

## A place to call home: Dorothy Day Apts. fine example of supportive housing for poor

BY [Heidi Evans](#) Friday, October 14th 2011

It's safe to say that [Arturo Basilio](#) speaks for everyone in his apartment building: They've all known pretty tough times.

"I love this place. It's a lifesaver," said the restaurant worker and father of three, including 4-year-old Artyairish. "**This place**" is the [Dorothy Day](#) Apartments on Riverside Drive and W. 135th St., supportive housing for the poor done right.

The pioneering 70-unit building serves formerly homeless families and children and those in deep, generational poverty.

With its modern design, Head Start nursery school for little kids, mentors for big kids and social and cultural services for adults, the beautiful turn-of-the-century building is a remarkable lifeline for the 192 people who proudly call it home.

"People can't believe I live here. They think it's for rich people," said tenant [Zoila Rosario](#), who also works as the cook for the 51 pre-schoolers, and whose own son is the first child in the building to go to college. "I say thanks to God."

The building at 583 Riverside is the sixth such project opened in [Washington Heights](#) and [West Harlem](#) by the nonprofit group, Broadway Housing Communities. Tenants pay 30% of their gross monthly income - or between \$300 and \$800 a month - to get a new lease on life. Not surprisingly, there is rarely a vacancy.

It's a peaceful patchwork of seniors, working class parents, survivors of domestic violence, substance abuse and AIDS.

A seventh building with 120 affordable apartments is scheduled to open in 2013 on W. 155th St. in [Harlem's Sugar Hill](#).

The buildings are the brainchild of [Ellen Baxter](#), who began as an advocate for the homeless in 1979 when she walked into the women's bathroom at [Grand Central Terminal](#) and was startled to see dozens of women washing at the sinks and sleeping on cardboard.

Determined to do something, Baxter and other homeless advocates took their passion to the State Supreme Court, which ruled that the city and state must provide emergency shelter to every homeless person.

As a result, several giant shelters were opened and filled, most famously the 1,400-bed [Fort Washington Armory](#) for single men on W. 168th St.

When Baxter visited the armory, she was sickened.

"I was so ashamed that our advocacy created this sea of destitute people, like a refugee camp," she said. "We realized that the litigation was a very crude means to address poverty, and this is not what we had in mind."

In 1983, she founded Broadway Housing Communities, with the simple idea that if people have a stable and safe place to live with services and helpful neighbors onsite, they can build a productive life from there.

"Building decent housing is not rocket science," said Baxter, 57. "There could be many places like Dorothy Day across the city. The great majority of people who are extra low income, if you provide basic things people need, that's all it takes to begin a path out of poverty."

It took the self-effacing but steel-willed Baxter's vision and determination to get this far.

In an only-in-New York story, the Dorothy Day apartments were born when Baxter got a surprise call from [Valerie Delacorte](#), the wife of publishing magnate and [Manhattan](#) philanthropist [George Delacorte](#).

The Hungarian-born actress told Baxter she was troubled by the thousands of people and children who were homeless - and that if she named a building after her dear friend Dorothy Day, whose electric bills she paid during the Depression, she would donate \$1million to Broadway Housing Communities.

Day, born in 1897 in [Brooklyn](#), was an activist for peace and social justice who devoted her life to advocating for poor and homeless people.

That \$1 million enabled Baxter to raise the additional \$16 million it would cost to renovate the gutted building on Riverside Drive and change the lives of hundreds of New Yorkers since 2003.

"She's like a savior," said tenant [Marilyn Denis](#), a retired bookkeeper who works full time as the building's "conierge" in charge of security at the front desk.

Denis' tenant-manager role as the eyes and ears of the building along with six other tenants goes to the heart of Baxter's philosophy: Along with social and educational services, tenants are encouraged to take part in the management of the building where they live.

When a youngster put graffiti on a stairwell wall a few years ago, the entire building rose up. The boy's parents made him wash it off.

"I know every person here, the kids, their friends, which visitors are trouble," said Denis, who is like the building's den mother. No one passes her station without a hello. No visitors enter without proper ID and her approval.

"I have seen homeless tenants move in with all their belongings in just a shopping bag," said Denis. "Now you see them and they're dressed, they go to work, you can see the pride they take in themselves, their kids. It's wonderful."