



# Profiles of Selected Mitchell-Lama Tenants

October 2003

**Aloma Legall** moved to **Tower West** Dec. 15th, 1971, before the building officially opened and before all apartments were ready to be occupied. The gang 100 Puerto Ricans terrorized the neighborhood. Nearby Park West Village was patrolled with dogs.

Often when Ms. Legall told a cabdriver where she wanted to go, he would refuse to accept her as a fare. The working people who moved into the Mitchell-Lama complex in the neighborhood changed the area. They domesticated the neighborhood through organizations that would make life easier for the people who came there to establish households - such as setting up a food coop and block associations.

Ms. Legall, the first black female fashion designer to be hired by a corporation, now teaches arts and crafts to children, and scenic design for the theatre to children and young adults. When asked where she would go if she could no longer afford her apartment, Ms. Legall said this: "During the black-out people were walking through tunnels and over highways fighting to get home, to walk into an apartment and just close the door behind them. Just to be home, even if there is no food, that's such a basic need. There's a sanctity to home and I can't imagine life without it."

Being visually impaired has not slowed down **Peggy Bradford**. A resident of **Independence Plaza** for 25 years, this senior's mantra is, "I can't sit home and be a couch potato." Prior to retiring 15 years ago, she also worked as a medical receptionist and at the Department of Aging. She also managed to raise three children along the way.

Always eager to help others, Peggy has volunteered much of her time at the Greenwich House Senior Center (GHSC) where for a period, she was the chairperson. She started the GHSC's Outreach Center for homebound seniors and continues that work today at her home at Independence Plaza. Over the years, she was also involved in local politics. She does leafleting and makes calls for candidates to help them recruiting workers.

For Peggy, living at Independence Plaza has always been enjoyable. She likes the area, the location and the people. "It's a wonderful place to live," she says. "It's very convenient, I love my apartment and the rent is affordable."

## Campaign to *Preserve* Affordable Housing Member Groups

Independence Plaza North Tenants Association Working Families Party New Amsterdam Tenants Association  
Heywood Towers Tenants Association ACORN Community Service Society Roosevelt Island Tenants Association SEIU 32 BJ  
Phipps Plaza Tenants Association Concerned Cooper-Gramercy Tenants Association CWA 1180 UNITE PEF Region 11  
Met Council on Housing New York Jobs With Justice SSEIU Local 371 Citizen Action of New York Knickerbocker Plaza  
Tenants Association Mason Tenders District Council Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition Boulevard Towers Tenants  
Association IBT 808 DC 37 AFSCME United Jewish Organization of Williamsburg Columbus Manor Tenants Association  
315 West 86<sup>th</sup> Street Tenants Association Coalition for a Livable West Side

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**Sylvia Mendel**, CSW, 73, moved to **Phipps Plaza** with her 26-year-old daughter 23 years ago. The neighborhood was shabby with deteriorating storefronts at street level. The presence of Phipps Houses, from 29th to 26th St. on Second Avenue, brought in a number of substantial businesses - a grand new movie house, a drugstore, Borders, a pet store and a gym - which anchored the neighborhood in middle-class respectability. Ms. Mendel, and other Phipps residents, have been active on Community Board 6 and other community organizations (such as the Rosehill Association), helping to rid the neighborhood of prostitution, the drug element and other sordid activity that infested Lexington Avenue from 28th to 23rd Sts. The Phipps Plaza neighborhood has become closer in character to its upscale neighbors, Kips Bay and Gramercy Park. Phipps residents were involved literally in cleaning up the neighborhood - picking up garbage and trash and involving local merchants in their efforts; painting benches in the park - they established a small park, mostly for children, and named it after Vincent Albano, a Senator from the neighborhood.

Among her professional accomplishments is establishing a residential program for the frail elderly in her building (for the N.Y. Foundation for Senior Citizens) the first of its kind in NYC. Ms Mendel has observed that the sight of older people using their walkers and wheelchairs to get to voting booths on Election Day has served as an incentive for less involved citizens. Retired (after 16 years) from the NYC Department of Mental Health, in 1996, Ms Mendel went back to work part-time for Project Liberty. Many Phipps residents worked for the city or for corporations downtown and were deeply affected by the attacks on 9/11. Still reeling from this, they received the buyout letter January 2002.

Because of her profession as a social worker and through surveys she herself designed, distributed and analyzed, Ms Mendel believes the following: "There are a disproportionate number of older women living alone in Mitchell-Lama buildings. They are widowed (median age 55) or divorced and have few wage-earning years left, or they are already have low fixed incomes. There are at least 300 such women I know about in my complex of 892 apartments. A significant number of them are not eligible for Sticky Vouchers and are faced with rent increases of 100% to 200%. These women have supported the city's cultural institutions, hospitals, public schools, libraries, even the U.N. with their unpaid work as volunteers. This population, along with young families, already pay more than 50% of their incomes in rent."

**Linda Coleman**, 54, moved to **Independence Plaza North** with her eight-year-old son in December 1975. The neighborhood was then Washington Market and, although she had moved into a beautiful apartment building, the surrounding area lacked any safe places for her son to play. The rubble in front of the building, left over from the recently completed construction of IPN, and the next-door construction site of the Borough of Manhattan Community College, which was inactive because the city was then bankrupt, became the playground for the children of the neighborhood. Her son and other children would also sneak away and play under the old Westside Highway.

That area would later become Battery Park City. The neighborhood then lacked the amenities that draw people to it today. There were no supermarkets, no nearby restaurants, no Washington Market Park, Back then, to make up for the lack of a supermarket, IPN families got together to form a food co-op. Though it was short-lived it was the beginning of the spirit of working together to solve a common problem that still exists today.

Ms. Coleman has worked for the city for 27 years and for the past few years she has held two jobs with the city. She works for both the Human Resources Administration and the NYC Off-Track Betting Corporation. Ms Coleman has devoted most of her days and nights, in recent years, to working so she could send her daughter to Stanford University.

Having lived in this community nearly all her adult life, Ms. Coleman now worries that she will have to move if rents skyrocket. With plans of retiring in 3 years, Linda fears that she will not be able to afford to live in IPN or anywhere else in NYC, where she has lived her entire life. "I feel as though I am living with one foot out the door, it's a horrible feeling, after being here through the lean years in this neighborhood."

If IPN becomes unaffordable, she says her only obvious choice is to pick up and move to California. That is where most of her family lives now, many of them having moved there for the same reasons as she - affordable housing. In the meantime, if our new landlord raises the rent to unaffordable rates, Ms. Coleman may have to sacrifice saving for her retirement for the next 3 years in order to pay her rent. She will need that time in, or lose the full benefit of her pension when she retires.

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