



"Been in a place so long and then have to go to a strange place... I just hate to move," Lillian Veney says. She has lived at Buckingham Village for 12 years; it will be razed for upscale housing.

Neighborhood's Guardian Cast Out of All She Loves

Arlington Redevelopment Puts 'Mama' and Friends on Uncertain Path

By ANNIE GOWEN
Washington Post Staff Writer

The letter came in February, and she already knew what it was, even though she can't read and her granddaughter had to tell her later what it said.

In the lawyered prose of a real estate developer, the letter informed Lillian Veney that her apartment building in North Arlington was being torn down to make way for luxury townhomes. She had four months to move out.

Veney, a retired oyster shucker and maid, was being evicted from the home where she has lived for more than 12 years, where Veney and her friend Marie — before Marie was evicted, too — sat guard at Fourth and Thomas streets every day from 2 to 6 p.m.

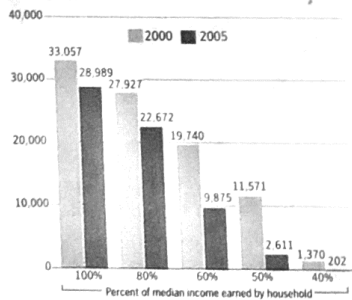
In a county that has lost nearly half its affordable apartments in the past five years to redevelopment, Veney's story is a familiar tale. In recent weeks, however, she has become a living emblem for the crusade to save her complex, Buckingham Village. When Veney tells her story at rallies and meetings across the county, even hard-hearted bureaucrats have been moved to tears.

Veney is 79. Because she lives on \$541 a month from Social Security, her world teeters on the brink even on a good day, but now it seems to be collapsing around her. In Buckingham Village, at least she could cope. There's a drugstore and a market and a community center where she volunteers and the mostly Latino clientele call her "Mama."

See 'MAMA', B8, Col. 1

Reduced Affordability

Number of rental units in Arlington County affordable to each income group, 2000-05



SOURCE: Arlington County Housing Division

THE WASHINGTON POST

Poor, 79 and Victim of Housing Boom

'MAMA'. From B1

"I really did feel sad," she says. She's sitting amid carefully sealed boxes stacked on old carpet. "I wondered, where I was going?"

As if finding another apartment at her age and income wasn't going to be hard enough, there was another complicating factor: She has a dog.

She might have been able to find an apartment in a nearby complex administered by the county-sponsored housing corporation. But she was told there was a no-dogs policy, and Precious — a gift from a relative four years ago — is a non-negotiable companion. Veney scrimps pennies out of the \$109 a month she has left over after rent to take her Shih Tzu to the dog groomer.

"I'm always alone and by myself, and she's my company-keeper," she says, giving Precious a pat. "She's a good watchdog. Did she bark at you? Anybody come to that door, she bark at them."

Paradigm Development Co., which co-owns the complex, wants to demolish Buckingham Village's low-slung brick buildings and replace them with townhouses and luxury apartments. In dense Arlington, buildable land is increasingly scarce and valuable — the land on which Veney's apartment sits is worth about \$4.5 million an acre. The townhouses could run as much as \$1 million.

"Activists formed a "Save Buckingham" group to fight to keep the 1940s-era buildings, arguing that they are historic and shouldn't be torn down. Hundreds of families are set to be displaced in the coming months if the second phase of the plan is approved by the Arlington County Board, but developer Stanley W. Slotter, Paradigm's president, said he will set aside 208 apartments for low-income residents when the project is finally expected to be built in the next few years.

"There are some folks who have been in the community a long time, and it is a hard sell for them," Slotter said of the evictions. Slotter said that he tried to help Veney



Ashanti Veney-Baah, 2, sits with her great-grandmother, Lillian Veney, outside Buckingham Village in North Arlington.

but that she said she needed a building with an elevator. "I'm responsible for the fact that she had to be relocated, but she could have stayed in the neighborhood if she had wanted to," he said.

Veney's story is commonplace in many ways, so it's hard to say why it's touched so many. When she testified at a recent county meeting about her plight, several onlookers were moved to tears. County Board member Walter Tejada (D) called it his worst moment on the board.

"Here is this wonderful lady, a longtime resident, liked by everyone, and she happens to be low-income and happens to be a minority," he said. "It really breaks your heart to see a senior citizen having to go through this."

Maybe her story has touched people because she's such a fixture in the community, guarding the corner the way she does, sitting on a white wicker chair that's curved like a throne. Maybe it's the dog. Or maybe it's Veney herself.

She's small, barely over five feet. When you hug her, you can feel her shoulder blades under your hand.

On a recent day, she is wearing a white head scarf and T-shirt, gray sweat pants decorated with red-and-green Christmas trees and slip-on tennis shoes.

She shuffles slowly amid the aging brick buildings. The trash bins are filled with dis-

"I've been 37 years in Arlington County," she says, pointing out the next building slated to be torn down. "I'm not happy. Been in a place so long and then have to go to a strange place. I know everyone 'round here, and they know me."

She stops. Her face creases up like a napkin somebody threw away.

"I just hate to move," she says.

Longtime area housing activist Lois Athey said that forced moves are always difficult, particularly for seniors, who can suffer health problems as a result. The community won't rebound from such a loss, she added.

"She's the guardian of the neighborhood, and you can't replace that," Athey said.

Slotter's company had prepared a plan for the evictions — including providing up to \$1,800 for moving costs — that it presented to residents at meetings this spring. Representatives also hired a coordinator from a local nonprofit group to help residents find new homes. Despite that, Veney's search for an apartment seemed like a lonely quest.

One day, she walked far up Wilson Boulevard, stopping each time her legs hurt, to see a building. There were no vacancies. She asked in the office at Historic Ballston Park at Buckingham, but there was a "no pets" policy.

On nights when she was worried, she'd take tiny colorful triangles of fabric out of a basket and sew them into squares. She has made quilts for years. She taught herself the skill by watching the nimble fingers of the blind aunt who raised her back in tiny Farnham, Va., in the Northern Neck.

"When I get upset and I'm by myself, I just sit back and sew" the squares, she says. "I made 50 of them one night."

Finally, with a daughter's help, she found a one-bedroom at Columbia Commons, a brick mid-rise on a hill off Columbia Pike. There's a view — you can just see the tiptop of the Washington Monument — and a pool and a picnic ground where she can sit with her dog. One of her granddaughters lives close by, and she will be able to walk to Community Church of God, where she attends Bible study. The rent is \$1,080 some-



Every afternoon, Veney and her friend Marie Weekley gathered outside their apartment complex, keeping tabs on things. Weekley found a new place nearby after the eviction notice.

er. But the grocery store is a 20-minute walk. She will also have to navigate a steep hill to get to the CVS.

And she'll be three miles from Buckingham Village and the community center that has become a central focus of her life. Buckingham's community center was established 15 years ago by the county to help the neighborhood's residents, most of them immigrant families just learning English.

But Veney has made it her own, they say. She helps hand out fliers and sorts surplus food that is distributed — including a bag of canned food she can take home herself. She brings her salty corn bread and baked beans to potlucks, setting them on tables crowded with pupusas and empanadas. She attends community meetings without fail. She danced the salsa and merengue at the surprise birthday party they threw for her in March.

"People nicknamed her 'Mama' because she's everybody's mom," said Connie Freeman, the center's community outreach specialist. "Whenever something happens in the community, they all go to her to find out if it's true. She found out about the evic-

tion. Veney says she's going to keep coming back.

"I'm going to learn how to catch that bus. That green bus that comes over here," Veney says, referring to the county bus. She smiles. "Connie (Freeman) said she'd bring me."

"Realistically, Veney probably won't be able to go to the center for much longer "because of transportation," Freeman said. "It's easy for her to walk here now. She's right in the middle of things. It's a great loss to the community."

Veney's almost all packed now. She stands amid the boxes in her apartment and points out what's left to do. She's done all the packing herself — carting in boxes from the complex's maintenance office.

Slotter said his company will help Veney move, but she seems confused. She's fuzzy on the details.

She looks around.

"Yup," she says. "Just a few more days."

Then she gives in to the lure of the bright spring day. She clips Precious's green leash onto her collar. The dog wiggles in delight. Veney goes outside to take her seat on the corner on the white chair that looks like a



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