



## **Apex Housing: National Model of Success in Westbury**

Written by Cory Twibell Friday, 31 December 2010 00:00

### ***Kimmel Foundation Project Blends Amenities, Affordability***

Where Maple Avenue meets Union Avenue on the Westbury-New Cassel border, two state-of-the-art housing units rise several stories above the heavy volume intersection.

Their collective height is a testament to the above and beyond effort of the non-profit group responsible for bringing the Apex project to life: the Kimmel Housing Development Foundation.

Formerly the Anna and Philip Kimmel Foundation, the group dates back to 1994, according to Chairman Howard Kimmel, whose gentle presence is felt throughout the complex.

Apex I and II redefined the term “affordable housing,” and its traditional connotation was destroyed, as was the overcrowded house which stood on the site more than a decade ago.

“When everyone was saying, ‘Don’t go into the area because of crime, prostitution and drugs,’ we had a sufficient vision to go into the area – not enough money but a vision – and we proved successful,” said Kimmel, who along with his team, hopes to rid the affordable housing phrase of its negative associations.

“Part of a successful affordable housing project: It fits into a community; it’s an asset to a community. If you peek behind the walls, here is what you’ll learn - the kind of people you might talk to that live here, the kind of housing they couldn’t find that they found and the challenge of doing this because people have stereotypes in their minds and they can be exploded by the reality, that’s what we’re trying to do.

“Our message when we’re going into other communities: whatever you think in negative terms about affordable housing, we can show you the positive side in real life in a real building. This is doable; this isn’t so big that it’s going to overwhelm a community around it. This is a small site but look how ingeniously they’ve worked everything in,” said Ellen Kelly, head of site development for the Foundation.

Roberta Treacy, the Foundation’s president, agrees.

“Unfortunately when people think of affordable housing, they think of the wrong idea, that it’s outside people we don’t know, forgetting that a lot of the time, it’s their neighbors,” Treacy said.

Affordable housing, Treacy explained, also ought to be available for all Nassau County residents and beyond, regardless of age.

“A young person or someone in their 20s, who wants to leave their parents’ house but stay in their community and not move in to Brooklyn or something and make a contribution on Long Island, where do they go? A couple who no longer needs a house or no longer has children, where do they go?

“Housing costs have gone up on LI and taxes are incredibly high in Nassau County, so to be able to not only buy, pay a mortgage, pay taxes and maintain a house, you need an incredible income,” said Treacy.

The Apex I unit, which opened in 2003, houses senior citizens and offers a unique environment of safety, affordability and independence. The common rooms outside the elevators and friendliness found throughout the unit could be mistaken for a college dormitory. The highest annual income found in Apex I is a little under \$30,000.

Functional since 2009, Apex II, with a peak annual income of around \$47,000, offers next-generation workforce housing and specially designed units for the physically challenged. The Apex III unit, which will be similar to Apex II, is currently in the works.

“What we’re doing should be done, can be done, in other communities. Whether it’s affordable housing at \$30K, or \$70K, it’s affordable housing. You may call it by a different name, ‘workforce’ housing, whatever it is. If it’s low-income, it’s got a negative connotation.

“I’m a civil servant living on a civil servant’s income. I am eligible for affordable housing, as are tens of thousands of other people, but they don’t have that availability to have local accommodations next their friends, churches, movie houses, walkable communities, train stations,” said Kimmel.

Kimmel likened the Apex I to the lifestyles of “princes and princesses, kings and queens,” except on “Social Security benefits,” chimed Kelly.

Kimmel explained that the Foundation’s journey to its current state was long – and the initial reaction from the community wasn’t wholly welcoming.

“The initial meeting with the community was ‘get the hell out of here,’ and after they had built the development, it was a rousing applause for the Kimmel Foundation, for doing a good job and improving the community. Many people in the community at first were saying, ‘We don’t need you or want you,’ later on said, ‘We’re proud of you.’

“It was ‘not in my backyard unless,’ which made us prove ourselves with the state, county and town with putting in expensive and essential things like the area on roof, the fencing that surrounds the property to protect the senior citizens, oversized closets, multiple refrigeration units in two-person apartments, pass-through window for kitchen and dining room,” said Kimmel, who was content spending the extra time and money on the essentials.

“As for the amenities, the apartments have emergency pull chains in two places, accessible roll-in showers, larger bathtubs, sinks with no cabinets below so wheelchairs can be rolled under the sink, angled mirrors for those in wheelchairs, six lights as opposed to one over the mirror.

“All the features that are needed by senior citizens to keep them here rather than have them institutionalized, are both affordable and keeps them independent so they can stay near their churches, theaters and shopping,” said Kimmel.

Kimmel also said the goal of the Apex units was to help make the surrounding area a “walkable community.”

“At least in the daytime and I hope in the evening, it becomes a walkable community. You’re within 600-700 feet from the railroad station. In the past when you went to and from the railroad station, you’d carry just your railroad fare and nothing more. It’s different now, senior citizens go out now and they’re shopping in the community,” said Kimmel, who also explained that seniors, through a Town of North Hempstead initiative and in conjunction with the Park Geriatric facility, are given the opportunity for free or reduced transportation to various

places.

While the Apex may be overlooked from street level, its residents aren't bashful in telling its tale.

"It's wonderful. I live in a studio apartment, probably like 600 square feet, all wheelchair accessible, it's nice and roomy. I have lovely neighbors and it's a nice neighborhood. The superintendents Marta and Wilfredo are wonderful people and they take care of everybody and it's a very nice environment," said Sharyn Fitzpatrick, who has lived in the unit since October 2009.

Fitzpatrick also echoed the sentiments of the negative low-income housing connotation.

"The only thing that bothers me is that this is 'low income housing' and that makes it sound not so nice. We might all have a 'low income' but just about everybody here is working families, couples. Every apartment is beautiful and it's not like we're on skid row over here.

"Especially right outside my apartment on Union is this big sign: Low Income Housing. It sounds like it's all 'riff raff,' drug addicts, that sort of thing, and it's so far from the truth. Everyone here is so friendly and so nice. The neighborhood, I go into town all the time by myself," she said.

George Bond, a resident of in Apex I, seemingly at a loss for words, said, "It's unexplainable. It's so great. It's the best. I don't think that you can find anything that compares to this anywhere in the United States. As far as affordable housing is concerned, you can't beat it.

"There are more [seniors], that people in politics should be concerned with and look out for the little people. I could go on and on but this is the greatest thing that's happened in my lifetime as far as living, as far as shelter."

Resident Marie Zadorecki explained, "Life is wonderful, what can I tell you. It's a very, very wonderful place to be and I'm very happy and thankful for it. Howard is a wonderful man."

Thanks in part to The Kimmel Foundation, residents can continue living and thriving right where they belong. Right here in Westbury.