

Temple Community and Norris Homes

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Tyler's Community Arts course is a regular teaching gig for me in the Fall semester. The course enrolls students ranging from first semester freshmen to PhD students, but the majority of the students are young and new to campus. Understanding communities we aren't from and our relationship to them is a critical focus early in the class, so we always discuss what they've been told about the community surrounding Temple.

Students often relay stories of well-meaning campus police who have advised their parents of certain boundary lines that are unsafe to cross, or orientation language that implies a certain sense of danger at different times of the day. They're told that when they go out, it is wise to maintain the company of peers. Their parents sometimes sign up for TU Alerts and call them when a warning is sent. Students will mention alerts that they've received in the week that they've been on campus with a sense of concern that they may be surrounded by danger and criminal activity. Though I don't want them to disregard warnings, I feel compelled to ask: have you received TU Alerts when a member of the community is doing something nice?



Jennie Shanker and the Norris Homes Historic Marker Mural,
photo by Nathan McChristie

This semester, the death of Jenna Burleigh brought a new weight to this discussion about community. We talked about the vulnerability one experiences shifting from a community they're familiar with to one they don't understand. How at home they may know who they can trust, where to go or who to reach out to if they're in trouble. There, they may know a gem of a human being who strangers misread as threatening due to perhaps something eccentric about their behavior or their outward appearance, or they may know a highly magnetic person who they steer clear of, having experienced something of their character. We talked about issues in missing or misinterpreting cues, or in trusting a stranger who is outside of one's known community.

Though we often speak of "the community" surrounding Temple, there are actually several communities that border each of Temple's campuses. Norris Homes is one of them. Norris is just east of campus, from Berks Street to Diamond, and from Marvine Street to 10th. The only guard kiosk on Main Campus faces it, and commuters who take the regional rail to and from campus walk past it twice daily.

Norris Homes was built in the early 1950s, and is run by the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA). Currently the site can accommodate 147 families. Those who have been at Temple for a while may remember the 11-story tower building that was located between 11th and Alder and Norris and Diamond. In 2011, residents were given 90 days to evacuate the tower before it was demolished. The rest of the Homes will be razed within the next two years. Residents have been under the impression that by the end of this month, with the exception of seniors, they would all be relocated. Plywood began to replace windows and doors over a year ago, and the pace of relocation has reached a crescendo in the past two months. At a meeting with PHA last Thursday, October 5th, residents learned that they could stay for another 90 days. Beyond that point, 30 day notices would be issued when houses need to be emptied for demolition.

The changes at Norris have been part of a Neighborhood Choice Initiative grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The future of public housing is in "mixed income communities," as the planning that created public housing projects like Norris was based on racist real estate practices. That housing embedded these racist practices in the city as a structural force that has maintained segregated communities to this day. The new housing at Norris, which will be built by a developer through a public-private partnership, will bring a combination of PHA, Section 8, first-time homeowner, and market rate housing from Marvine Street to Marshall going east-west, and Berks to Diamond north-south. The philosophy behind the plan is that new mixed income areas create urban environments where anyone can feel welcome, so fewer parts of the city would be deemed to be less desirable than others.

The upcoming change at Norris represents a significant re-engineering of a predominantly African-American community and a section of Philadelphia, and it marks the beginning of the end of public housing projects that are exclusively for low-income residents. It marks a radical shift in the history of this part of the city, and of public housing in this country.

Neighborhood Choice is an Obama-era program that was meant to fix problems with HUD's previous Hope VI housing program. Hope VI, like Choice, relocated residents from projects during the construction of new units, promising those who left in good standing replacement housing and a right to return. But under Choice there were fewer replacement units built than there were tenants who wanted to return, so former residents found that some of their replacements were not, as they had been led to believe, in their original communities. In addition, some residents found that when they tried to return, they were subject to credit and criminal background checks which created further barriers to attaining what Hope VI had promised. Neighborhood Choice is supposed to insure a one-to-one ratio for replacement housing built for residents who want to return, and if they are in good standing when they leave, they will not be subjected to any further requirements to return to the new housing.

The original plan for relocating Norris residents was thoughtfully designed in collaboration with Donna Richardson, the president of the Norris Resident Council and a fierce advocate for the community. The multi-phase plan guaranteed that most residents would only have to move once, going directly from their current housing into the new construction. New housing was to be built in the many vacant lots east of 9th Street. Residents could choose to move to this new housing near Norris, or to other public housing throughout the United States. Every aspect of their move would be facilitated and paid for, including the cost of having professional movers for each residence. The plan was to complete construction on a number of new homes and then move Norris residents directly into the new housing. That would leave a block of Norris open for demolition where further new construction could occur. Through this shifting of construction sites over several phases, very few people would need to be relocated, which meant moving twice if they wanted to stay within the community.

Unfortunately, the construction fell over a year behind schedule, and after the 2016 Presidential election, it became clear that it would be unwise to depend on an extension of the timeframe for the grant, so the plan would have to be completed on time. Because of this, everyone at Norris, except for senior citizens, must move twice, relocating to temporary housing so demolition and new construction can happen at a faster pace. Residents who want to return to the new housing will have to move to other PHA projects for up to two years before they're able to move back. Those who don't want to return to the new construction can choose to live in "scatter sites," PHA managed properties that are not part of housing projects.

Several residents have recounted how three senior citizens passed away within a short period of time after relocating prior to the demolition of "The Building", the tower that was demolished in 2011. They moved to places where neighbors weren't watching and tending to them as they did at Norris. The vulnerability that comes with a shift in community can have high stakes, especially for those who are already frail. The decision to try to keep senior citizens at Norris seems to be based on the desire to have them move only once. There will be a senior citizens-only building located at 9th and Berks. Ground has been broken on the site, and the move-in date is rumored to be anywhere from 6 months to one year away. There is concern among some residents around the prospect of the seniors living in an essentially vacant Norris for a period of time. One senior told me that she felt safe because the area is covered by the Philadelphia Police, as well as PHA's and Temple's security. She said she's never lived in a safer community.

Three weeks ago, a resident, Ms. B., and her family were moving to their relocation site, a house between 8th and 9th street in the Richard Allen Housing projects. Ms. B. had lived in the same house at Norris for 19 years and had raised all her children there.

When everything from Ms. B.'s house was loaded on the truck, she told me that she didn't have any transportation to get her family to their new home. Everyone squeezed into my car, including Beyonce, the cat. As we drove toward it, we talked about the new neighborhood. Ms. B. said in a wary voice that she hoped when we got there that people weren't out (on their stoops/in the streets). I asked if she had met her new neighbors when she visited, and she said she hadn't and she planned to walk into her house, close the door and keep it that way.

At Norris, if Ms. B. was home her door was open. She's a gifted hairdresser, and adults and kids go to her regularly to have their hair done. Her daughter, who will graduate from high school in the spring, formed a neighborhood dance troupe when she was 12 years old, and has been choreographing hip-hop performances that have engaged many younger girls, and a few boys, over the years. Kids have to try out for the troupe, and there is status associated with being a member. If you've walked down Berks Street to get to the SEPTA station, you've probably seen them practicing outside of Ms. B.'s house on Warnock Street. When the weather was bad, they'd need to use the small living room area inside the house to prepare for a performance. The room was too small for everyone to stand in at once, so they'd take individual turns while the rest of the troupe watched from the entrance to the stairwell and next room. Once all the furniture was moved onto the truck, the room's floor was so worn in the area they danced, the white plastic showed through the linoleum's woodgrain surface pattern.

Being in a new house pointed to things they'd lived without during their 19 years at Norris. Ms. B. showed me that the kitchen had two main lighting fixtures plus lights under the cabinets and a garbage disposal. Each room at Norris had only one central light fixture, and basic appliances. The Richard Allen house is three stories tall instead of two, and it has a large backyard. It is a significant step up from the living conditions at Norris, and there are even some other Norris families who have moved nearby. By moving there, kids will be able stay at their current schools, and they can continue to take advantage of the free afterschool program at the Norris Homes Community Center, which will not be demolished before a new one is built. Though the central location of their lives has shifted, they are within a radius that allows for continuity in parts of their daily lives.

Temple will also still be part of their lives, as it's impossible to live anywhere in the area without having some level of interaction with it. Norris residents' relationship with the University has often been complicated. Over the years, a number of services and outreach programs have bridged parts of these two entities, but divisions have remained and on both sides. The programs have not succeeded (and perhaps were never intended) in creating a sense of community between the two entities, and people from each side of the divide have felt discomfort as neighbors. Though most Norris residents may no longer live directly in Temple's shadow, many of the kids go to Dunbar or Duckery, as well as the free after-school program and summer camp at the Community Center that, sites where Temple's School of Education engages. Some residents use Temple for their healthcare, and most know people who work at the University. Many wish they could find work there themselves.

The Community Center may no longer bear the name Norris. Isaac Norris' wealth was gained by being a force in the slave trade from Jamaica in the colonial era. The Norris family continued to trade slaves until 1732. As with recent controversy around confederate statues and images of our late mayor Frank Rizzo, there are questions about how to deal with this history as part of our civic space. Former residents who lived at Norris since it first opened in the '50s return regularly for an annual cabaret, reunion and cookout. Many have had success in their careers and have entered into the middle and upper classes, some have gained recognition as athletes, artists, or musicians. Being from Norris is something that is meaningful to both past and current residents. "Norris" is part of their identity, and the recent understanding of the Norris family's colonial history hasn't spread through the community. Removing the Norris name from the Center and new housing removes the name of a longstanding predominantly African-American community from the site that has acted for many as their place of community origin.

The importance of community in our lives is under-appreciated and often overlooked. It is something that needs to be examined, understood, and challenged. Moving from a community where we have history, familiarity, and comfort to one where these elements are lacking represents a profound change in one's life. Transitioning from one to another takes time, and during that time we

are more vulnerable than many of the people we're surrounded by. We should be considering questions that surround the transition from one community to another when we advise incoming students. We should be more informed about and engaged with the many communities that surround Temple. Who are the people in the neighboring communities and what are their lives like? Why do we feel we share so little in common? How is this reinforced? Is it possible to understand our relationship in a new way, or build mutually rewarding relationships that soften boundaries?

Temple has an office that is dedicated to the University's relations with the communities it borders, but relationship problems can't be fixed from the top down. Faculty with the expertise and sensitivity to connect with our neighbors need to be encouraged and supported in work that builds bridges that increase familiarity and mutual trust. Forming connections in new communities allows one to find one's place in them. There are risks in operating outside of one's "own" community, but approaches that fortify borders and enforce the judging of appearances stunt the possibility of discovering and developing the potential for new relationships. They foster a lack of trust, magnify inconsequential differences, and reinforce unjust imbalances. They limit us in being able to mutually recognize and share what we can offer each other, and what we can build together. We have the ability to choose between keeping the door closed, or open.

More information about the Norris Homes and Professor Shanker's work can be found at the Norris Homes Web Archive at www.norrishomesphilly.com.