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Supreme Change

As Sonia Sotomayor Strives for the High Court, Her Childhood Neighborhood No Longer Houses Opportunity

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Walk through the red-brick buildings of Bronxdale Houses, the public housing project where Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor grew up, and find broken elevators; smashed windows, lights and front-door locks; and hallways that stink of urine.

In one apartment, plastic bags are taped onto the walls to cover the disintegrating plaster, the stove is out of service and the faucets leak. It's the kind of place where people fight and no one bothers to call the cops. Kids from the Light Side of the projects, where the streetlights mostly work, are prone to turf wars with those from the Dark Side, where they mostly don't.

"There's a lot of drama," said Ivellisse Velasquez, 18, who has lived here all her life. "A lot of kids are getting caught up into it. They have good hearts, and they have good minds, but they get sidetracked."

The neighborhood was different when Sotomayor moved here in the late 1950s, at age 3. Her story has been hailed as an affirmation of the American dream: She came from the bottom and, against all odds, rose to the top. But these projects in those early years were not the bottom. In fact, Bronxdale Houses was designed for working people like Sotomayor's parents, who needed a steppingstone from the tenement slums to the middle class. And the Sotomayor family moved away when Sonia was 16, before successive waves of drugs and crime began to make the projects synonymous with poverty and violence in America.

"I never perceived myself as a poor child," Sotomayor said in an October 1999 housing authority publication.

In the past few decades, there has been a sense that high-density public housing failed, and many of the bigger projects have been torn down as cities offered residents vouchers, or built new mixed-income developments.

Today, studies show public housing residents are poorer, more isolated and less educated than they were in the '60s. It is "extremely rare" today to rise out of the projects to become highly successful, said Patrick Sharkey, an assistant professor of sociology at New York University. In 1970, some 15 percent of children in public housing who participated in one survey went on to earn a college degree; that number plummeted to 4 percent in 1990, according to an analysis Sharkey did.

Sotomayor's story "runs against the dominant patterns of the past few decades about mobility," said Sharkey.

"There's much less economic mobility than Americans think there is."

In 1957, the Sotomayor family moved from a tenement in the South Bronx to Building 28 of the new Bronxdale Houses development. The project consisted of 28 seven-story buildings with 1,496 apartments in an isolated but carefully landscaped area bounded by highways. Average rent was about \$51 a month. Planners thought these "towers in the park" would be a key to the modern city and house people cleared from the slums in urban-renewal programs. Most tenants at Bronxdale were working class, including many World War II veterans; about 10 percent were on welfare. It was difficult to get one of the coveted apartments if an applicant was not working, was a single parent or had a drug abuse record, said Nicholas Dagen Bloom, a historian of New York public housing.

About half the residents were white -- mainly Italian and Jewish, and also Irish, longtime residents recalled. At a time when black and Puerto Rican families found it difficult to rent in a segregated market, about 30 percent of Bronxdale residents were black and about 20 percent were Puerto Rican, according to city housing authority records.

Stories of gang violence and vandalism seemed distant from the rhythms of life at Bronxdale, residents of the time said. Sotomayor recalled the new apartment was "spacious, pristine white" the day her family moved in, and she celebrated by pedaling her tricycle around until she bumped into a wall and left an ugly black tread mark. Three-year-old Sonia guiltily hid under a bed for two hours. "Marring that wall was the single most traumatic event of my childhood," she said in the housing authority publication.

Back then, the grounds at Bronxdale were so carefully maintained that if you walked on the grass, you might get a ticket, and your parents would surely get a call from some neighbor about your misdeed. Mothers would prop open the front door with a chair to get a breeze while they were cooking, and kids would run from apartment to apartment, said Taur Orange, who is 54, the same age as Sotomayor, and whose family was one of the first to move into the project. Residents could leave their bicycles and baby carriages downstairs without locks or fear of theft, said Shaunee Butler, also 54, who also grew up at Bronxdale.

"We had the run of the projects," Sotomayor said in the housing authority article. "We had freedom."

Sotomayor's parents became close with neighbors, but the family also had its own social world. Each weekend, cousins, aunts and uncles met at the Bronx home of her paternal grandmother, Mercedes Ortega, for dominoes and a feast. In summer, the whole extended family would spend the day at the Orchard Beach in the northeast Bronx and bring sandwiches, pernil and arroz con gandules. Sonia's parents, aunts and uncles used to dance guaguaco and merengue in each other's living rooms, said friends of the family.

Friends who frequented the Sotomayor home were impressed by two qualities: warmth and aspiration.

Sonia's father, Juan, who worked at a tool and die factory, used to tell her, "Someday, you're going to go to the moon," her cousin Miriam Gonzerelli has said.

Sonia's mother, Celina, who had grown up poor in a sugar-plantation town in Puerto Rico, subscribed to a mail-order encyclopedia set, as well as Nancy Drew books that first piqued Sonia's interest in criminal justice. "She really valued education," Sonia's brother, Juan, said of his mother. "She said, 'Listen. This is your path.' "

After her father's death from a heart problem when Sonia was 9, the family moved to Bronxdale Building 24, where the two children shared a room. The new second-floor apartment looked out over Blessed Sacrament, the private Catholic school both children attended. Celina would watch from the window and pick out Sonia and Juan, three years younger, from the slew of boys and girls in navy-and-plaid uniforms to track their progress home.

"She was eagle-eyed," said Juan. At Bronxdale, only kids from "hard households" dropped out of school, and

most would do no worse than drink cheap wine and Colt 45 malt liquor. Neighborhood crime was still mostly limited to theft of bicycles and lunch money. But, said Juan, "I was always worried." Celina, who was training to be a registered nurse, taught Sonia and Juan to be vigilant outside and check the little mirrors affixed to the walls in the stairwells.

"My mother is like a lioness," said Juan, an allergist in Syracuse. "She was a protective lioness. My mother was going to make sure we never went down the wrong side," he said.

Then heroin surged through the Houses.

"People started sniffing heroin, then skin-popping heroin, then shooting heroin," said Shaunee Butler, an unemployed dental assistant who still lives in Bronxdale. "You would see friends or people you knew and now they're getting high, they're no longer the same person."

A small group of Bronxdale boys, the children of police officers and postal workers, had blossomed from local delinquents into the Black Spades, a drug-dealing gang that was to grow far beyond the Houses.

In the larger Bronx, landlords were setting fire to their own buildings because they could get more insurance money than rent. The refugees flooded to Bronxdale, recalled Juan. As crime rose, the Houses began to fill with people who were strangers to each other. Celina wanted out.

Sonia had tested her way into Cardinal Spellman High School, then a top school in the city.

"Sonia was always very focused, and studious. She was not hanging around in the street," said Ted Shaw, a Spellman classmate who is now a law professor at Columbia University.

In 1970, halfway through Sonia's sophomore year, the family left Bronxdale Houses and joined a wave of people who moved from the projects to Co-op City, a new development, farther north in the Bronx, of more than 15,000 apartments.

"When we left, it was rough here," Juan said as he walked up a path near his old home in Bronxdale. "Where we moved was clearly a step up."

Meanwhile, as the Bronx continued to burn -- in the decade after 1970, the borough lost about a fifth of its housing -- the projects housed the refugees. Vandalism and violence reigned.

Taur Orange, the Sotomayors' neighbor at Bronxdale, visited there after leaving for college, and found the Houses transformed.

Graffiti covered the walls. People feared their neighbors. Most horrifyingly, she said, was finding people she had grown up with losing themselves in drugs.

It seemed "unreal," said Orange, who now directs a recruitment office for low-income and minority students at Fashion Institute of Technology. "I would come home and get updates about people whose lives had just turned. You began to hear about some childhood friends who had died of overdoses."

In 1981, Congress changed eligibility rules to give preference in public housing to the poorest households, which "effectively made public housing the housing of last resort," said Ingrid Gould Ellen, an associate professor of public policy at New York University.

Then came crack.

"It hit hard," said Butler, who can tick off names of people she grew up with who became addicted and ended

up dead.

A federal commission established in the late 1980s argued that the projects had become environments of concentrated poverty. And the wrecking balls began to fall at high-rise projects across the nation.

Sonia Sotomayor's success is exactly the kind that the projects were intended to foster. But could such a story unfold in today's Bronxdale Houses? Many who live here, and experts who study poverty and public housing, are not hopeful.

"Times have changed, kids are into the violent gang lifestyle, so it's harder now to make it out," said Ivellisse Velasquez, who hopes to attend college in Georgia and never come back.