

a closer look

Richard Schuurman: turning inner city despair into jubilation

by Anna Madrzyk

"The place was really in bad shape. Like no heat, no hot water... We would get up, and we would have to heat water to wash up in the morning; plus, we would have to turn on our ovens to keep warm. It was just terrible.

We didn't have any security in the halls, and addicts were running in and out. I was afraid for my kids to just come over here and visit... I wouldn't dare to open my door, because so much went on in the hall. Addicts were beating up their girl friends and things. A man got hit, beat up, right in front of our door."

Viola Taylor is black, middle-aged and poor. She lives with her husband, Charles, in a Washington, D.C. ghetto just two miles north of the White House.

But today, the rat-infested, crumbling apartment building the Taylors moved into is an inner-city success story, rather than a pit of despair.

It was purchased by Jubilee Housing, Inc., a non-profit organization that grew out of a small church's mission to help the poor. Since 1973, Jubilee has bought several slum buildings and, through the efforts of tenants working side-by-side with volunteers from across the country—including a contingent from the First Presbyterian Church in Arlington Heights—is turning them into decent places to live.

Jubilee's unique approach to inner-city housing rehabilitation spurred big-name corporations and high-powered legal firms to offer financial help and donate their expertise. It attracted such Washington, D.C. movers and shakers as First Lady Rosalynn Carter, Washington Post Publisher Katherine Graham and former Secretary of State William Rogers to serve on its support committee.

And it inspired Barrington resident Richard Schuurman—a 54-year-old former executive whose career included nine years as president of an Oakbrook insurance firm—to change his life.

At a time when most people would be looking forward to a few years on easy street, with their children grown and heavy financial responsibilities over, Schuurman accepted a volunteer position as director of Jubilee's development office.

He spends every other week in Washington, leaving his spacious suburban home—with its view of 2½ wooded acres, spectacular sunsets and a water lily pond stocked with golden fish—for the inner-city of the nation's Capitol. There, he sleeps on a mattress in a small row house right in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood that Jubilee is helping rehabilitate.

"The first night there I was very, very apprehensive," Schuurman recalled. "If you're afraid of roaches, you'd better stay out of the whole area. It's just a way of life out there."

He pondered the decision to leave the business world for months before joining Jubilee. "I guess I look at life differently than when I was 24 or 34 (years old)," Schuurman explained. "I just came to a point where I said, 'what's this all about?' I was not particularly unhappy with what I was doing, but I just didn't find anything really fulfilling in it anymore.

"It was a difficult decision. It meant shifting my whole life, turning it around 180 degrees."

Schuurman says he had the complete



A successful insurance executive, Barrington resident Richard Schuurman decided to leave the business world and now commutes every other week to Washington D.C., where he uses his managerial skills to help improve housing for the city's poor.

support of his wife, Ann, who has her own business: three very successful employment agencies, located in Barrington, Streamwood and Elgin.

"I had to work through the idea of working for a pittance while my wife would be the chief breadwinner, because we live in a culture where your identity is tied in with your breadwinning activities," he said. "It was my problem, and I am so thankful I was able to work through it. We still have an adequate income to live the way we always did... I can't say it was a great sacrifice in that sense."

As director of development for Jubilee, Schuurman will be traveling around the country during the next few months with his associate, a tenant of one of the apartments, seeking desperately needed funds from selected private foundations and firms.

He's in a race against time, because the strategically located Adams-Morgan neighborhood is rapidly changing. Already, there are \$180,000 townhouses going up across the street from tenements. Soon, Jubilee officials fear, rising property values will push the cost of the apartment buildings way out of the non-profit organization's price range. The process of "gentrification," Schuurman says, threatens to leave Washington's poor "with literally no place to go."

Jubilee's goal is to secure 20 percent of the housing in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood for poor families. To achieve it, the organization must complete an ambitious five-year expansion program, which will require raising \$3 million in funds just the first year. Currently, Jubilee owns five small apartment buildings in Adams-Morgan and a

sixth dwelling in another neighborhood.

While other inner-city rehabilitation projects have reverted quickly back to slums, Jubilee is successful because it requires that residents assume responsibility for their living conditions, Schuurman said. Renovation projects patterned after Jubilee have started in Denver, Louisville, Baltimore and Alexandria, Va.

"This is not a matter of a group of middle-income people who come into a neighborhood and want to 'do good,'" he said. "We have a very deep commitment to getting these people to help themselves. We require the residents to attend classes, learn how to handle the operation of the buildings, preparing them to take over the building as time goes by as cooperative housing and eventually to own the buildings themselves."

Resident Viola Taylor, who serves on two committees for her building—admissions and construction-maintenance—was taught how to spackle and paint by her husband Charles, who is chairman of the construction committee. "I don't mind working, trying to help make the hall look decent. I feel proud," Mrs. Taylor told a Jubilee staffer who interviewed her for a publication on the project.

Some residents were suspicious of Jubilee at first, Schuurman said, and there are still a few who are just "along for the ride" and don't do their share of the work. But overall, participation is good and many residents are deeply involved. Besides decent housing, Jubilee offers below-market rents for residents, whose family incomes average \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year.

The Jubilee approach to improving the quality of life for ghetto residents is "wholistic," Schuurman said, encompassing a variety of social services as well as housing. In the neighborhood, there is a Montessori School for damaged children, an nutrition program for the elderly, a health clinic and Potter's House, a combination bookstore-coffeehouse that was the first mission of the Church of the Savior, the tiny, ecumenical church on Washington's Embassy Row that launched Jubilee.

Once a year, the Washington luminaries on Jubilee's support committee attend a dinner with residents. "It's dynamic to watch those with power sit down with those without power and see what happens," Schuurman said. "They discover they have a lot in common—Mrs. Carter's got Amy just like Rosa Hatfield's got her four children, and the problems are the same."

Like the other successful businessmen who have become involved in Jubilee's work—and who discuss their feelings about it on a 12-minute promotional tape used in fundraising efforts—Richard Schuurman finds his new job absolutely fulfilling. It has "deepened my spiritual life greatly," he says.

"Up to now, I guess, I gave to the causes the church supports but I never had a sense of personal participation in it," Schuurman said. "There's a great deal of difference between writing out a check and working with poor people to help solve their problems. I am a lot more sympathetic to the plight of the poor people than I ever have been before."

Schuurman said the experience has taught him something about his own lifestyle.

"You can get by," he says. "We live so lavishly in our suburban culture. You can get by on much, much less and still be happy."