

Beauty and a Bus

July 19, 2007

Ben Strauss

Beauty Turner leads a bus tour of Chicago. Missing on her tour, however, are the Sears Tower, Wrigley Field and every other landmark you'll find in a Chicago guidebook.

That's because Turner's excursion is a trip through Chicago Housing Authority projects, some of which are no longer standing. A product of Chicago's public housing herself, Turner is now the assistant editor of *Residents' Journal*, a bi-monthly magazine written by CHA residents and published by We The People Media.

The tour is Turner's attempt to share the history, personalities and sense of community that define Chicago's infamous public housing developments.

First stop: an expanse of cracked asphalt at 53rd and State. It used to be the Robert Taylor Homes.



*Beauty Turner on the bus tour.
Photo by Ben Strauss.*

"I want you to listen to the voices of the voiceless," Turner says at the site. "They had a neighborhood just like you and me. They lived, played and died here."

The Taylor homes were torn down last year, as part of the Chicago Housing Authority's \$1.6 billion project to replace low-income high rises with new mixed-income communities.

"Today these women are in South Chicago, Danville and Englewood," she says. "They had to abandon their homes and their communities."

Turner leads her captivated audience from site to site in a beat-up yellow school bus. Sitting in the back, listening to her point out the sites, the We The People Media Bus Tour feels like an eccentric elementary school field trip.

Turner's mostly white charges are reporters and employees of non-profit organizations.

Elinor Krepler is there as part of her rabbinic training program in Philadelphia. There is a group from the Field Museum's Cultural Understanding and Change program. There

are reporters from National Public Radio and a history professor from Roosevelt University, Brad Hunt, who is writing a book about the history of public housing.

Many on the tour snap pictures of public housing projects as if they were tourist attractions. They turn their microphones toward CHA residents who are not used to being listened to. At the Dearborn Homes, Turner takes her guests inside and up a flight of stairs stopping at the door of a friend.

What ensues is an impromptu press conference, starring residents Carol Wallace and Joyce Smith. The women talk about their community and its hardships. Smith laments the treatment by the police.

"My own grandson was arrested for trying to visit me," she says.

And the notion of giving a voice to the voiceless becomes more tangible.

From the Dearborn Homes, the school bus rolls down Cottage Grove Avenue, lined by abandoned lots, churches and community centers.

Every few blocks a billboard appears. They feature mixed-income communities like Park Boulevard and Oakwood Shores that have replaced CHA projects.

The illustrations are colorful, advertising "the new wave of community living." Turner, however, insists the old way of living is worth remembering, if not preserving. And she is suspicious of the changes.

"A lot of the people dependent on public housing won't be able to afford the new condos," she explains. "They won't ever be able to move back to the place they called home."

The last stop on the tour is what Turner dubs the Ghetto Gallery, in the South Side's Grand Crossing area. Pictures of Turner and other public housing residents line the walls along with posters of Che Guevara and quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr.

Turner introduces Darryl Young, who raised 21 children in the Taylor Homes before they were bulldozed. His frustration is that now his children and grandchildren may not have a place to live.

"I went to Vietnam to keep this country safe," he says. "And now it's hard just for my kids to have a place to live."

His voice, once silent, is now being heard thanks to Turner.

"A lot of people are suffering," says Turner. "I think a tour like this can bring it to a lot of people's attention."