

Woman Of The Week: ALICIA CHRISTIAN

Alicia Christian, Founder, Dignity Housing, Philadelphia, PA, speaks with Marilyn Russell

By Marilyn Russell

Yesterday, our nation said goodbye to a Civil Rights Icon, a woman who dedicated her life graciously fighting for justice and equality, Coretta Scott King. Today, I thought it fitting to feature Alicia Christian, who is forming her own legacy right here in Philadelphia, advocating for civil rights of the homeless for the last 18 years. She founded the first client-based, indigenous, African-American organization to address homelessness in the United States - Dignity Housing.

Alicia Christian came to my attention via Cozen O'Connor, a top-100 law firm that does pro bono work on behalf of Dignity Housing. Particularly, Neal Colton of Cozen O'Connor, who spearheaded a team of lawyers who committed over 500 hours of work on behalf of Dignity in the midst of their financial crisis. Neal worked very closely with Alicia throughout and had this to say about the experience: "Being able to help wonderful people who work tirelessly to assist and counsel the homeless and often battered members of our community, and redirect the delivery of their services to better achieve Dignity's mission was a very rewarding experience that hopefully will create better financial and operational stability into perpetuity. The greatest reward was being around Alicia Christian whose effort has no boundaries. It's my pleasure to nominate her as Woman of the Week, but truly, she deserves Woman of the Decade."

WOTW: Alicia, tell me about your own experience as a homeless person.

Alicia: You know, it was 22 years ago and luckily was fairly brief. I downplay my own experience because today's homeless seem more entrenched and surrounded by life's deprivations. For me it was an experiential catalyst (a wake up call) for my heightened sensitivity to work with homeless men, women and children in Philadelphia.

I'd been unemployed, lost a home and as a single mother, learned, first hand, the indignity of homelessness and the despair of lost hope. I was lucky however, as I had an arsenal of skills with which to fight back - a college education, a solid previous work history, friends and family that cared, expectations that things could and would get better. I was able to reclaim and restore my life. That experience, however, directed my steps and, in fact, led to my eventual work with homeless individuals and families and my advocacy on their behalf.

WOTW: Tell us a little about your background.

Alicia: I am indeed a product of the Civil Rights era of the 1960s - black, proud, with a well-defined sense of social and economic justice. After college I worked in Washington DC for advocacy organizations like the National Committee for Human Needs and Budget Priorities, the Center for Community Change, the Congressional Black Caucus. I was like a sponge, learning from premier national activists and policy analysts. I was an idealist who honestly believed that right would prevail and persistent organizing could tap the conscience of America regarding inequities surrounding race and class issues.

Of course, the War on Poverty was not won and today's national and regional policies provide me no clear indication that this particular War will even be declared. I returned to Philadelphia in 1983, different, tempered by my own experience with joblessness and no home, though still committed to social change. I saw homeless people on the streets and was haunted by the despair or vacant resignation in their eyes. I secured a part-time job at the Mental Health Association of SE. PA as a research associate, and began attending meetings regarding the homeless. At one such meeting I was introduced to Chris Sprowal, a forceful, charismatic, black homeless man who, attempting the unheard of, began organizing homeless people to speak for themselves.

I joined Sprowal, Sr. Mary Scullion (Project HOME), Gloria Guard (Peoples Emergency Center), activist attorney Steve Gold and others. From 1984 through the early 1990s the Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless and the Union of the Homeless organized and eventually galvanized public attention and support for their efforts to improve the plight of homeless in Philadelphia -- improving conditions in the shelter system; pushing for the creation of a cabinet level city agency to address homeless needs (now called the Office of Emergency Services and Support - OESS); creating an employment support program; establishing a homeless-managed shelter; winning voting rights for the homeless; advocating for appropriate social services; and pushing for affordable housing.

WOTW: Apart from your own experience, what drove you to this avocation?

Alicia: I was incredulous that in New York, NOT New Delhi; in Philadelphia, not depressed areas of the Philippines, that people routinely walked by or stepped around the homeless, without really seeing the hapless person on the street. I could not accept seeing the dispirited homeless women and children whose only habitat was a crowded emergency

shelter and who were hard pressed to envision a better future for their family.

WOTW: How/When was Dignity Housing formed?

Alicia: Dignity Housing, established in 1988, is a direct by-product of the urgent advocacy by homeless people and their allies. A large part of what I know about the homeless street experience in Philadelphia was gathered in discussions with countless numbers of homeless men, women and children during the years leading up to the creation of Dignity Housing. Years ago a homeless man told me, "The first thing you lose is your dignity. On the streets, in abandoned buildings, you can't meet your basic needs in privacy or safely."

WOTW: Can you share some of the obstacles you faced both politically and personally?

Alicia: We founded Dignity Housing in 1988 on the premise that given appropriate support services, mentoring, and affordable, decent transitional housing (over a two to five year period), homeless families and single adults could stabilize their lives, pursue life-enhancing goals in education and employment, and budget and save for a move to permanent housing. We secured a city commitment from a bond issue and other funding to acquire and renovate more than 150 scattered-site, vacant homes and apartments.

We then fought for a commitment of Section 8 rent subsidies from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These would ensure the affordability of the housing stock -capping tenants' out-of-pocket payments at 30% of their income and providing a rent subsidy to Dignity for the balance. From the onset we faced obstacles. First, HUD, and the local Housing Authority, set the total contract rents below prevailing market rates. The inventory while attractive after renovations was broadly scattered throughout the city. It was composed mostly of single-family row homes and property management and maintenance were more costly than in single multi-unit apartment developments.

Then, after committing the first group of Section 8 subsidies, HUD got amnesia and rescinded its commitment of subsidies for the balance of Dignity's inventory. For nearly four years Dignity Housing scraped by receiving rental subsidies on only 45 of the more than 100 online, occupied housing units in its inventory. The income loss was staggering! Despite the eventual resolution of this dispute in Dignity's favor in 1993, our agency still feels the residual, negative impact of years of lost rental income and current rents that are generally set at levels far below other prevailing rents in neighborhoods where our units are located.

Of course in the early years we also faced community resistance to placement of our residents in their neighborhoods. The NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) reaction was initially fierce, with a number of tense and angry community meetings. This resistance eventually faded as most Dignity tenants -following our program requirements-became good neighbors, going to work, school, and involving themselves in civic activities.

In fact, several years ago when one tenant family's time in our program expired and they were to move on, the same group of neighbors who had protested their move into the neighborhood approached me to extend their stay. It's a shame that so many people have difficulty embracing the importance of addressing the housing requirements of citizens with the greatest need. Recognizing that need truly embraces the precept that Philadelphia is the 'City of Brotherly (and Sisterly) Love'-a city whose affordable housing commitment can positively reflect how we live and how we relate to and accept one another.

WOTW: With all these financial restrictions, how do you manage?

Alicia: Dignity's trademarked social services program is highly regarded and is cost effective. Closing program budget gaps, however, is a constant concern. Our agency receives some government contracts, foundation and corporate support, and individual donations. More than 1700 formerly homeless men, women, and children have been helped by Dignity since its inception. Each year we face the challenge of doing more with fewer resources. In 2003, the weight of maintaining an unwieldy, aging rental inventory of homes and apartments throughout city (with low rents and no reserves for capital repairs), along with some decline in philanthropic support after the 911 and other national and international disasters, forced me, along with the deputy director (Beverly Roberts) and the board to consider closing our doors.

I laid off myself, Beverly, and 75% of the staff. I was stunned when the day after receiving their layoff notice, many joined me at Dignity to volunteer time to keep the agency open while they still had to conduct their own job searches. Daily News Columnist Elmer Smith was so moved by this gesture, he referred to it as something out of a Frank Capra movie. The experience, however, was all too real and painful, and lasted nearly five months. The Dignity tenants rallied to our aid, taking their protest to City Council. The late councilman David Cohen, relinquished his time on the Council Floor to our tenants' appeal for resources to help Dignity. The city's Office of Housing and Community Development provided a special grant to help us keep the doors open. Also, Neal Colton, an attorney at Cozen O'Connor spent countless pro bono hours assisting Dignity addressing its debt, funding gaps in the city's support, and even attempted negotiations with the Philadelphia Housing Authority for higher contract rents on our agency's behalf.

WOTW: What drives you to keep up the good fight?

Alicia: Friends, family, devoted co-workers, and most importantly Dignity tenants who, against all odds, succeed. Among graduates of the Dignity program are homeowners, teachers, social workers, retail workers, professional and para-

professionals in the health care field (Include one medical doctor), police officers, and a PH.D.

My daughter, Nicole, is also source of pride and inspiration. She is now a second year medical student at University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. We have gone through lean years together. Her early playmates were often children in the city's shelter system and activists and allies who bunked at our home in the midst of organizing drives. My daughter survived my 18-hour workdays and what she calls my 'avocation, not job'. My mother, who passed away last year, was a wonderful support. Nicole is proof positive that 'it takes village to raise a child'.

WOTW: What's on the horizon for Dignity?

Alicia: As long as the needs of homeless families and individuals are evident, Dignity must raise funds to address those needs. In 1991, our deputy director Beverly Roberts and agency supporters established a Dignity Housing Scholarship Fund. Since that time we have awarded more than \$160,000 to Dignity tenants to pursue advanced trade skills, Associate and Bachelor degree programs. More than 60 tenants and former tenants have completed degree programs or substantially benefited from this effort.

On Sunday, February 12th, 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Dignity is convening a Valentine's Day Jazz Buffet fundraiser. The event will be held at the Commodore Barry Club, Carpenter Lane & Emlen Streets. It will feature a buffet dinner and the music of the popular, local jazz ensemble, Ralph Penn & Friends. Tickets are \$45 per person and interested parties should call 215-242-3140 to purchase tickets by this Friday, 2/9/06. Proceeds will benefit the Dignity Scholarship Fund.

We are also excited about a major fundraiser planned April 21, 2006. This event will recognize the tremendous support and pro bono legal services to Dignity rendered by Neal Colton, of Cozen "O Connor. Information about this event will be announced on our website, www.dignityhousing.org soon.

Each month we receive urgent telephone inquiries from 100 or more homeless individuals who seek admission to our program. We can only help a small number. Today, we are working to identify capital funds to refurbish 20 aging, vacant homes in our inventory. Eighteen years ago, our units were a source of pride in neighborhoods and want to maintain these standards of excellence. One of our newer developments, Dignity II (16 apartment units in Germantown) that was brought on line five years ago has evidenced problems no longer covered under the construction warranties. The problems displaced our entire basement -level after school program that serves over 25 children and teens. We seek support from construction companies and donors to address this.

Government contracts and a number of foundation grants that support Dignity's social service program have some match requirements. Each year the agency struggles to close the gaps in funding. We need and welcome the support of concerned donors.

With the help of supporters and donors, I am confident that Dignity Housing can maintain and expand its commitment to "Building Community, Creating Leaders, and Making Change." Formerly homeless families and individuals can, with our help, move up and out of poverty.

If you'd like to nominate a Woman of the Week, please e-mail me at mrussell@knight-ridder.com.