veterans killed in the service, and families of other veterans and servicemen were awarded preference, and no boarders or ‘roomers’ would be allowed. ¹⁰

At the time, *The Daily Times* ran an editorial that questioned the \$3,500 annual income level as being too prosperous to qualify as low income. They wrote in an editorial that such an income (\$3,500 annually) they could only interpret with some difficulty as “low income.”¹¹ In following years, the annual income was again adjusted. A 1959 Rent Schedule, for example, specified a maximum annual income at \$3,600 (for a family with six minors) and set a \$1 per month charge for every additional \$60 of net annual income **(PHOTO #20: Early Rent Chart)**.

⁸ *The Daily Times*, unknown specific date 1950, “Both Sides Win, Lose in Court Hearing Here”

⁹ *The Daily Times*, Sept. 17, 1952, “Gainesville Housing Authority Sets \$1,907,000 Bond Sale September 23”

¹⁰ *The Daily Times*, Jan. 1, 1952, “Housing Authority Sets Admission, Rent Policy.”

¹¹ *The Daily Times*, Jan. 13, 1952, “Low Rent Housing and Private Industry”

The Melrose Homes complex was officially dedicated in April 1952 (**PHOTO # 21: Program 1**) with families moving in by May, 1952. Green Hunter Homes was beginning to be filled with residents by August of the same year.

By August 1952, public housing – which had been stalled by litigation the previous year when adjoining property owners claimed that public housing would lessen their property values – had an unexpected impact on the neighboring properties. A city ordinance that required any home within 200 feet of a city sewer be connected to the sewer caused “at least 30 homes” adjoining the public housing property to be connected to the sewer, and the city legally mandated additional plumbing improvements in another 60 homes.¹²

In February 1956, the USPHA approved funding for an additional 100 units, allocating \$20,000 for preliminary studies and planning. The new site would be divided into “50 white” and “50 Negro” low-rent housing units, with the latter adjoining the Green Hunter Homes. Thirty of these units would be located on what was currently a vacant lot, and 20 units would be located on the north side of Atlanta Street. The white units would be spread around the vicinity of Melrose Homes. Additionally, a change in policy now allowed single residents over 65 to dwell in the units.¹³

The two 50-unit sites were begun early May 1957, with the completion date set roughly at March 1958. The average monthly rent was \$18 for a family who earned an annual income of \$1,380 and had three minors.

Newspaper journalist Johnny Vardeman (**PHOTO # 22: Johnny Vardeman**) began his writing career at *The Daily Times* (later, *The Times*) in Gainesville in 1957, and he continues to write his weekly column there. Vardeman covered the city into the 1990s, first as a writer, then Managing Editor and later as Editor.

Mr. Vardeman recalls the beginning of Gainesville’s public housing, when he said: “In the early days, there was a push for public housing, from business people and the Chamber of Commerce, who thought what kept a lot of industry out of the area was the lack of affordable housing.” When this new housing came – and a workforce with it – the perception was that public housing was a place for families just starting out or for those suffering setbacks could temporarily gain a foothold, and then rise into better circumstances by the fruit of their labors (**PHOTO # 23: Gainesville 1950s**). Ideally, one day these public housing residents would own their own

¹² *The Daily Times*, Aug. 17, 1952, “Housing Units Said Improving Private Homes”

¹³ *The Daily Times*, 1956, “Locations of 100 New Housing Units Listed”

home, and, perhaps, their own business. However, this perception of public housing as a benevolent ‘hand up’ would not last.

Much of what changed the positive perception of public housing could arguably be attributed to larger social changes in the nation in the early and middle 1950s. As the nation’s public housing was originally established as segregated units, it became a visible focal point for desegregation, as did desegregation in all government-operated sectors (schools, public housing, government offices, etc.)

In the Gainesville area, residents recall the late 1950s as time of heightening conflict.

“There were a lot of people that resisted desegregation, especially in places such as schools and restaurants,” Mr. Vardeman said. Ironically, though, it was the forced desegregation of the schools – perhaps the most visible and symbolic of places – that precipitated change. “Resistance softened gradually, and it was led by the schools,” Mr. Vardeman said. While the bulk of resistance to desegregation came from the white populace, not all of it came from there. There was also resistance within the black neighborhoods, particularly those adjacent to the Green Hunter Homes area.

“Some felt it minimized their community,” said Mr. Vardeman. “They (the black community in Gainesville) had their own downtown. They had black-owned businesses, cab companies and even a black-owned theater. It (the results of desegregation) moved a lot of black businesses out, so there came to be some resentment toward it.” According to *The Newtown Story*¹⁴, the black business community was substantial at that time. The book described: “Athens Street was the heart of black Gainesville since the 1920s.” By the 1950s, a long lineup of black and black-oriented business fleshed out the business strip: “Chamblee’s Drug Store, Clearview Restaurant, Carl’s Spoon, Carter’s Shoe Shop, Greenlee’s Funeral Home, Mr. Morgan’s little cleaning place, Daddy Poole’s, Asberry’s barbershop.” The area even had its own all-black baseball team, the Gainesville Eagles, who played their games in cab driver Doc Harrison’s field (near the site of today’s Harrison Square Apartments).

By the early 1960s, in spite of a decade of turbulence, the public housing community was again in growth mode, this time adding 100 additional units. This growth included units at Tower Heights, a senior and disabled development near Gainesville’s Alta Vista Cemetery (**PHOTO # 24: Tower Heights**).

¹⁴ *The Newtown Story, One Community’s Fight for Environmental Justice*, by Ellen Griffith Spears, 1998, published by the Center for Democratic Renewal and the Newtown Florist Club

In 1969, Congress enacted the Brooke Amendments (named after U.S. Senator Edward Brooke, which limited rents charged to public housing residents to 25 percent of a family's adjusted income. Like all housing authorities, the GHA was then required to admit tenants who could not pay rent, and was required to lower rent for many existing tenants.

The result of this legislation was substantial. Because of the consequent budget drops from flagging rent revenues and, maintenance and other general repairs were curtailed, and the physical aspect of public housing in Gainesville began to deteriorate. This, coupled with a shift of the public image of housing as a 'hand out', rather than a 'hand up,' gradually set in both a tarnishing of public housing and an actual decline in it physically. This cycle – and perhaps more importantly, the *perception* of it – gelled into the denigrated term of 'housing projects.'"

By 1970, as Georgia schools and public housing were fully desegregated, this perception of public housing continued to decline. "As time went on, and crime rates began to rise, people's attitudes changed," said Mr. Vardeman. During the 1970s, he recalled that the perception of public housing varied greatly – depending on the point of view of the speaker. "Some had a negative view of it. Some would be happy," he said, noting those in the latter group were usually the ones who lived there.¹⁵

The idea of public housing as a stepping-stone toward a better life galvanized into the notion of it as a breeding ground for poverty, complacency and dependency. Regardless of the social stigma, Gainesville's public housing survived, expanded and housed countless residents.

Public housing was not the only aspect of housing to suffer during the 1970s. Private housing also began a period of steep decline in the "Southside" area of Gainesville, as depicted by *The Daily Times* in a 1973 article "Home Sweet Home: As in the Slums of New York, home in Queen City is not always sweet."¹⁶ This, in effect, became a self-propelled cycle in both public and private housing, wherein housing properties deteriorated, overhead escalated, rent income vanished and general public support trickled away with it.

Urban decay throughout the 1970s was rampant in Gainesville just as in much of the country as fuel shortages, mistrust in government and widespread drug use became epidemic. Public housing often bore the brunt, in the public mind, of such unwelcome sweeping changes.

¹⁵ Interviewed Feb. 28, 2013, Gainesville, GA

¹⁶ *The Daily Times*, April 16, 1973, "Home Sweet Home: As in the Slums of New York, home in Queen City is not always sweet"

As conditions worsened, neighborhood groups comprised of public housing residents and other concerned citizens arose to speak against them. While their efforts brought attention to the problem, the cycle was entrenched and would last for decades. Through it all, however, the demand for housing grew exponentially.

To accommodate this need, units were developed in the early 1970s. Seventy-five units were constructed across from the old Butler Gym off Old Athens Highway (Harrison Square Apartments), and 25 additional units built across from the current location of Northeast Georgia Medical Center (Jesse Jewell Parkway Apartments).

Section 8

In order to offset the public housing slide, *The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974* brought sweeping changes, providing Georgia with a completely different type of low-income housing program called *Section 8*. This new federal program subsidized low-income family rent to help them afford housing in the private market. *Section 8* made up the difference between what low-income households could afford and the fair market rent. Under this program, very few housing authorities in Georgia were allowed to administer their own program. Consequently, the State of Georgia created the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, the primary Administrator for the *Section 8* Program for Georgia.

In 1980, the City hired Gould, Sumney and Brown of Chicago to conduct interviews with 2,400 families living in Gainesville's older and more dilapidated homes. The firm concluded that, of the 2,400 people interviewed, nearly half (1,300) were potential applicants for public housing. According to an article in *The Times* the survey revealed that 60 percent of those interviewed have higher incomes than the per-family average in the South – a ironic twist that led some to believe that government math, while often “yielding manifold social benefits,” also led to “wild government spending and bureau budget-packing.”¹⁷ Much of such negative public perception shaped in the 1970s and 1980s persists, and with it, paradoxically, does a need for additional public housing.

In subsequent years, the Gainesville Housing Authority added more units as budgets permitted and in time grew from the 200 original units into the 495 today. While the original units were almost exclusively comprised of black and white residents, the trend toward a new demographic emerged in the early 1990s. This

¹⁷ *The Times*, Gainesville Ga. May 7 1980, “Gainesville's Public Housing Requirements”

new shift materialized as the poultry industry and related industries in Northeast Georgia began employing a high percentage of labor from countries in Central and South America. This influx of reliable labor brought a boon in meat processing, as well as construction, landscaping, food preparation and other employment. While this proved an ideal arrangement for those seeking work and local businesses eager for the resource, it put a strain on the local housing market – especially low-income housing. As pressures mounted, local hostilities arose and Hispanic gang activity surged through the latter 1990s into the early 2000s.

Gradually, however, gang-related activity greatly diminished as acceptance and acclimation between cultures occurred.

At the time of this writing, the demographic makeup in Gainesville’s public housing is roughly 62 percent Hispanic residents, 28 percent black and 10 percent white.¹⁸

Economically, most of today’s residents are on fairly equal footing, with the average household income at about \$12,547. (Federal Poverty Guidelines¹⁹ consider a 3-person family with an annual income of \$19,090 or less as living in poverty. Over 46 million people (roughly 15 percent of the population, live in poverty conditions according to 2012 Census Bureau figures.)

Despite federal budget cuts and other challenges, the Gainesville Housing Authority continues to thrive in its seventh decade. One strategy for survival that has proven successful is based on the effort to foster community partnerships wherein all partners benefit. For example, the RISE program (Real Interactive Summer-learning Experience) was launched in 2011 in partnership with Brenau University and others. **(PHOTO # 25: RISE)** Community support is key to RISE. Children receive daily snacks and a healthy lunch from the Georgia Mountain Food Bank. Gainesville City Schools provides transportation. United Way helps with funding. The THINK program gets teen males involved as teaching assistants. The RISE Camp includes “Fun Fridays,” where students participate in cultural field trips at diverse sites like the Interactive Neighborhood for Kids, Quinlan Visual Arts Center, Elachee Nature Science Center, Brenau University’s Sports Complex and Gardens on Green. During the 2012 maiden year of RISE, there were 17 students participating. To document student progress, students are pre and post-tested. In 2012, scores show that 89% increased their instructional learning level in

¹⁸ Gainesville Housing Authority records

¹⁹ 2012 Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) annual income levels are published in the Federal Register of January 26, 2012, Volume 77, Number 17, on pages 4034-4035.

reading and average math scores increased from 52% to 82% over the nine-week program. By 2013, RISE attendance swelled to 40 students. In 2014, RISE had expanded to 75 students split across two campuses.

RISE is just one example; there are many equally successful programs founded on the basis of community partnerships. Other examples include the after-school homework program, founded in 2008 in partnership with the Free Chapel and the GHA in which resident children attend study sessions in math, reading and art. The program is equipped with volunteers from high schools and colleges. The sessions run Tuesday and Thursday in GHA community centers (which means children do not require transportation to get to these programs). Additionally, the GHA has partnered with the Quinlan Visual Arts Center to provide free art classes for our resident children and for our seniors and disabled population. The Gainesville Fire Department and Brenau University's Nursing Programs also provide workshops on home safety and health. **(PHOTO # 26: Tower Heights 2)**. In another example, book bags and school supplies were provided to the authority's school age children (almost 500) through community donations. Also, local churches facilitate weekly homework sessions, guitar lessons and ESOL classes. The Hall County Health Department also presents health classes to residents, as does the Georgia Legal Services Program. Community gardens were added to several sites by the Hall County Master Gardeners, the Hall County Extension Office and the Georgia Botanical Gardens. **(PHOTO # 27: Community Gardening)**. In addition, programs like Awaken led a group of up to 150 resident children with after-school homework help, mentoring and field trips offsite to cultural and informative locations. **(PHOTO # 28: Awaken)**

Furthermore, in GHA's computer labs, other partners such as the Women's Clubs and Scholastic Reading Programs offer reading classes. Residents can also access reading and math programs, job searches, resume writing, job skills building programs, money management, access e-mail and government information websites, including community safety and healthcare information and services.

Today, Gainesville Housing Authority (like other Housing Authorities nationally) is an independent corporation authorized by enabling Federal legislation and created in accordance with the Housing Authorities Law of the State of Georgia. It operates under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Evaluated annually through the Public Housing Assessment System (PHAS) – a method used by HUD for judging the successful operation of a housing authority, GHA scores a Standard Performing status for

the Public Housing Programs. Because of this score, the Housing Authority is more likely to be eligible for grants from Federal & State sources. Many of the award-winning programs that enhance the lives of GHA residents are funded through such sources. In the 2013 annual review, HUD rated GHA as ‘Top Performer.’

Being rated as a top performer is a great success, but what is it like actually living in Gainesville’s public housing community? While admittedly limited, this report may at least suggest a idea of living in local public housing. Through this sketch, the report concludes the overview of the social and developmental history of public housing in Gainesville with the observations from residents compiled from a 2011 survey conducted in Green Hunter Homes on Atlanta Street.

Today, the Green Hunter Homes site has 131 units, which is 50 more than the original 80 units built in the early 1950s. Of the 128 occupied units, residents from 105 participated in the survey. Regarding length of time of residence, nearly 60 percent had lived there 2-3 years; 18 percent had resided there 4-5 years and 14 percent were there 6-9 years and about 10 percent had resided there ten years or more.

Most lived in a two-bedroom apartment, followed by 32 percent residing in three-bedroom apartments. The lowest percentage for surveyed residents was for the five-bedroom units, with only 3 percent occupying them.

When asked what they liked best about their housing community, most agreed the affordability followed by the proximity to important sites such as banks, churches and shopping. Additionally, the community was noted as being ‘family friendly’ and also that the neighborhood was on located on a convenient bus route.

When asked what they liked least about their housing community, the chief complaints were the lack of central air conditioning, the level of noise, no personal yard space, little storage space, size of apartments, the need for more parking and transportation, too few parks and recreation, and too few amenities within walking distance.

When asked about using the City of Gainesville Park and Recreation Programs (sports and after-hour programs), only 28 percent of respondents said they used the services, while the others did not, citing lack of transportation and hours of the offerings as reasons they did not use the services.

At the time of the survey, about 16 percent of families had Internet access, while 84 percent did not. However, 62 percent of the families had cable TV versus 38 percent did not. About half had the regular use of a car.

As far as number of children, most respondents reported having two children, followed by three children, then one child, no children, five children and lastly, six children or more. Finally, almost half of respondents spoke “limited English.”

The GHA looks ahead

Looking to the future, the GHA remain committed to maintaining safe, decent housing that fosters upward mobility and personal growth for people of all backgrounds and ages. If current economic trends prevail, then funds for public housing – and the goal of self-sufficiency for residents – must be found in new and innovative ways such as aforementioned community partnerships, better public understanding of public housing, and, finally, through reconnecting with the root issue of public housing – which is that the problem faced in 1949 still prevails today. In 2014, we still have more people than we have housing to accommodate them. This trend is expected to grow as the ‘Baby Boom’ generation (those born 1945-1964) reach retirement age at staggering numbers. The challenge to create and maintain public housing can only rise despite tightening financial times.

However, armed with the experience gained from seven decades of service, the GHA is poised to move forward in solving this challenge armed with a vision of equality forged by responsibility and built on the enduring vision of the sanctity of the American home.

This report was compiled by Beth Brown, Executive Director of the Gainesville Housing Authority 2020.