

**HENRY HORNER MOTHERS GUILD:  
Tenants Go Public On Public Housing**

A Case Study on Media Advocacy

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## **HENRY HORNER MOTHERS GUILD: Tenants Go Public on Public Housing**

Mothers in Chicago, furious about their living conditions, fed up and fighting back...

—WBBM-TV, May 31, 1991

Horner residents blame CHA

— *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1991

Video Makes Mothers' Case About Life in Projects

— *The Washington Post*, June 1, 1991

“In the shadow of downtown Chicago are 21 towers of poverty known as the Henry Horner Homes,” began the story on “ABC World News Tonight” (May 31, 1991). ABC was one of the many news organizations that paid attention when the Henry Horner Mothers Guild slapped its landlord, the Chicago Housing Authority, with a class-action lawsuit. Newspapers and television stations responded with top of the news features and front-page articles. The news media told the story of a group of women who accused the Chicago Housing Authority of being a “slum landlord,” responsible for violations that threatened the lives and safety of their children. Going beyond what might have been just another local story set against one of Chicago’s blighted housing projects, the mothers’ story assumed special importance. This case study tells the story of how this group of public housing tenants used a video news release to get news attention that even highly skilled media strategists might not have delivered.

### **BACKGROUND: THE HENRY HORNER HOMES**

The Henry Horner Homes, which opened in 1957 to provide much needed temporary shelter for financially-strapped families, were among the first Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) high-rises. There are 1,777 apartments in Horner's 21 buildings. Each unit cost about \$13,000 to construct, making the Horner Homes the cheapest CHA development built at the time.

The Horner complex is located in a remote semi-industrial area on the West Side of Chicago and houses some 3,000 tenants. According to the CHA's own reports, half of the apartments are vacant, uninhabitable and virtually abandoned. In 1991, when the Mothers Guild was active, there were approximately 35,000 people on the waiting list for Chicago public housing. At the same time, an estimated 850 apartments stood empty at the Henry Horner development.

Ninety-seven percent of Horner residents are African-Americans with an average household income of \$4,135 — much of it from government entitlement programs, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Transitional Assistance (TA), and Supplemental Security Income Assistance (SSI). The majority of tenants are unemployed and pay less than \$100.00 a month in rent. Residents who do find jobs are forced out of the complex by federal policies that increase the rents for working people, thus adding to the high concentration of deep poverty and growing gang terror. “There are no children here,” said former Horner resident LaJoe Rivers, “because they have seen too much.” (This quote sparked the title of the book There Are No Children Here by Alex Kotlowitz.) The Horner development, in effect, segregates the poor, cutting them off physically and psychologically from jobs, health care and opportunities more readily available to the rest of the city.

Like tenants everywhere but especially in urban high-rises, the mothers of Henry Horner want decent, secure and sanitary conditions for their families. As Henry Horner residents, however, the women have none of this. Instead, the CHA, the nation's third largest public-housing administrators, offers poorly constructed dwellings that are falling apart from 25 years of neglect. With little social planning or screening, the agency continues to move low-income families into housing regarded as hazardous and highly unsuitable for families. Death-trap elevators constantly break down; leaky plumbing causes frequent flooding. Inadequate security gives gang members easy access to and control of the buildings; vacant apartments harbor

trespassers and drug addicts. Outside, there are no safe playgrounds. Mothers keep their children indoors because just beyond their front doors, drug dealers do a thriving business.

Newspaper stories provide an almost daily account of crime and substance abuse in these high-vacancy high-rises. In a recent article in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Oct. 17, 1994) 14-year-old Tony Dawson takes reporters into a vacant Henry Horner apartment scattered with broken glass, beer bottles and drug paraphernalia. Dawson, using a plastic bottle of rubbing alcohol, demonstrates how a certain drug user smokes crack cocaine in an empty apartment on the eighth floor of his building. He can demonstrate because he has observed the drug being smoked while playing with friends in the building. "Too many public housing communities are home to the drug trade, and too many have become literal war zones," said HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros when he announced federal awards to combat drugs in public housing (*Chicago Sun-Times*, Oct. 1, 1994). Henry Horner is among Chicago's roughest housing projects when it comes to drug dealing and gang activity (*Chicago Tribune*, April 28, 1991, page 1).

Not unlike similar projects across the nation, Horner has serious problems with no ready solutions. The housing project's problems of decay and neglect are complicated by the dangers of illegal drug use and trade. Residents and their children cannot avoid being exposed to them. Over time, this once well-intentioned housing project has failed to provide the physical structure that would promote family and community renewal; it has also failed to seed opportunities for eventual economic self-sufficiency. It is easy to see why the CHA and the federal government have been accused of continuing to stack poor people one on top of the other and then proceeding to neglect them.

The case of the Mothers Guild served as a reminder. As tenant advocates they slogged through the bureaucracy week after week, year after year, reporting problems ranging from looted mailboxes to flooded rooms to decaying walls. But there was little or no response from the CHA. Frequent staff turnovers made it almost impossible to get anyone to pay attention long

enough to follow through on work orders. The Mothers were told there was no money to fix broken windows, exposed wiring, or holes punched in walls by vandals breaking in from unoccupied units. While failing to deal with the serious deterioration of the buildings, the CHA was even less likely to clean up the grounds or plant grass and flowers in place of the weeds and debris. For most residents, the outlook was bleak. For the members of the Henry Horner Mothers Guild, however, it was their reason to be.

### **Henry Horner Mothers Guild**

Maurine Woodson formed the Henry Horner Mothers Guild in 1983 to help mothers cope with life in public housing. The lawsuit described in this case study was not the first time Woodson tangled with the CHA. As a single mother raising four children, she says she was fighting from the day she set foot in her apartment at Henry Horner Homes in 1975:

I held my rent because when I moved in my apartment, they had painted over dirt and filth...and I wasn't going to live in that....The city fights other slum landlords and they're the biggest slum landlord in this city. They want you to pay your rent on time. And if you don't, they're ready to put you out. (Woodson, interview 3.24.94)

Woodson's loose-knit self-help group included as many as 30 women, sometimes as few as six. They met once or twice a month to instill a sense of political power among the tenants. For three years beginning in 1986, the Mothers Guild received a total of \$88,000 from Chicago-based charitable foundations in support of community organizing. With the funding, the mothers set up an office equipped with a computer and copy machine and went to work. They initiated projects with neighborhood gangs in hopes of stopping shootouts. They launched clean-up campaigns in their buildings and on the grounds. They called on the city to tow away abandoned cars and tear down abandoned buildings. They pushed for improvements such as getting broken lights in the stairwells replaced and posting temporary security guards at the building entryway—all of which they regarded as short-term solutions to ongoing problems.

## **THE STORY**

On May 31, 1991, mothers concerned about raising their kids in the dangerous conditions at the Henry Horner Homes asked the court to force the Chicago Housing Authority to live up to its obligations as landlord. In their lawsuit, they charged the housing authority with building-code violations and accused the CHA of breaching the terms of its leases with Henry Horner's tenants. They also lodged a protest charging that the CHA practice of allowing vacant apartments to deteriorate constituted a *de facto* demolition of nearly half the development. Vacant apartments continue to be linked to drug use and drug dealing, proliferating a dangerous environment for tenants and their families (*Chicago Sun Times*, October 17, 1994, page 1).

Hoping to draw attention to this unusual lawsuit, the Mothers Guild, with support from community organizer Kim Bobo and Bruce Orenstein of the Chicago Video Project, developed a plan to gain media attention. Together they distributed news releases announcing a news conference. Accompanying the release was a videotape that substantiated their claims against the housing authority. The videotape, and the fact that members of the Mothers Guild helped make it, succeeded in attracting renewed media attention to the old problems at Henry Horner.

### **Gathering Support**

I wouldn't want to try and raise a kid there...You can't walk through some of those buildings and not just be overwhelmed with this sense of just total evil in this society—that we as a society could allow this to exist. It's unbelievable. It just makes me mad.  
(Kim Bobo, interview 4.7.94)

With funds for technical assistance from the MacArthur Foundation and the Woods Charitable Fund, the Mothers Guild hired Kim Bobo, a community organizer with experience in social justice issues. Bobo came recommended by other public housing tenants who had faced similar problems. The Horner tenants worked with Bobo for two years before filing the lawsuit, meanwhile extracting a number of impressive changes from the CHA. For example, they got the housing authority to replace broken locks and repair elevators. The CHA

also fixed up the first-floor social room in Woodson's building to house children's after-school programs. But Bobo declared that the time had come to take a more aggressive stand in getting basic policies changed. "We were winning on all these little things and losing the big war in terms of what was happening," she says.

Annette Hunt, a single mother of four, has lived in the Horner Homes for eleven years. Despite the Mothers Guild's many accomplishments, Hunt says conditions in her building were a worsening mess. She was frustrated and realized that the Guild would have to do something different to force the CHA to react.

We felt like it was time for something to be done about this because we just want a chance to live better just like everybody else does. And we felt like it could be done if we just let everybody know that we're living like this here. And then maybe that would make somebody take notice and say, "These people shouldn't be living like this." So that's when we did the big lawsuit; to make people stand up and take notice. (Hunt, interview 3.15.94)

The Mothers Guild called on the lawyers at the Legal Assistance Foundation, a federally funded program providing free legal representation to low- and moderate-income people. The Foundation's expertise in handling public housing issues was known to the Horner tenants.

Before lawyers could proceed with the lawsuit, the Mothers Guild knew they needed the support of their Horner neighbors. To generate such support, the mothers, armed with flashlights, canvassed from building to building, up and down dark stairwells, door to door, in search of plaintiffs who would strengthen their class-action suit.

It was no easy task ... it was awful. We would always go in groups of three women ... I always had my little thing of mace. And the women from the Mothers Guild always had kitchen knives with them 'cause it's really scary, especially some of the floors where there'd be one apartment on a whole floor that had anyone in it...And there were several times when we'd come out on a floor and start down and there'd clearly be some sort of drug deal or something going on. (Bobo, interview 4.7.94)

Doing the necessary legwork to collect statements and lay the foundation for the lawsuit took more than a year. Tenants were afraid to come forward, worried that the CHA would evict

anyone who spoke out against the agency. Many did not see the point of taking action. They were discouraged by reports that the city might demolish the Henry Horner Homes to make room for a commercial development across the street— where a new sports stadium now stands.

But the women in the Mothers Guild persevered. Working with Bobo and their lawyers, they gathered documents that showed, even after repeated requests over long periods of time, the CHA failed to maintain and repair apartments in the Henry Horner development.

### **Considering Media Coverage**

Determined that the work of the Mothers Guild should not go unnoticed, Bobo proposed to bring the inside story out into the light by documenting the Guild's activities. Almost all of her organizing campaigns have included a media component, not only to help move the issue forward, but also to build morale and overall commitment to the campaign. While Bobo cautioned the mothers against relying on the media to change things, she counted on the media to add urgency and significance to their work.

This was not the first time the mothers had dealt with the news media. Once before, after repeated attempts to get vandalized mailboxes replaced and secured, they took snapshots of the broken boxes and circulated them among the media. Newspaper and television reporters came to take their own pictures and then interviewed the mothers about lost and stolen checks. Maurine Woodson recalls the incident:

I had to rent a mailbox because mail was coming up missing out of my mailbox.... They just tore up the mailboxes. And we fought. The mailboxes were real raggedy, but when we hit the press with it, we got new mailboxes. But before that, they wouldn't do anything. (Woodson, interview 3.24.94)

Bobo called upon her colleague, Bruce Orenstein, executive director of the Chicago Video Project, for consultation. A longtime community organizer himself, Orenstein was nevertheless shocked to see the living conditions at Horner. He called them a nightmare, saying that he had never seen anything so desperate—not even in the poorest communities.

There would be a whole building with hundreds of units in it, with maybe 20 people living in that building...Everything was stripped down, and you'd walk through the hallways and it would be pitch dark and it felt like you were in an abandoned building, yet CHA is actually running this building...Even I was shocked at how awful they [conditions] were. Just the filth, the dirt, the sense of danger, the sense of doom. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

Orenstein quickly agreed to help with the media plan for the Mothers Guild. After further conversations with Guild members, he concluded that producing a video news release (VNR) would be the most effective way to bring attention to the deplorable living conditions in the project. A VNR in the hands of the right people in the media, he told the mothers, would help publicize their work. The mothers agreed to team up with the Chicago Video Project to tell their story.

### ***The Chicago Video Project***

The Chicago Video Project (CVP) is a not-for-profit video production company that makes videotapes to promote social change. With funding from charitable foundations, the CVP has worked on behalf of Chicago grassroots organizations to advance policy issues through strategic media planning. In the last three years, the CVP has produced programs used to lobby public officials and inform the community and the media on issues related primarily to housing. Its other programs aim to teach a range of skills to community activists, such as how to conduct productive meetings and how to approach people in the media as partners in their struggle for change. By coaching them in the art of making television, CVP has helped many activists get faster results from their representatives in city government.

Orenstein never studied filmmaking. Though he has gained considerable competence on the job and produces broadcast-quality stories, the strength he brings to using filmmaking to advance social policy comes from 15 years of experience in community organizing in Illinois, Indiana and Washington. Orenstein knows how to frame the issues so people pay attention.

## **The Media Plan**

### ***The Video News Release***

Power is often associated with high visibility. Attracting media attention, particularly television, is an integral part of doing business in America. The CVP provides media advice to those usually portrayed in the media as victims, giving them access to a game usually played by the rich and powerful. The Horner VNR, shot with a hand-held consumer camera, was produced for less than \$4,000, all paid by the Chicago Video Project. Orenstein, accompanied by members of the Mothers Guild, surveyed some of the worst areas in the development and captured them on tape. They shot for five days in December 1990 and January 1991 and edited the footage in February. In May, 35 copies of the finished tape were distributed to local and national news outlets.

Orenstein said he designed the VNR to do three things:

- 1) Generate more news coverage than would be normal for this type of issue;
- 2) Increase in-depth coverage; and
- 3) Frame the issue to convey a very specific message.

The three-and-one-half-minute tape was dramatic and succeeded in gaining media attention. Opening with a long shot of the Horner high-rises, the camera pans across a boarded-up building as tenant Mica Goldbold talks about her memories of a clean, relatively pleasant Horner in 1972. The VNR continues with shots of dark and threatening hallways. It documents overwhelming evidence of the horrible conditions inside the projects — an animal left dead in a vacant apartment, crumbling asbestos hanging from pipes; gang graffiti from floor to ceiling; ill-lit, dangerous corridors of crime. We see children trapped in harsh surroundings while on the soundtrack their mothers talk about the hardships of raising them, trying to teach them respect and the difference between right and wrong. “The hallways are dark so often that children growing up think that is just the way it is supposed to be,” the narrator says. A mother says:

It's very hard because you are bringing up kids in a very negative world. It's very negative, because you have to do the best you can, you have to teach them, and you have to put all you can into them. But being single and bringing kids up, and living in CHA, living with the gangs, the drugs, the rats, the roaches, is very hard. Because then you have to explain to your child, well why do we have to live like this here? And that's not easy to explain to them. (Annette Hunt, VNR)

Reporters who covered the story said they were impressed with the mothers who, instead of submitting to the continuing decline of their homes, took a bold new approach to decades-old problems. The video offered compelling evidence and legitimized the Henry Horner Mothers Guild's claims against the CHA. (Newspapers and radio stations got VHS copies, and television stations received 3/4 inch broadcast videotape that they could air.) It was strong enough to persuade viewers that the mothers' concerns were valid and that their demand for change was indeed reasonable.

### ***Framing the Issue***

From past experience, Orenstein knew the story was newsworthy. There were the essential news elements of conflict, drama and originality. He also knew that reporters responded to stories about public housing. This was definitely no ordinary story. Orenstein sensed that, barring a catastrophe, the media would be out to cover it.

The real concern for Orenstein was managing the focus of the story by framing the issues strategically. To increase the chances that the mothers' ideas, rather than the individual reporter's, were expressed, he designed a media package that would help reporters tell the mothers' story, with an emphasis on two key points:

1.     Broken promises — the CHA broke promises to the residents of Henry Horner;
2.     Accountability — the CHA should be held to the same legal responsibilities and standards as other Chicago landlords.

These themes were repeated in the press release, VNR, press conference and ensuing interviews. The result was that nearly every story told in the media carried the same message. Orenstein acknowledges that, after years of experience, he finds shaping the message now comes instinctively.

I spent ... a whole evening just getting that one line about CHA should be held to the same standards as other Chicago landlords...When I walked in and talked to Kim Bobo and the women in the Mothers Guild, I knew the issue. I knew almost how to cut it much better than they did because I'd been spending fifteen years cutting issues like this, framing them. So a lot of the things that I said, they really got excited about because I took their feelings and then just packaged them and focused on them and turned them into flashy sound bites. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

The intended audience was the media itself, the primarily white middle-class journalists who determine to a large extent what is news. Orenstein says that, while he was conducting interviews and editing the VNR, he was thinking of the reporters who were going to carry the message. "We would say, 'What are they going to respond to? What is going to touch them?'"

### ***Training***

Orenstein and Bobo spent about 40 hours giving the mothers basic media training. Tenants worked with Bobo to write the news release. They worked with Orenstein in front of the camera. Together they crafted their statements to the news media.

We wanted to portray these women as fighting for a better life for themselves and their kids. We were very conscious of portraying them as articulate, intelligent, caring women who are filing a class action lawsuit out of the same values that are held by the middle class: a better life, safety, cleanliness, health... (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

In going over the agenda for the news conference, Bobo and Orenstein told the mothers what to expect from reporters. They rehearsed in the room where the conference would be held. The women prepared their statements and practiced answering questions until they were comfortable about speaking to the issues without introducing anything that could be used in the media to distract from the two main themes. No mixed messages. Annette Hunt says they were encouraged to speak from their hearts. But they were also cautioned to consider their statements

carefully, to contain nervousness or anger. "I didn't want to be militant, but I wanted to make sure I could get the point across. I grew and I learned more as I went," says Maurine Woodson.

A tour of Henry Horner was carefully mapped out for the media. Each member of the Mothers Guild practiced her role so that statements made during the news conference and during the tour for the media reinforced the message conveyed in the press release and the VNR. Orenstein compared it to a dress rehearsal for a play.

They had some good training and they were able to go out and pull it off. They're very brave women to do this, because they had never been public figures before.... But they were just great. They were well rehearsed. But they were living the situation and they couldn't help but convey the emotion of it. And they did a very good job in doing that. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

### ***Contacting the Media***

One week before filing the lawsuit, the Mothers Guild sent out the printed news release and video news release. Two days before the press conference, Orenstein and Bobo made the follow-up phone calls. They contacted assignment editors, city desks, producers and reporters. They asked if the material had been received and reminded all of the press conference scheduled in two days. Because most of those contacted had not had the time to screen the VNR, Orenstein described what they would find on the tape and explained why he thought the story might be newsworthy.

In some cases, the mothers themselves talked to members of the media. For example, Maurine Woodson had kept in touch with some of the reporters who covered the mailbox incident. Based on that relationship, WMAQ-Channel 5's Renee Ferguson says that she would always be interested in stories about the Mothers Guild. She, in fact, ignored Orenstein's request for a news embargo and went on the air with the story the evening before the news conference, a move that could have jeopardized the best-laid plans. Orenstein feared that Ferguson's report would lessen other TV stations' interest in the story the next day. Fortunately, just the opposite happened.

Because TV news is often driven by what appears in the papers, the *Chicago Tribune* was given the exclusive rights to the story the morning of the news conference. Orenstein made these arrangements with the *Tribune* because he knew urban affairs writer Patrick Reardon. Other outlets released the story on the afternoon and evening newscasts, as well as in the next day's papers. To provide reporters with their own stories, Orenstein and the Mothers Guild identified well-trained mothers who would give exclusive interviews.

### **Media Reaction: “A New Spin on an Old Story”**

The news media was used as a vehicle to bring the Mothers Guild's demands to the attention of policy makers. But first, it was the reporters who had to be convinced of their importance. Jim Williams, a former WGN-TV reporter, recalls that he was interested right away when he was assigned to the story. The fact that a videotape came with the news release made it that much more interesting.

It was clear to me that if they were willing to go to that length to document the problems there, that the problems were serious.... I was impressed with their willingness to take matters into their own hands and to creatively document what they experienced everyday.... I think all of us who covered the story understood that sometimes you have to be creative in order to draw attention to a problem. Because if you try to seek attention and corrective measures through traditional means, you're stonewalled sometimes.  
(Williams, interview 3.21.94)

Except for the ABC affiliates, all television coverage included shots from the video news release. A WBBM-TV producer says, that although they've covered public housing “a million times before,” the video footage was dramatic and made the Henry Horner story stand out from the rest. She says it was a new spin on an old story.

All the newspaper and television reports reflected the message shaped by the Mothers Guild. Williams admitted that the VNR influenced him.

I'm certain that it did subconsciously....They very clearly spelled out the problem at Henry Horner. And that made it easier for me as a reporter to report their complaint.  
(Williams, interview 3.21.94)

When asked if they felt manipulated, reporters said the Mothers Guild offered a point of view compatible with traditional journalistic values.

I doubt that they actually got precisely what they wanted in every case. They may have gotten more of it, but if they did, it's probably a reflection not of manipulation of the media but of how honest and straightforward they were. So, you can't control us. We're uncontrollable. This is America...We have the freest, most rowdy, wildest press...I generally have a feel about who's lying and who's not. I certainly know after twenty years in broadcasting what's staged and what's not. Everyone has a point of view and that's different from lying. (Ferguson, interview 3.18.94)

Fox-32's Ann Kavanagh said the video news release indicated to her that the mothers meant business and were serious about getting something done.

Who better to know what their daily lives are about than them....I found it really poignant....It made the story a lot stronger to say, yes, this is a video that was made by the mothers themselves. I just think that gives the story a lot more oomph....It was just another angle to the story that made it stronger than just a bunch of mothers complaining. (Kavanagh, interview 3.18.94)

As a rule TV news organizations shoot their own footage. Recent cutbacks, however, have resulted in less time for staff writers, reporters and camera crews to devote to individual stories. Kavanagh says that news stories dealing with issues as complex as the conditions at Henry Horner are difficult for general assignment reporters to cover. Without time to research and to find mothers willing to talk on camera, it would have been impossible to tell the whole story if the Mothers Guild had not already done some of the work.

It makes it quicker because it had all the people that you needed to interview right there in one room. You didn't have to go traipsing all over the projects or knocking on doors trying to find people who would talk. First of all, it takes time to knock on doors and frankly it can be a little dangerous if you knock on the wrong door. (Kavanagh, interview 3.18.94)

WMAQ-TV's Renee Ferguson welcomes calls from grassroots organizations interested in social change on behalf of the poor. Other reporters we spoke to also expressed a willingness to help citizens shaping the debate over their future. In public housing, it was important, they said, to let the residents' agenda redefine the problems and issues and how they should be addressed.

## THE NEWS COVERAGE

The Mothers Guild story was told on radio and television and in the newspapers. It was picked up first by the *Chicago Tribune*, then by the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Washington Post* (see Appendix for press clippings). It made the local news on CBS's WBBM-TV, ABC's WLS-TV, NBC's WMAQ-TV, Fox-32 and the Tribune Co.'s WGN-TV. Audiences nationwide watched it on "ABC World News Tonight," "CBS This Morning" and the talk-show "The Oprah Winfrey Show." Television coverage ran anywhere from one minute and fifteen seconds to four minutes and fourteen seconds; "The Oprah Winfrey Show" gave the story an even longer segment.

As a result of a carefully staged news conference and a very clear and distinct message, the mothers' story came across strongly and clearly. "Broken promises" and "Hold the CHA to the same standards as other Chicago landlords" were charges repeated in nearly every report. The Mothers Guild's views were well articulated and communicated. In contrast, CHA chairman Vincent Lane, interviewed after the news conference, came across as ineffectual. He said, "I can't change this. I'm strapped for money, I wish I had a magic wand to change it, but I can't." He was edged out of the story and put on the defensive by reporters who had accepted and then reinforced the Mothers Guild's message.

Anchor Walter Jacobson, who was at WBBM-TV at the time, added a new twist to the story on the 10 o'clock news by visiting Henry Horner tenant Shirley Stuckey. Her apartment was a steambath because she had not been able to turn off the hot water for the past two years. Her walls and floors sweated; the newsclip showed mildew growing on everything she owned. Viewers could almost smell the odor. Jacobson, with his camera crew in tow, confronted Chairman Vincent Lane on an inspection tour, telling him about Shirley Stuckey and the hot water. In a matter of hours, the faucet that would not stop running was fixed. "Thanks to the plumber, the maintenance director, Vincent Lane...but most of all, thanks to TV," Jacobson said.

Before the news coverage, the outside world decided how CHA residents would live. Now these residents are speaking out for themselves, trying to determine their own fate. With training, they effectively presented their view of life in the housing projects for outsiders to share. They gave the news media and the public glimpses of a life very few have experienced for themselves.

## **CONCLUSION: A Media Advocacy Paradox**

It would be unfortunate, indeed, if after all the media attention the only thing fixed at Henry Horner was Shirley Stuckey's faucet. In recent interviews, Hunt and Woodson said they had high hopes for change:

I was hoping their response would be "Okay, we see this is a problem, let's get it fixed. Let's do something about it. It's been going on too long." (Hunt, interview 3.15.94)

I was hoping that people would really see this problem and do something. And the federal government would step in and actually make living conditions in public housing better. That's what I was hoping for. (Woodson, interview 3.24.94)

After all the media excitement quieted down, however, the mothers finally asked themselves what they had in the way of results. Had they accomplished what they intended? Or was the news coverage superficial glitz? What were the long-term effects? Was it worth it? What is next?

Things that we really wanted to get done — things that we needed to get done, didn't get done. We felt like this media would help us to let people know that this was going on. We still haven't gotten anything done. (Hunt, interview 3.15.94)

Looking at the inside of the building, like when I rode the elevator in 1815 (West Monroe St.), it was black. It was filthy. The water, the mud, no security. They're supposed to have security there. They still haven't done anything about those things. And these are things they were supposed to be making better from the class action lawsuit. They have ignored it. (Woodson, interview 3.24.94)

One video news release had only limited value in producing real long-term results for the Henry Horner residents. The Henry Horner Mothers Guild story illustrates a telling paradox of

media advocacy: media coverage, after all, can only be a small component of a successful advocacy initiative. News coverage alone does not make change happen. Media advocacy will not be successful in the long run without the organizational capacity and vision to carry it out. It will not work in the absence of a strong advocacy base. Orenstein says that a media strategy, to be effective, must be coupled with strong organizational capacity to bring about change.

Organizationally, [the Mothers Guild was] a fairly weak group. They don't have many people involved. They don't have a funding base. They don't have a full time staff. To then broker all the news coverage that they got and all the attention that they got...to broker that into very specific, concrete improvement — they didn't have the strength to broker as much as they could have on that. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

The daily struggle of living in the Henry Horner development, coupled with the extended timeline of the lawsuit, compounded the usual difficulties of community organizing:

Three years is an awful long time to maintain enthusiasm, particularly when you've got to run and worry about making it just to get into your apartment at night...If it were a matter of winning the case in the press, we would have won it by now. The press was very good. And I think it was very important that the press came out to Horner to see it for themselves. They took them on this tour and people were shocked and so on. But there's a whole host of problems with public housing and it's an issue that people get a glimpse of and then they go on to something else. (Wilen, interview 4.6.94)

The media advocacy and community organizing conducted by the Mothers Guild was carried out in a setting that is blighted by drug use and gangs, among other ravages plaguing the housing project. Numerous reports have identified Henry Horner as a center of drug use and trade. Organizing in that setting was not only difficult, but dangerous.

Two days after the story aired nationally, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp, arrived in Chicago to inspect the buildings with Mayor Richard M. Daley. However, the Mothers Guild was unaware of the impending visit. If there was an opportunity to use the media to demand a meeting with Kemp, U.S. Senator Paul Simon and city officials, the Mothers Guild was unable to take advantage of it, because there was no structure in place for ongoing media advocacy.

The cameras and reporters are gone, and it's business as usual at the CHA with one exception. CHA chairman Vincent Lane is said to have met with Henry Horner's residents to tell them that some of their homes would be torn down. While federal law requires the government to provide alternate housing for those displaced by such a plan, the residents do not know how or when this will happen. (Indeed, in August of 1994 city officials announced that the homes will be torn down to free up space for the Democratic National Convention in 1996 to take place in the nearby sports stadium. Plans are pending to relocate the residents.)

The video news release has not helped speed things along in the courts. Since the suit was filed in 1991, the CHA has made several motions to dismiss and five different settlement offers. Until August 1994, lawyers for the Henry Horner tenants did not consider the offers reasonable because the CHA demanded the demolition of Henry Horner buildings that tenants thought should be rehabilitated, not demolished. Both sides have now agreed on the list of buildings to be rehabilitated, a list of those to be torn down, and a procedure to resolve conflicts in the future. In September 1994, the CHA announced that it had submitted a proposal to the department of Housing and Urban Development to spend some \$200 million on rehabilitation that includes both the renovation of some buildings and the demolition of others. Lawyers on both sides are optimistic about reaching a settlement in 1995, subject to variables including what the Republican Congress will do in the next session.

In the last three and a half years, there have been other changes. The Henry Horner Mothers Guild dissolved in 1991 amid rumors of financial mismanagement. All but one of the key players moved out of the development. Only Annette Hunt remains, and she had chosen not to continue organizing support for the Mothers Guild. As president of her building council, however, she still works with the Legal Assistance Foundation to find new Henry Horner tenants to serve as plaintiffs in the lawsuit. They will replace those who have moved out.

CHA Chairman Lane, interviewed in August 1994, ironically applauded the Mothers Guild for drawing attention to their predicament through the media.

Generally speaking, I'm always supportive of the residents, and I encourage them not to be apathetic and stay in the background. What the Mothers did got the attention of the media, then HUD. Any such coverage is positive because it puts the issue on the public agenda and raises the public's consciousness. Media coverage in this case helped the lobbying effort to address the problems. HUD and Congress respond to perceptions generated by the media. The residents held the authorities' feet to the fire. But I myself never felt threatened. I'm all for improving the quality of life in the CHA. (Lane, interview 8.2.94)

A media-savvy public official, Lane did point out one dilemma of media advocacy. "If every organization did it, then the media would be bored of it quickly," he said. "The groups then have to figure out how to differentiate their messages and come up with new angles." As for the residents' lawsuit against the CHA, Lane didn't want to go into the specific charges. He, however, agreed with the need for legal action. "I think they should've filed the suit. After all, that was another option for achieving results, to shake things up in Washington. There will be some resolution soon." The recently announced decision to displace the Horner residents—a decision he participated in—is of serious concern to Lane. "We want to find better homes for them," he said. "This is where my proposal for scattered-housing sites can be put into action."

### **Lessons from the Mothers Guild**

If it is media exposure you want, it helps to be innovative and unorthodox. The story of a group of women who strike back at their landlord and tell you why in their self-produced video is not only surprising, it is impressive. And in the case of the Henry Horner Homes Mothers Guild, the news media loved it. The experience of the Mothers Guild teaches us that with resources, planning, and practice it is possible to have a profound influence on how a story is told by the news media.

## ***Resources***

Even with an effective message, it remains difficult to translate media attention into political power for effective change. A single story has a short shelf life. As Orenstein notes, unless there is a structure to sustain push for policy change, grassroots organizations cannot achieve any kind of permanent change other than a blip in the news.

This was more along the lines of a blip on the TV screen. That's not demeaning what we did. But that's the reality of it. Nothing is going to change until some real power is developed from those people who are living in these conditions to alter the relations of power between themselves and decision makers. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

Orenstein says grassroots organizations need more education to understand fully what access to the media provides and how to take full advantage of it.

Hundreds and thousands of dollars are spent by corporations to shape the message out there - millions of dollars through advertising. But even then, CEOs of major corporations and high officials, all have gone through media training. And that same kind of thing needs to happen at the local level, with groups in poor neighborhoods that are organizing for change. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

To carry out effective media advocacy organizations need the resources for the tasks at hand such as developing materials and contacting reporters. Just as important, they need the resources to sustain all the aspects of an advocacy initiative, usually in the face of difficult circumstances.

## ***Planning & Training***

The limited resources the Mothers Guild were able to gather allowed them to enlist the community organizing services of Bobo and the media production services of the Chicago Video Project as well as conduct the organizing for the lawsuit. Together they carefully planned their media strategy in anticipation of journalists' questions and reactions. The message they put forth was carefully crafted, and the mothers' delivery was well practiced. The practice telling their story gave them the confidence to proceed and be heard so powerfully by reporters.

### ***Effectively Telling the Story***

The media coverage certainly satisfied Orenstein's goals of drawing more attention to the issue, increasing in-depth coverage, and putting forth a specific message. On that count, the Mothers Guild was an overwhelming success.

The message we relayed was that mothers were trying to take care of their children, instill values in them and that they were being frustrated by an uncaring bureaucracy and that's the message that we gave because that's the message that the news media will be most readily able to project out there. That's the middle-class message. The more radical message even more true is the political analysis...Maybe that's video release number two. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

By targeting the CHA and going public with their stories, the women did accomplish something very important. They established the CHA tenants as new players in the game. Residents saw themselves on TV as take-charge "movers and shakers." Hunt values her experience tremendously and credits it with building her self-confidence in her work as president of her building council. "I know that I have done something and it makes me stronger to proceed on to what I have to do. I did it and everyone knew about it and I felt good. I wasn't just sitting back like everybody else just talking about it, I did it. And that made me feel good about myself," she says. Furthermore, Orenstein says there is great value in the relationships the mothers formed with the media. By making an issues-oriented story easier to cover, the women have insured the likelihood of reporters taking the initiative once again on behalf of the tenants.

If the Henry Horner Mothers Guild, with three women and a team of attorneys from the Legal Assistance Foundation, tomorrow decided to hold a press conference, they can get almost every news station probably in Chicago to cover it because they covered it in the first place...and in that sense, the effort was highly successful. (Orenstein, interview 10.14.93)

The mothers had their say on TV, radio, and in newspapers across the country. In the process, they eliminated a few stereotypes. Unlike the usual stories of the projects, theirs challenged the common view that public housing tenants are shiftless freeloaders who live in run-down buildings and shoot at one another. These mothers took control of a situation and fought back both in the courts and in the media. They put a new face on the problem, persuading journalists

and viewers to see CHA residents as empowered advocates, not the cliched victims of crime, poverty, and hopelessness.

Anyone willing to dismiss this effort as a failure because CHA policies have not changed would be mistaken. While the news reports may not have accomplished all that the Mothers Guild had hoped, they did spur the CHA to make some immediate repairs. Perhaps more significant, the coverage successfully portrayed these public housing residents as strong women, well-organized, making a change in their admittedly horrible environment. In contrast to the usual news coverage of public housing residents, which typically portrays them as powerless victims who somehow deserve to live in dilapidated conditions, these news reports portrayed residents as powerful advocates. The women of the Mothers Guild could not control what reporters said, but they effectively controlled what they said, and this made all the difference. Taking advantage of local resources, they positioned themselves as human beings who did not deserve their horrible surroundings and were willing to fight for decent, safe, sanitary housing, as any citizen deserves and would desire.

The Henry Horner Mothers Guild used the news media to affect a dramatic move from the wings to center stage where they rattled the political structure, even if for a short time. It may take a few more attempts before the Horner residents can sustain and leverage that power, but one thing is sure — now the women know how to force a crisis upon policy makers by confronting them with images. They have tasted what it is to jostle for government and media attention — and win.

## **HENRY HORNER MOTHERS GUILD: Tenants Go Public on Public Housing**

A Case Study on Media Advocacy

### **METHODS**

To find out how a group of public housing tenants got the attention of the media, we gathered print reports and tapes of local news broadcasts and met with former organizers from the Mothers Guild — Mica Goldbold, Hazel Holmes, Annette Hunt and Maurine Woodson. We interviewed Bruce Orenstein of the Chicago Video Project and talked to television reporters Renee Ferguson of NBC's WMAQ-TV, Ann Kavanagh of Fox-32, and former WGN-TV reporter and current mayoral press secretary Jim Williams. We spoke to a news planner at ABC's WLS-TV and a former news producer who worked on this story with anchors Bill Kurtis and Walter Jacobson at CBS's WBBM-TV. We also interviewed Bill Wilen of the Legal Assistance Foundation, as well as community organizer Kim Bobo of the Midwest Academy. These interviews were conducted between October, 1993 and April, 1994. An interview with Vincent Lane, Chief of the Chicago Housing Authority, was conducted in August, 1994.