

# Bridging the Generations

*A unique project in New York houses seniors and homeless single parent families with young children.*

BY KAREN R. BROWN

In 1988, a New York City public official told *Newsweek* that single-room-occupancy (SRO) housing was a "remnant of a past generation that should be regarded as extinct." However, a partnership of three prominent New York City institutions—the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, Fordham University, and New York Foundling Hospital could not disagree more.

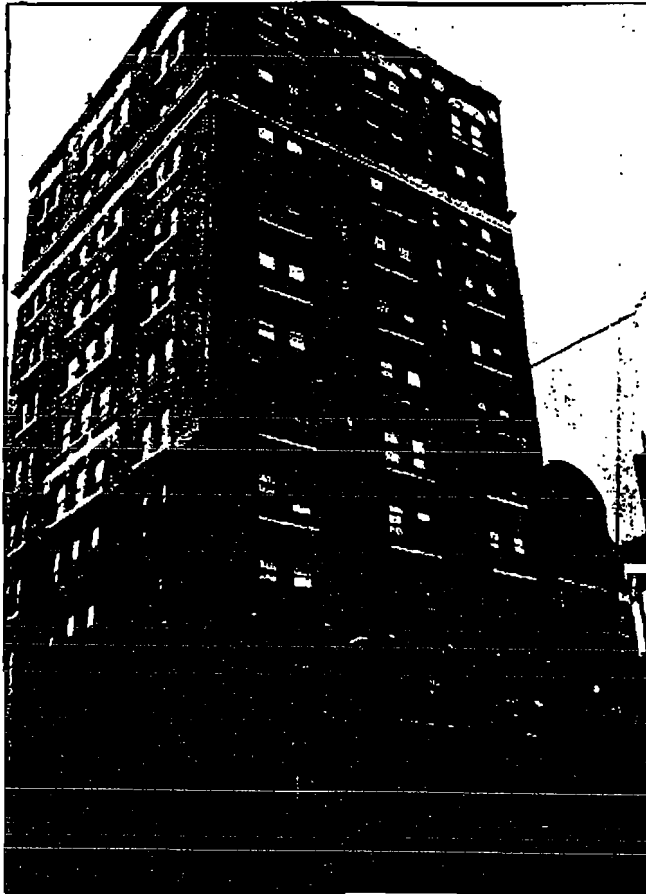
The partnership working together since 1987, has opened Manhattan's first SRO designed to house several generations and offer a variety of support services. The West End Intergenerational Residence (WIR), located on Manhattan's gentrified Upper West Side, is the brainchild of low-income housing attorney Nancy Biberman. It provides a permanent home for 44 low-income and/or homeless seniors, including 22 former tenants, and a transitional residence for 54 formerly homeless single mothers with one or two children under age seven. Three units are also reserved for Fordham University social work and education students who can live at WIR for one or two semesters.

The units are equipped with a kitchenette and basic furniture. For the families, cribs and high chairs are available and two units share a bathroom. There are also two private baths on each floor, a shared living room area, and a secure rooftop garden and play area complete with a sandbox.

WIR challenges the common assumption that housing should not mix ages. In the early 1970s, several evaluations of

mixed-age public housing popularized the idea of intergenerational conflict, and the studies were never contested. Nancy Biberman recalled that when she proposed WIR to funders, "everyone pointed to these

WIR's location in an upper-income neighborhood also challenges the idea that low-income housing should only be built in low-income neighborhoods. "The kneejerk response to this type of housing is to put it in low-income areas already lacking in community infrastructure and services," said Biberman. The \$4.5 million acquisition cost of the Upper West Side building made it a controversial choice, but Biberman was determined not to concentrate more low-income housing in a low-income area.



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The West End Intergenerational Residence challenges many common assumptions about subsidized housing.

studies as evidence that it could not be done." Yet the elderly and single mothers have much in common, including the need for conveniently located public transportation, shopping, drug stores, health care facilities and companionship.

## SRO Hotels Nearly Extinct

Residential hotels were once very popular in large cities, particularly for single people. In 1913, SROs housed more than 11 million people in the 10 largest U.S. cities. Many offered a variety of services, including meals, housekeeping and child care. In its heyday, the WIR building, then known as the Congressional Hotel, was the home of Governor Lehman and other wealthy families who occupied entire floors.

Unfortunately, the urban renewal bulldozer razed many residential hotels during the late 1960s, and then the 1970s brought conversion to high-priced coops and condominiums. In New York City alone, the number of hotel units plummeted by 89 percent between 1970 and 1983, dropping from 127,000 to 14,000 units.

After scouring Manhattan for the right building, Biberman settled on the old Congressional Hotel in part for its location on the corner of West End Avenue and 83rd Street, one block from Riverside Park, three blocks from the district school, and near two major hospitals, a neighborhood health and community

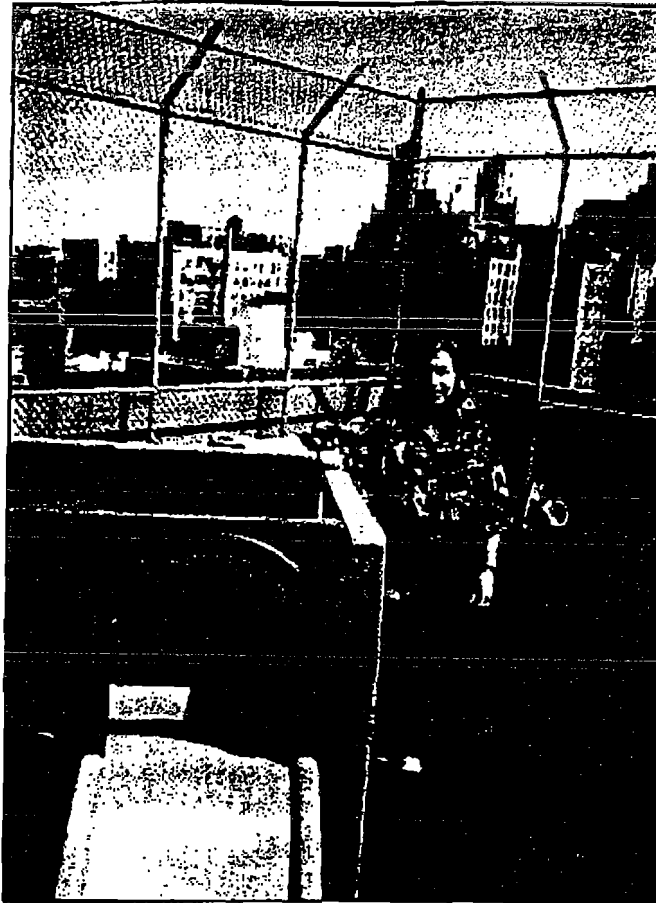
center, movie theaters, and museums. Of the building's 120 units, only 30 were occupied at the time. Father Robert O'Connor, Pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church, an early supporter, said the building was "almost like a haunted house. Some of the empty rooms were locked, while others were filled with garbage and water leaked from the top floor to the first floor." Nevertheless, the building was an attractive candidate for coop conversion because of its prime location.

After meetings with various banks and city officials, Biberman pulled together a financing package from public and private sources, including: a \$7.135 million, 30 year interest-free balloon loan from the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), a \$1.5 million grant from the New York State Homeless Housing Assistance Program, and monies from the Low Income Housing Fund, Chemical Bank and New York Community Trust. The city loan and state grant commitment were earmarked for acquisition and renovation costs.

Even with the financing lined up, the owner was reluctant to sell. Biberman persisted, even visiting him at his office with homemade borscht. Finally, in January, 1988, he sold the building to the WIR Housing Development Fund Company. They took title to a building with 30 tenants, "all over 55 years of age and all terrified," as Biberman recalls. When the surrounding community learned about the plans for the intergenerational residence later that month at a press conference with Mayor Edward Koch and Cardinal John O'Connor, the real problems began and could be summarized by one word: "N.I.M.B.Y."

#### Resistance

Biberman and the other partners agreed not to let the community know about the proposed residence before gaining title to the property and closing. "We were all worried that if we announced our plans



Nancy Biberman, the projects prime mover in the building's rooftop playground.

residents would try to get an injunction to stop us," she said. And try they did, though unsuccessfully. In addition to holding informational meetings for the opponents, Biberman made it part of her job to set aside time at the end of each day to personally respond to all the calls and letters. This meticulous attention may have paid off in the end. Although not required, WIR received unanimous approval from the Community Planning Board.

"It was the very first time that a project housing formerly homeless persons got unanimous approval from a Community Board — which is not to say that everyone loves us," Biberman adds.

Today two community residents sit on the Board of Directors and the WIR Advisory Board, composed of community residents, still meet periodically to discuss concerns, and more recently, how the community can help. The evolution of the community from a critic to participant was a long and difficult journey, but was clearly essential for WIR's maintenance and continued existence in the neighborhood. As Executive Director Barbara Petro proclaims,

"We're here and we're staying."

#### Comprehensive Social Services

The social services program at WIR was developed to provide a cluster of services in order to prevent residents from having to travel to six different offices for different services. The education program is provided by Fordham University's Graduate School of Education and the social Services component is provided by New York Foundling Hospital, under contract from the Human Resources Administration, and supplemented with interns from Fordham's Graduate School of Social Work.

Fordham's Graduate School of Education designed the education program for the young mothers which includes pre-educational testing, General Educational Development (GED) classes, and post GED education and college counseling. Fordham Associate Professor of Education Angela Carrasquillo designed the curricu-

lum. The New York City Board of Education provides classroom teachers and teaching assistants, and pays for transportation and lunch costs. All GED classes are held at Fordham's Lincoln Center campus, twenty blocks away from WIR. Classes are purposely held at the campus to encourage the students to consider college as one of their future options. Nine women already attend local colleges, and another nine are currently in the GED classes. Three women took the GED examination last November, and a smaller group are in career and vocational programs.

Fordham's Graduate School of Social Work supplements New York Foundling's on-site social work staff, directed by Mary Reynolds. Six Masters in Social Work (M.S.W.) candidates work one-on-one with both the young mothers and the seniors. Helen Horowitz, Director of Public Affairs at Fordham and a M.S.W. candidate, works at WIR three nights a week. What does she think the young mothers have in common? "Although each woman is unique, they all

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## Mixed Generations

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want apartments of their own and whatever it will take to get that — college, job training, a job."

WIR's on-site infant and toddler child care center helps mothers work toward their goals. The center is part of the Living for the Young Family Through Education (L.Y.F.E.) program, a full-day early childhood education program funded by the Agency for Child Development and administered by the New York City Board of Education. It provides care for children of teen students who are between two months and 2.9 years of age. The WIR center is unusual since most other L.Y.F.E. sites are

located in high schools and alternative high schools.

Like Head Start, the L.Y.F.E. program emphasizes parental involvement. Reynolds said that not only do the mothers participate in parenting workshops every Thursday afternoon, but many regularly assist the head teacher and associate teachers at the center. Older children who are not eligible for the L.Y.F.E. program are enrolled in child care in the community. The Association to Benefit Children, for example, offers all-day Head Start for three- to five-year olds at the nearby Goddard Riverside Center. But like other mothers dependent on child care, the WIR residents often need additional help, if their job or educational program runs later than child

care or if a child gets sick. One mother whose vocational education program ends at 5 p.m. is currently trying to make arrangements for another resident to pick up her child at a community program. Unfortunately, there is a gap on the senior services end, since the Human Resources Administration contract does not include them. Reynolds is particularly worried about what will happen as the seniors age and require long-term care.

### Building an Extended Family

Everyone involved with WIR agrees that intergenerational programming is extremely challenging. Biberman points out that while some of the former 22 tenants accepted the project, all chose to live separately from the families on the ninth through eleventh floors. Some seniors at WIR have no interest in parenting and participate only in special events, such as summer birthday parties in the rooftop garden. However, a few of the new elderly residents were specifically recruited for their interest in working with families, and they live on the family floors, volunteering at the child care center and doing some informal babysitting along with some of the original residents.

Over time, more seniors have become involved with the young families. Some have overcome their initial fear of caring for young children through a training program offered by the New York Department of Aging's Foster Grandparent Program. As one elderly gentleman observed, "I learned there is a lot to taking care of children." Biberman also notes that the presence of young children has helped bridge the two populations at WIR.

She recalls recently meeting one senior in the elevator, a man who was initially opposed the WIR project. This time, however, he said hello to Biberman and quickly introduced her to the young child and mother also in the elevator. WIR demonstrates that while intergenerational cannot be forced or even jumpstarted they can ultimately offer a rich loving environment for seniors as well as single parent families. ■

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