

Summer 2009



FAIR HOUSING NEWS

Produced by the Fair Housing Center of West Michigan

Fair Housing: Strengthening the Fabric of Our Community

2009 Fair Housing Awards

On April 22, 2009, the Fair Housing Center of West Michigan presented two 2009 Fair Housing Awards at its *22nd Annual Fair Housing Luncheon & Workshop Series*, underwritten by the Grand Rapids Association of Realtors and Mercantile Bank. Over 360 people watched as FHCWM Board Members Suzanne Schultz and Floriza Genautis presented the awards to two unsuspecting fair housing advocates.

Judy Barnes, CEO of the Home and Building Association of Greater Grand Rapids (HBA), was presented the



Outstanding Individual Award for her advocacy in the fair housing arena and for supporting equal, fair and affordable housing for all. Judy has given her time, talent and resources along with a tremendous amount of dedication to housing issues. She has courageously taken on issues related to diversity and inclusion. Judy's passion for ensuring equal housing opportunity and her commitment to fair housing was integrated into every program and activity at the HBA, resulting in a membership actively engaged in making housing opportunity a reality for all people.

The **Area Agency on Aging of West Michigan (AAAWM)** received the Outstanding Organization Award which was accepted by Assistant Director Jackie O'Connor. The AAWM has been working



with the FHCWM on a pioneering fair housing project for seniors. The initial proposal from the FHCWM, to specifically address housing discrimination within the senior population, was unlike any of the

other senior millage projects the AAWM was funding at the time. They embraced the project and, rather than trying to fit the FHCWM's project into the framework for other Agency funded projects, took the time to sit down with FHCWM staff and creatively develop relevant ways to gauge the unique project's effectiveness. The AAWM has exemplified a real spirit for partnership on the project which has been one of the keys to its success. Their dedication to collaboration and partnership for the betterment of their clients and their willingness to share resources has greatly raised awareness about fair housing issues in the community and has resulted in a strong, cohesive effort to fight housing discrimination against seniors.

Kick Off of the 2009 Membership Drive

After the Award presentations, **Dale Zahn** and **Yvonne Sims**, co-chairs of the 2009 Membership Drive, officially kicked off the drive. Mr. Zahn shared the impact that fair housing has had on his own life, and stressed the need for continued fair housing services. Ms. Sims followed up with the importance of supporting fair housing through Fair Housing Center membership.

Highest Workshop Attendance Yet!

The FHCWM had over 180 participants registered for one of three different morning workshops — that was 36 more attendees than in 2008! The *Foreclosure in Our Neighborhoods: A Revitalizing Community Response* workshop was moderated by Lee Nelson Weber (Dyer Ives Foundation). This workshop provided information from recent research and reports which investigated the impact of foreclosure in our communities; it also explored the causes and realities of the foreclosure crisis. Panelists discussed the importance of a comprehensive strategy that

includes foreclosure prevention and intervention as well as the stabilization of and reinvestment in our neighborhoods as the local impact grows. Panelists featured: Darel Ross (Lighthouse Communities), Kym Spring (Foreclosure Response) and former State Representative Steve Tobocman.

The Hate Crimes in our Neighborhoods: Enhancing Awareness and Prevention Strategies workshop was moderated by Doretha Ardoin (Coldwell Banker-AJS Schmidt and FHCWM Board President).

This workshop discussed community responses to hate crimes, recent case overviews and personal experiences dealing with hate crimes. Hate crimes, and actions to take in response of hate crimes, were discussed on national, state, and local levels. Panelists featured: Sherrill Frost-Brown (National Fair Housing Alliance), Darla Robinson (Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance Board), John Obee (Wood, Kull, Herschfus, Obee & Kull), and Kelvin Scott (Director, Michigan Department of Civil Rights).

The Accessible Housing: Building New Opportunities workshop was moderated by Joanne Feutz (Disability Advocates of Kent County). The need for and importance of accessible housing was addressed in depth. Because of the needs of an aging population and concerns about the civil rights of people with disabilities, the lack of accessible housing has become a critical issue for planners, policy makers, and our communities. National testing projects, recent court decisions and settlements, and local resources and investigations were presented. *(article continued on p. 2)*

**Kent County
Senior Millage**

...FHCWM Notes & News...

Morning Workshops a Success!

(continued from page 1) Panelists featured: Anita Schmaltz (Miami Valley Fair Housing Center, Ohio), Margaret Biggs (ZeroStep/Disability Advocates of Kent County), Regina Davis (Inner City Christian Federation), and Lucia Rios (Disability Network/Lakeshore). This workshop was made possible through the support of the Kent County Senior Millage.

Nancy Haynes, FHCWM Executive Director, introduced the keynote speaker: Dr. Nandinee K. Kutty, co-editor of the book Segregation: The Rising Costs for America. Dr. Kutty is an economist and policy consultant, specializing in the areas of fair housing, economic mobility, impact of housing-related factors on family well-being, Social Security, housing for the elderly, and macroeconomic stabilization. In her speech, Dr. Kutty shared the following:

8 Points on the Value of Integration to America:

1. Integration lets America be America
2. Integrated Neighborhoods Result in Opportunities for Lower Income and other Historically Disadvantaged Groups
3. Living in Integrated Neighborhoods of Opportunity Creates a Sense of Efficacy and Control
4. Housing Integration Results in School Integration with Benefits for All Students
5. Fair Housing for a Healthy Nation!
6. Segregation Cordons Off Spaces within the Nation Where Lower Standards, and Degraded Human Values are Tolerated
7. Fair Housing for Better Human Capital Development
8. Diverse Communities are Important for the Competitiveness of a Region in the National and Global Economy

Dr. Kutty also shared an article she wrote, "*Fair, Green, Smart—Housing in the 21st Century*." She proposes that housing policy be based on these three principles:

- Fair refers to fair housing, and a pro-active enforcement of the principle of non-discrimination in housing markets, home mortgage lending markets, and home insurance markets.
- Green refers to deliberate efforts to protect the environment, to conserve resources, and use renewable resources.
- Smart refers to adopting principles of smart growth such as using space efficiently, creating affordable rental and ownership housing, and building livable communities that are conducive to healthy community interactions.

The full text of Dr. Kutty's speech and her article are available at www.fhcwm.org on the "Luncheon & Workshop Series" page.

FHCWM Welcomes and Goodbyes

We are pleased to welcome **Troy Zapolski** of Land & Company as the newest member of the FHCWM Board of Directors.

In February, the FHCWM hired a new Enforcement Assistant, **Lucia Belassi**. Lucia is a native of Uruguay and a 2008 University of Michigan graduate. Lucia, with her easy-going attitude and eagerness to learn, has been a delightful addition to the staff. **Welcome Lucia, we are very excited to have you with us!**

April brought even greater changes.

Regina Davis, Director of Enforcement, announced that she would be leaving the Fair Housing Center. Regina coordinated the Enforcement arm of the FHCWM for 10 years. Before becoming a staff member, Regina volunteered as a Fair Housing Tester. Her commitment to fair housing and her dedication to the testers will be difficult to replace. **We wish you the best of luck, Regina, you will be sorely missed!**

April also brought promotions for both **Elizabeth Vezino**, former Operations Manager, and Lucia Belassi. Elizabeth is now the Director of Advocacy and Lucia has become a full time staff member as our new Test Coordinator. Elizabeth is now involved in both the administrative and enforcement sides of the FHCWM and Lucia is coordinating all of the Center's testing. **Congratulations Elizabeth and Lucia!**

National Fair Housing News

Gordonsville, VA - An African American couple won a jury verdict of \$250,000 on May 29, 2009. The couple alleged that because they are African American their landlord removed all their belongings while they were out of town attending a funeral and burned them in the front yard. The couple believes that when the landlord rented to them through a real estate agent he did not know they were African American, and began to discriminate against them upon learning of their race. They alleged that the landlord and his relatives began to harass them, informing them that they could not have friends or family visit and warning them that the property was being watched by neighbors, who used racial epithets, swear words and other derogatory terms when referring to the couple. The landlord also allowed neighbors and relatives to hunt and use firearms near the house.

The jury deliberated less than two hours before returning a verdict with \$200,000 in compensatory damages and \$50,000 in

punitive damages against the landlord. Essential to the evidence presented were photographs of the lifetime of possessions removed and burned, including a photo of the landlord sitting in a lawn chair next to a heap of the ashes of their belongings. The landlord denied that race played any role in the incident, claiming the couple had left the property after failing to pay rent and removing most of their belongings, the remainder of which he burned. Although the jury did not find a violation of the Fair Housing Act, they did find the landlord guilty of violating state law through trespassing and breach of contract.



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...FHCWM Notes & News...

Foreclosure Response: Don't Wait!

If you are at risk or have missed even one HOUSE payment, don't wait! Call Home Repair Services at 616-241-2601 ext. 0. That is the message of Foreclosure Response, a non-profit effort connecting residents with various community resources and advocating to stop foreclosures in Kent County. Partners include neighborhood groups, churches, non-profit housing and service agencies, foundations, city and county governments, legal aid resources, banks and real estate professionals. Home Repair Services is a non-profit with housing specialists who provide FREE assistance to work with your lender—acting sooner rather than later can result in a much higher success rate. Renters who believe they are being evicted unfairly due to foreclosure should contact Legal Aid of West Michigan at 616-774-0672.

According to a new report, "The Foreclosure Crisis in Kent County: A Call for a Comprehensive Response," each day, ten Kent County families lose their homes to foreclosure. Other facts included in the report:

- Nearly 2,000 residential foreclosures occurred in Kent County—5.5% of all the homes in the county—in the first six months of 2008, continuing a dramatic upward foreclosure trend that has now spanned five years.
- Each foreclosure of a single family home costs a municipality an estimated \$34,000 for expenses such as police and fire protection, social services, and inspections and code enforcement.

- *People of color are disproportionately represented among subprime borrowers. This means they end up paying, over the life of a mortgage, from \$50,000 to \$100,000 more in interest than average borrowers—resources that could have been used to send children to college, start a business, or offer the next generation a financial head start. Instead, all of that equity is transferred from the family to the lender.*
- *In December 2008, nearly 70% of the homes sold in the Grand Rapids area were in the foreclosure process—no doubt contributing to the fact that the average home sale price declined 25% between 2006 and 2008.*
- *Regardless of whether they have long-term leases and are current on their rent payments, renters in foreclosed properties are often forced to move on very short notice.... Compounding the problem is the fact that few resources are available to assist renters impacted by foreclosures.*

This and other data underlines the need for a comprehensive foreclosure recovery plan that addresses prevention, intervention, stabilization, and revitalization strategies. To learn more and view this report, visit www.foreclosureresponse.org and click on "Reports."



Nuts & Bolts of Fair Lending

Brief History: The U.S.'s first fair lending law, the **Civil Rights Act of 1866**, was passed shortly after the Civil War ended. It states: "All citizens of the United States shall have the same right, in every State and Territory, as is enjoyed by white citizens thereof to inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold and convey real and personal property."

In April 1968, one week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Congress passed the **Federal Fair Housing Act**, prohibiting discrimination in the sale, rental or financing of housing based on race, color, national origin or religion. Amendments were later passed that added protection for gender, familial status and disability status.

The need to provide protection against discrimination on the bases of sex and marital status prompted the passage of the **Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA)** in 1974. The ECOA applies to virtually all aspects of credit transactions and is designed to help assure that sex, marital status (and the added categories of race, color, religion, national origin, handicap status, age, public assistance status or previous ECOA complainant status) are not used as a basis for the denial of a credit application.

Protected Classes: The various fair housing laws identify a number of personal characteristics that may not be used as a basis for granting credit. In Michigan, these include: race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, familial status, marital status, handicap status, public assistance status, or status as a previous Fair Housing Act or ECOA complainant.

Unlawful Discrimination: Among other things, the laws prohibit overt acts or statements of discrimination and differences in treatment. Overt acts might include employees intentionally ignoring a wheelchair using loan

applicant or a male loan officer who inappropriately touches a female loan applicant.

Overt statements of unlawful discrimination that could be made by a person in the lending industry are:

- "No, that is an unsafe neighborhood—ever since Mexicans started moving in. We don't make any conventional loans there—mostly FHA or VA loans."

- "You probably won't want to consider buying a property yourself, the upkeep would be too much without a husband to help you."

Difference in treatment is the most important concept to understand when considering fair lending laws, which are concerned primarily with whether or not persons who are members of a protected class are treated differently because of their protected group status. Fair lending laws do not raise the issue of the overall quality of treatment of customers; they only require that the financial institution treat each person in the same way, without regard to the person's race, religion, sex, etc.

Practices Lenders Should Avoid:

- Discouraging consumers in protected classes from applying for loans.

- Refusing to make a loan to a qualified person because of a protected class.

- Lending money on different terms and conditions than those terms offered to another person with similar income, expenses, credit history, and collateral.

- Relying on property appraisals that consider the racial makeup of the neighborhood.

- Refusing to consider alimony, child support, or other separate maintenance payment or income sources.

- Targeting specific cases or segments of the population with inferior products.

How can you help? Contact the FHCWM to report discrimination or request training.

Save the Dates! Upcoming Fair Housing Events

Lakeshore Friends of Fair Housing Breakfast: Save the Date!

The 3rd Annual *Lakeshore Friends of Fair Housing: Opening Doors to Housing Choice* breakfast will take place on **Wednesday, September 16, 2009** at the Historic Baker Lofts Building (formerly Till Midnight). This year's event will feature renowned fair housing attorney **Steve Dane** (of Relman & Dane), who will provide an overview of fair housing and a legal update. Please contact the FHCWM if you are interested in sponsoring and/or attending this significant event!

Fair Housing Book Club

The next Fair Housing Book Club discussion is scheduled for **Thursday, July 23, 2009** at 11:45 am at the FHCWM office. This meeting will feature the novel, "The Tortilla Curtain," by T.C. Boyle. This novel tells the story of two couples in California, one a pair of wealthy suburbanites, the other illegal immigrants from Mexico; they have nothing in common except that they live very different lives in the same area. Bring a lunch and join in the discussion!

Trainings

The next **Fair Housing Training for Rental Professionals** will be on:

◆ **Tuesday, September 8, 2009**

2:00-5:00 pm, cost to attend is \$60

The next **Fair Housing & Advertising Training** will be on:

◆ **Tuesday, November 10, 2009**

2:00-5:00 pm, cost to attend is \$100

These sessions will be held at the FHCWM office. Call Liz Keegan at (616) 451-2980 to register.

The FHCWM hosts two **tester trainings** each month. Testers are volunteers that play the role of a homeseeker and receive a stipend in return for their time and services. In order to accommodate differing schedules, one training will take place during business hours while the other will be held in the evening. For the specific training dates, to register, or any other questions contact Lucia Belassi at (616) 451-2980.

www.fhcwm.org
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