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PHOTO BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

New Columbia advocate Leslie Esinga talks with Robert Gray, an employee of Big City Produce located on the commercial ground floor of a new mixed-use building that also contains housing in the New Columbia neighborhood of north Portland.

Fighting a Stigma

continued ▲ from Front

Esinga argues that baggage from the World War II-era Villa housing project is worth paying homage to, but the real struggles for New Columbia in her eyes are a microcosm of the same critical issues facing the city and country as a whole.

She sees a population largely of color that has been repeatedly shut out of employment and affordable housing opportunities, and now works to create options in New Columbia's 82-acre neighborhood where about 25 percent of the residents own their dwellings.

"We do everything we can to respond to community concerns, reach out to youth, find jobs for residents and keep everyone safe," Esinga says. "There's no magic to creating community."

Talk with a dozen residents of New Columbia, and most will tell you that they're happy with the progress of the neighborhood and feel safe. The neighborhood isn't without its detractors, however.

New Columbia resident Judy Badon was making plans to move out as her son Dominique faced

attempted-murder charges.

Badon feels that a two-page list of HAP apartment-dweller rules, along with a near 24-hour patrol by North Precinct officers, creates an environment ripe for fear. Citing her African-American son's six-foot, 235-pound frame, she said profiling was involved in his arrest at the family's home last month.

Police said a crime-scene gun and bullets can be linked to a getaway car that a group of friends were using. A trial was set for June 6.

Esinga notices that people perceive the police based on their personal experiences. With the inherently human element of New Columbia, she sees potential for anything to happen on any given day.

Acknowledging that criminals have been attracted to the project especially during the summer, she supports training of the regular "Feet on the Street" volunteer patrols to deal with the neighborhood's approximately dozen home-spoken languages and 22 countries of origin.

"You can't expect there won't be

bumps in the road," she says. "If there were a rash of move-outs, I'd be concerned."

Another HAP employee, Arlene Gregory, is assigned to advocate for parenting or housekeeping issues in a way similar to a social worker to prevent complaints or larger problems. When she hears about or sees violations, Gregory's goal is to find the appropriate services, whether for mental health, drug and alcohol counseling, or mediation.

"I go to them and tell them who I am, and that I'm not there to kick them out, but to find out what the core issues are," she says.

Working in the neighborhood since the 1990s, Gregory approaches her work with a feeling of understanding about what it will take for self-sufficiency to be reached.

She expects that her job would be phased out at some point, maybe in a decade, saying, "I live in a community that doesn't have someone like me, however, in a new community, in a mixed community, some people have different ideas about what it means to be a neighbor."



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