



# Uplifting Neighborhoods

Visitation Valley, San Francisco



U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development  
Andrew M. Cuomo, Secretary



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By Jim Wood  
for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development



U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development  
Art Agnos, Secretary's Representative, Pacific/Hawaii



# • Acknowledgments •

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The changes begun at Geneva Towers and rippling through the Visitacion Valley neighborhood did not happen by themselves. They are the direct result of a community, newly empowered to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. They are the result of the courage, as well as the faith, of the residents of the former Geneva Towers. They are the result of an unwavering commitment to serve the public by federal bureaucrats, who are too often mistakenly stereotyped as aloof and indifferent to the public they serve.

It took good intentions, to be sure; but it also required excellence, a willingness to overcome obstacles and most of all, respect toward all those who necessarily must be involved in such an undertaking. That respect was hard won, particularly on the part of a government agency that historically had bulldozed rather than uplifted low-income neighborhoods.

Former HUD Secretary, Henry Cisneros set out the vision and created the momentum for a HUD that uplifts neighborhoods. He encouraged everyone involved in this five year effort with personal visits that symbolized his commitment to the forgotten parts of the cities of America.

Robert DeMonte, the Pacific/Hawaii Regional Administrator for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in 1989 willingly engaged himself in a two-year effort to win a new solution to a crisis in living conditions for Geneva Towers residents. Mr. DeMonte won a victory for taxpayers as well as residents, going beyond the ledger book to the underlying purpose of government support for affordable housing - which is to provide decent, safe and sound homes.

Nicholas Retsinas, Assistant Secretary for Housing listened to, accepted and supported a local approach that put residents at the forefront of designing replacement housing. He expanded the effort beyond the property line to include all the residents of Visitacion Valley. Helen Dunlap, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Multifamily Housing, believed in and ensured that strategies developed in San Francisco were supported and funded at the National level.

The staff at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's San Francisco office made real the promise that government should be both accessible and accountable to the public. They put in an extraordinary effort that broke down barriers between the community and a federal agency intended to serve people: as well as breaking down barriers when past government practices stood in the way of better solutions to meet today's challenges.

The Geneva Towers residents themselves demonstrated a unique and remarkable courage and faith in agreeing to a plan that would demolish the only home that many of them had known. They looked past their fears and their own immediate comfort and made an investment toward a better and stronger community, and in the process have insured that they will remain a key part of the community.

Our accomplishments were made through a strong relationship among the City of San Francisco, local communities, non-profit organizations and the federal government. The people I have worked within all arenas have turned that potential into a reality, and I am proud to be a part of them.

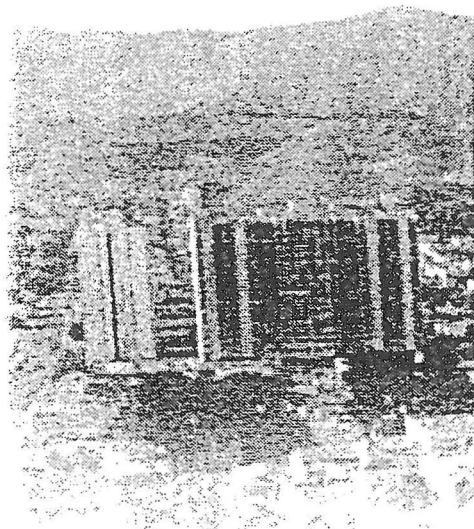


Art Agnos, Secretary's Representative



# **U**plifting Neighborhoods

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# Uplifting Neighborhoods

## Visitacion Valley, San Francisco

### Introduction

**I**n 1990, Visitacion Valley was a neglected urban backwater of 18,000 with rampant crime, awful schools, and a deplorable housing project called Geneva Towers. Now, thanks to an aggressive partnership led by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) between the community and the City of San Francisco, the area is on the way to becoming a strong, progressive, self-sufficient neighborhood. How this happened is an extraordinary tale of community uplift that can be replicated in other communities.

As we will see in this report, the residents had an important voice in planning and developing their own future. HUD and the City put aside traditional bureaucracies and worked together, sharing ideas, skills and funding. Although the catalyst was the demolition of the failed, indeed disastrous, Geneva Towers housing project, the changes were based on a recognition that genuine community uplift required not only new housing, but also social services, economic development, education, comprehensive public safety, health, transportation and employment opportunity for all residents.

Led by western Regional Administrator Art Agnos, HUD put together a partnership for social change with the residents and the City. After a series of community meetings, their strategy was spelled out in a historic Memorandum of Understanding. Geneva Towers

would come down, but the City's commitment to racial diversity would be honored. Displaced residents were guaranteed in writing that they could return.

The stage was set by Agnos' predecessor, Regional Administrator Robert DeMonte (1988-1992), who foreclosed on the private developer for failing to maintain safe, decent and sanitary housing in Geneva Towers. Conditions had so deteriorated that murders were common (in one year there were three inside the building, four more on the grounds) and drug dealers ruled entire floors. Garbage was everywhere, elevators didn't work and even mail was often undeliverable.

When HUD took over in 1991, it immediately began improving security and physical conditions in the buildings. However, it became apparent that the cost of rehabilitating the building would be prohibitive. When Agnos became Regional Administrator in July of 1993, he shared this information with the tenants who had been encouraged to form a residents' council. Thus began a pattern of community decision making and partnership with HUD in revitalizing Visitacion Valley.

The achievements that HUD, the community and the City brought about and are continuing to implement are as outlined below:

- Affordable housing is being provided for the foreseeable future.
- Geneva Towers residents participated in developing their replacement housing.
- Residents organized and participated in planning one of the three replacement housing projects. Ground was broken on the first project in July; ground was broken November, 1998 on a second; and the third is scheduled for the spring of 1999. In all 330 housing units will be built, 240 of them for families.
- The residents of Geneva Towers were successfully relocated and the results were celebrated with a party.
- Geneva Valley Development Corporation, composed of former towers residents and long-time workers in the Valley, is planning for the return of residents to replacement housing. Long range goals include teaching the returnees to manage the housing development and eventually to achieve home ownership.
- After a sophisticated outreach and education campaign, 2,589 Visitacion Valley residents, almost 90 percent of those casting ballots, voted to use implosion as the method of bringing down the Towers. This kind of community consensus was the first of its kind.
- At ceremonies attended by thousands, Geneva Towers was demolished, the rubble cleared away on schedule and the site conveyed to the City for replacement housing.
- Schools are being improved and police are upgrading Valley security with a substation at Sunnydale public housing development and a second on Leland Avenue. Residents are gaining experience in working with government and foundations on community uplift projects at a city-rented facility called The Village.
- Residents have formed their own Visitacion Valley job development and training program called Visitacion Valley Jobs and Education Training (VVJET) to participate in the \$50 million in construction slated for the Valley. Through 1997, 185 persons were trained and 182 placed on the job with a slightly higher number expected by the completion of 1998. The first hire at the Britton Street replacement housing development came through VVJET.
- The Urban Institute of San Francisco State University is working with residents on original projects at The Village and is planning a long-term community services relationship with Visitacion Valley.
- The Housing Authority is rehabilitating Sunnydale public housing.
- Visitacion Valley is receiving social services funding from the San Francisco Enterprise Community, which is assisting in programs ranging from job development at VVJET to English as Second Language classes.

Let's now look at the story behind these remarkable achievements.

# Chapter 1

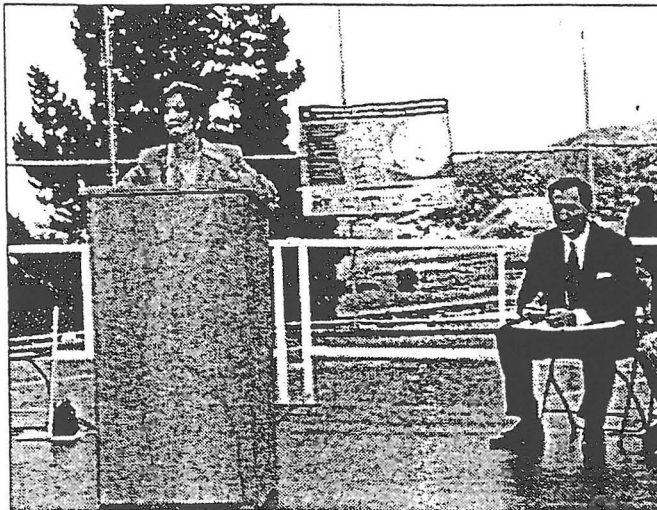
## Geneva Towers Comes Down

**T**he silence was broken by a siren, then a short series of explosions. In 30 seconds the two 20-story Geneva Towers were turned to rubble, their bases hidden in billowing dust. Georgette Allen, 28, who had lived in the Towers as a child and returned there to raise her own family, recalled afterwards that "something came over me; I was jumping and praising and spiritually moved. I never had the Holy Ghost, but that day, when the Towers went down, I couldn't even cry, there was so much excitement."

That day, May 16, 1998, had begun with basketball and booths and prizes and the school band in celebration of the annual street fair, newly named Visitacion Valley Neighborhood Day. The event ordinarily was held in the afternoon, but its time was shifted to the morning to avoid conflict with the implosion. (The demolition needed afternoon winds to carry the dust out of Visitacion Valley.) By noon the Neighborhood Day festivities were winding down, to be replaced by media crews, helicopters, former Geneva Towers residents and members of the public eager to witness the largest building implosion in California history.

Thousands had settled on the hilltops overlooking the Towers to party, fly kites, picnic, barbecue and drink beer. Hundreds had gathered at the official viewing site at Visitacion Valley Middle School where a ceremonial red demolition box with a long handle had been set up for the benefit of the media. A number of speakers were led by Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, and Shanika Knowles.

"Geneva Towers," said Agnos, "was never designed to be public housing, was never run as public housing and only became public housing when the private



*Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi (at podium) and HUD Secretary's Representative Art Agnos speak at the pre-implosion ceremony.*

owners couldn't run it properly. "Speaking of the demolition, he observed "it's about time."

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Rich Riggs, operations manager for Aman Environmental Construction, was supervising a demolition project that seemed to be going perfectly. On the day of implosion, Riggs said he had only one serious worry, that falling debris might bounce out onto the street. It didn't happen. A security fence kept the rubble and concrete inside.

The final preparation for the demolition had taken six weeks. Some 700 pounds of explosives (the exact amount and composition are proprietary) were loaded into 1,900 holes in the buildings' vertical columns and connected to non-electric initiators.

In an implosion this meant that when the explosives kicked out the columns, the buildings' weight would make the structure collapse. The implosion technique, fairly common and successful in the East, has only recently been used in California. Riggs

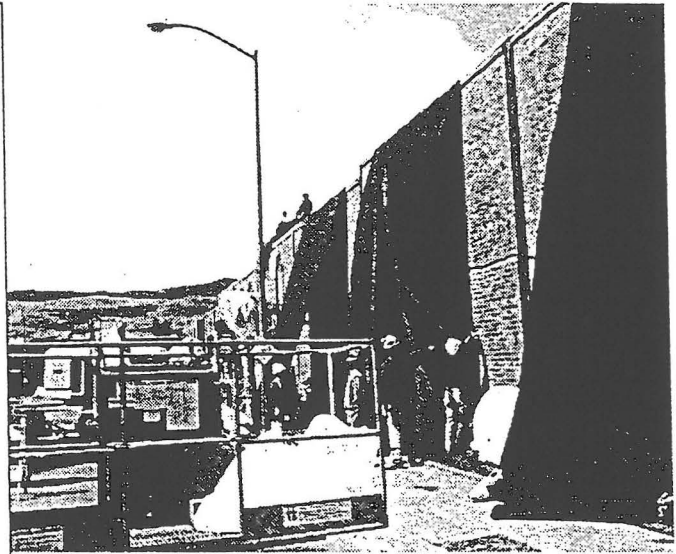
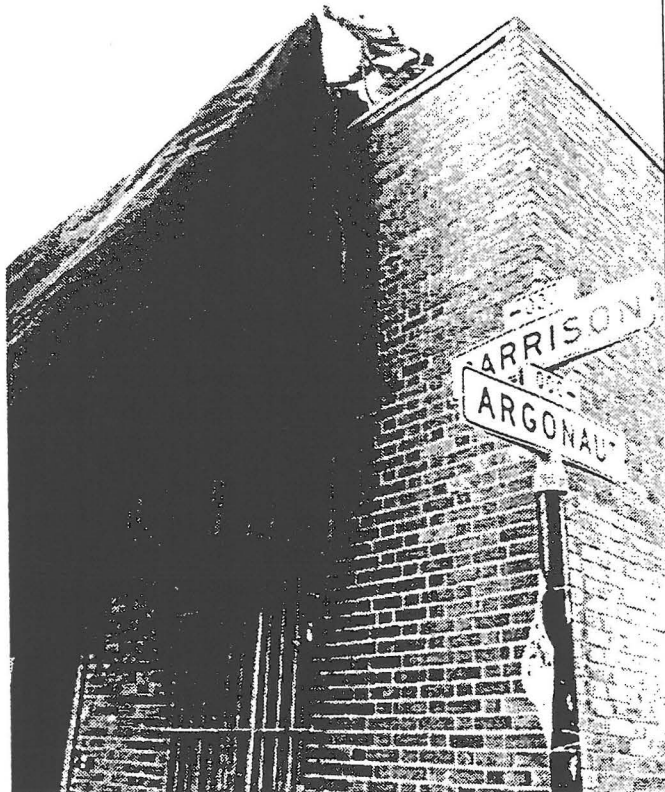


commented that it is because the state's taller buildings are now reaching an age at which demolition is a practical alternative.

Aman, a Covina, California firm with offices in Oakland and San Francisco and more than 100 employees in the Bay Area, was delayed in completing this project for months after asbestos was discovered on the exterior of the towers.

Once that time-costly condition was abated by an outside contractor, Riggs took over March 31, 1998 and demolition work began April 6. Working with Aman as a sub-contractor was Controlled Demolition Inc., a Maryland firm which had pioneered the implosion method of building demolition. Known as the Master Blaster, Controlled Demolition had a long history of safe implosions which helped convince the Visitation Valley community to use the method to topple Geneva Towers.

Except for a 15 minute delay, the implosion went according to plan. Agnos, Pelosi and Knowles pushed the ceremonial plunger while an out-of-sight licensed

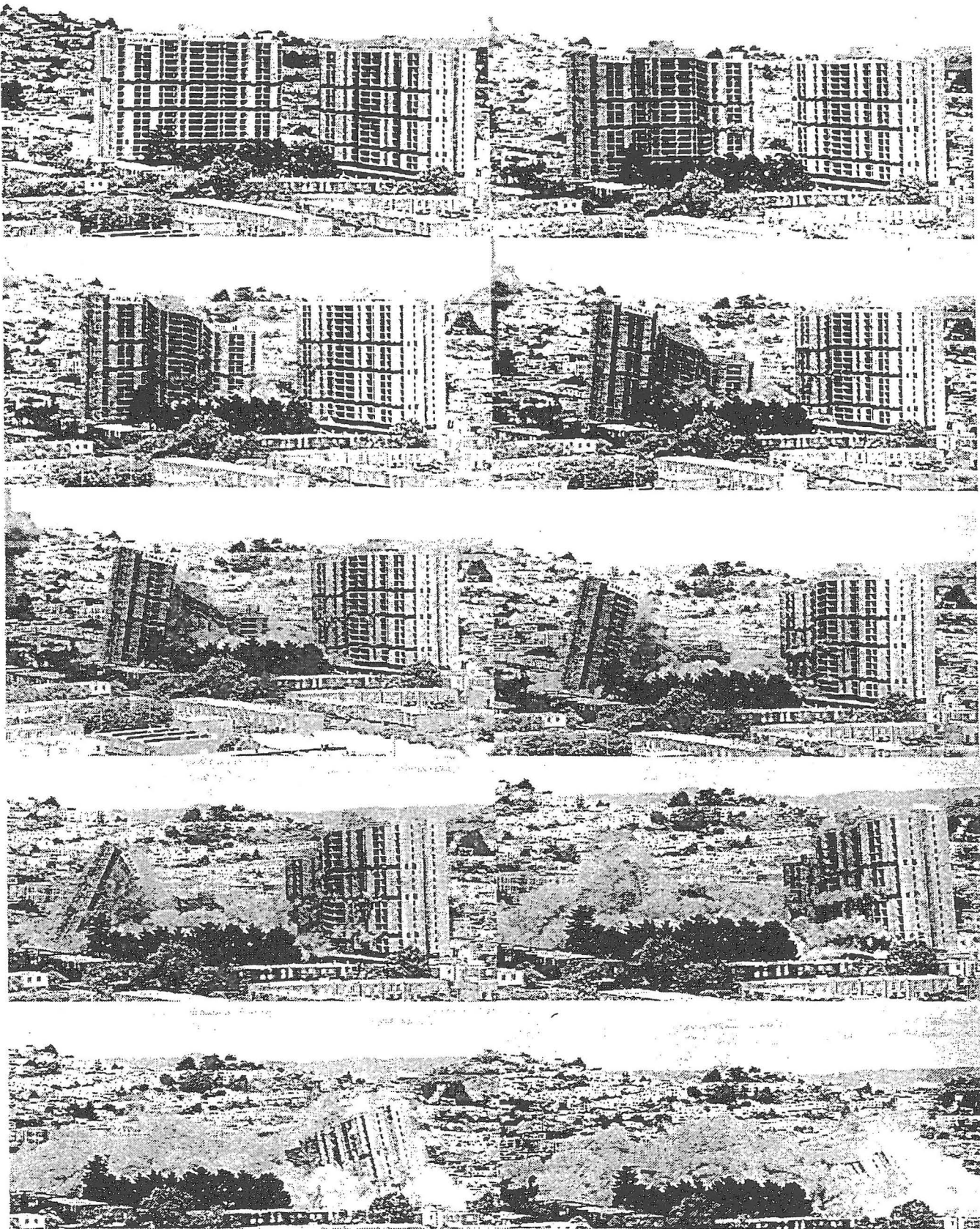


*Townhouses surrounding Geneva Towers are covered by workers in preparation of the implosion.*

blaster set off the explosives. The two buildings sagged to the ground while thousands cheered. The delay had been caused by a spectator who crossed into the danger zone for a closer camera shot and had to be shooed away. Although most witnesses and the neighborhood newspaper thought the intruder was a child, police and Aman say the intruder was an adult.

For Delores Gaddies, the thoughtful president of the Geneva Towers Resident Council and a long time Towers' tenant, watching the implosion evoked mixed memories. Towers residents had formed a close community, like a family, she said. "To actually see the building come down where I had lived for 20 years, it was sad," she said. "But I knew they had to come down. They weren't for families." Ms. Gaddies, a practical woman, had played a leading role in helping her former neighbors relocate and in planning for their return when replacement housing was completed. Watching the buildings crumble, she looked forward to the day when the Geneva Towers family would be reunited.

For Vincent Chao, principal of Visitation Valley Elementary School, the implosion was a significant event. He and his staff had dreaded home visits in the Towers. The hallways often were unlit, elevators would drop several floors, drug dealers menaced teachers. Neither principal nor staff felt comfortable



*These photos record the demolition of Geneva Towers by implosion.*

going inside the Towers. Chao, who was active in neighborhood affairs, regarded Geneva Towers as a blight on the community.

Chao remembers being impressed by the implosion planners as he watched the wind carrying the dust clouds away. "The dust was gone in 15 or 20 minutes, just high enough to clear the roofs. Those guys really knew what they were doing." Chao stared at the space that had contained the Towers. He remembers thinking: "Now they're going to have some decent housing."

The implosion left the Towers in massive piles of rubble some 30 feet high. Over the next four months, working smoothly, Aman cranes loaded the cement debris onto open trucks and shipped it to a facility in the Port of San Francisco for recycling into road building material. To the surprise of the neighborhood, the cleanup was completed on schedule.

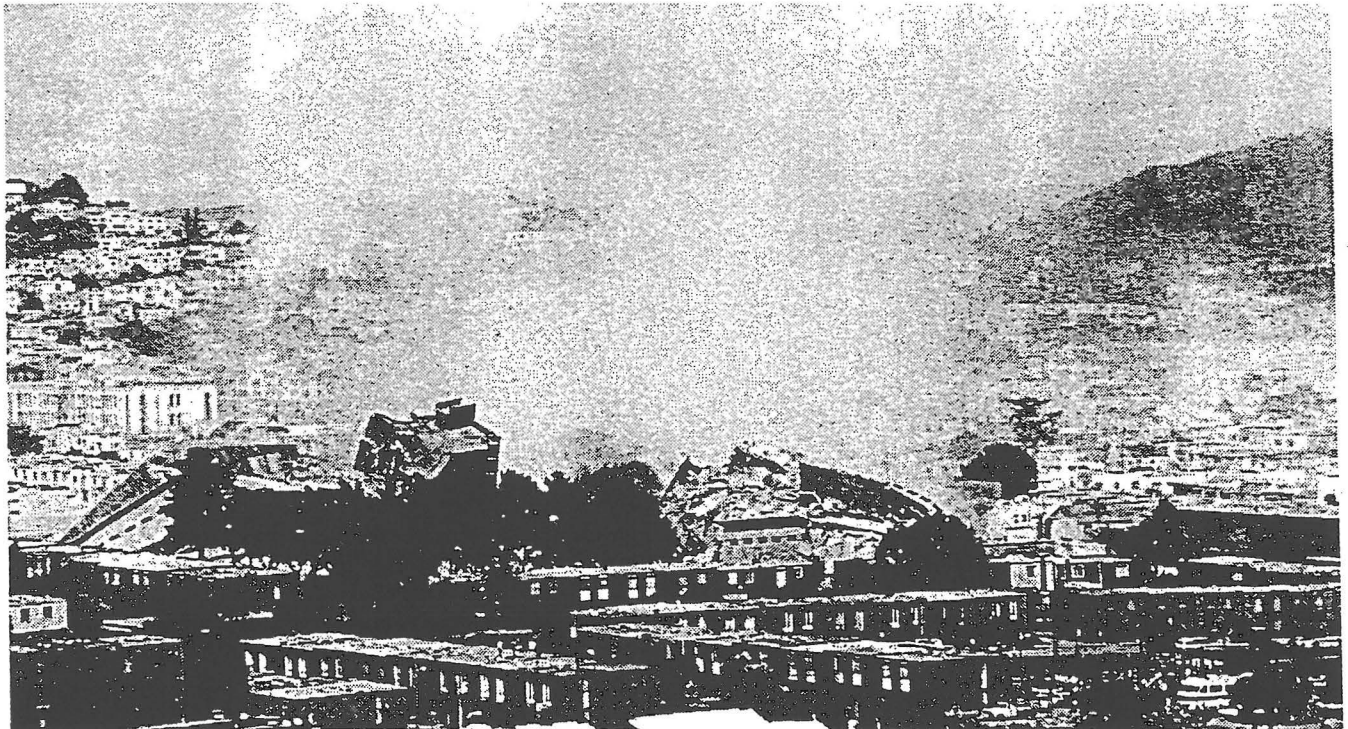
Riggs says the only problem his firm encountered, once cleanup work began, was when workers started removing the foundation for Tower B. They

encountered water at only four feet below grade, rather than fourteen as they had expected.

The reason became clear when an 80-year-old neighborhood resident showed up with a photo. He had lived near the site of the Towers all his life, he said, operating a dairy farm there. The photograph showed the area at Schwerin and Garrison, just outside the Towers' property. A bridge crossed a river there. An underground aquifer from the forgotten river was causing the trouble.

The Towers are gone now, but they live on in the memory of even the youngest community members. A toddler who had attended the implosion ceremony, walked with his mother past the site of the implosion shortly after the cleanup was completed.

"It go boom, mommy," he said. "It go boom." Unlike his mother, he would never live in Geneva Towers.



*As the cloud of dust from the implosion dissipates, a 30 feet high mound of rubble is all that remains of Geneva Towers.*



## Chapter 2:

# History of Geneva Tower

# I

### n the Beginning....

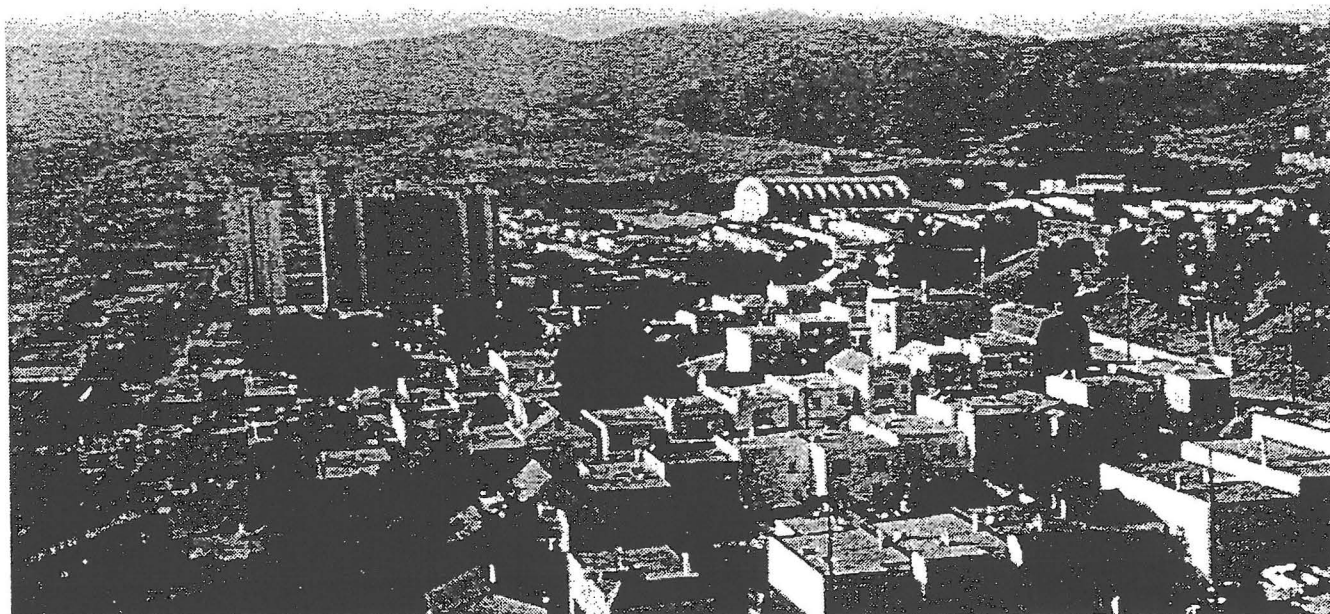
Geneva Towers began as the flawed dream of a famed developer. Joseph Eichler, who declared bankruptcy in 1967, just as the Towers were becoming a reality, went all out in the project which originally bore his name. The Eichler Towers had extensive parking, a recreation area, space for tennis and a swimming pool, balconies and glass walls offering the two and three bedroom apartments lovely views of San Francisco and the Bay. The halls and apartments were carpeted, giving the Towers a home-like feeling.

Built for moderate-income tenants like those working at the nearby San Francisco Airport, the sleek, utilitarian apartments reflected the influence of revered architect Frank Lloyd Wright, designer of an apartment where Eichler had resided during World War II. They also were a product of Eichler's philosophy of

attempting to provide architectural excellence to families of moderate means.

Eichler located his project in Visitacion Valley. Once a semi-rural enclave within the southeastern city limits of San Francisco between the Cow Palace and Candlestick Park, Visitacion Valley had become mainly a working-class bedroom community, with a few farms and nurseries remaining by the time Eichler moved.

In 1941 the Sunnydale housing project had been built, at first as temporary housing mainly for Navy personnel. With more than 770 units spread over 48 acres, owned and operated by the Housing Authority, it was the largest public housing project in San Francisco. As Navy personnel moved out and civilians moved in after World War II, the area gradually became one of the lowest income, highest crime areas in the City.



*For over 30 years Geneva Towers and the Cow Palace dominated the skyline of Visitacion Valley.*

Eichler apparently was undeterred by the proximity of Sunnydale, a short walk from his project. A Stevenson delegate to the 1956 Democratic convention in Chicago, he was one of the state's first major developers to push for open housing. When buyers objected to the presence of African Americans in his sleekly-designed projects, he would offer to buy back the homes of the objectors. The tactic worked. Although he and his associates built more than 11,000 homes, starting in the 1940's, there is no record of a Bay Area purchase rescinded for racial reasons.

## Low Income Housing

Whether because of Sunnydale or the distance from shopping and night life in San Francisco, the Towers were unable to attract moderate income renters. Instead Eichler and his successors turned to low income, federally subsidized renters. In 1966 the owners requested HUD mortgage insurance in the amount of \$10,094,000, and in 1976 HUD granted project-based Section 8 assistance, meaning that low income families living in the Towers would not pay more than 30 per cent of their income as rent. The future of the Towers as low income housing was set and within a decade of opening.

The Towers' residents were mostly very low income families, many of them headed by single females. Almost half the residents were youths, 1,102 children. The Towers' apartments which were intended for flight attendants, airport counter workers and jet mechanics, proved a difficult fit for larger, low-income families.

"What are you going to do with a two-year-old baby on the 20th floor?" asks Larry Fleming, the former Towers maintenance manager who now is executive director of VVJET. "Where are you going to play? You're a prisoner in your own home."

The Towers suffered from poor maintenance. When garbage chutes became clogged, some residents simply tossed their trash over the balconies; aerial delivery. Christmas trees were placed in elevators, set on fire

and sent streaking toward the upper stories. The metal elevator cages were unharmed but the controls were damaged. As conditions deteriorated, the elevators sometimes were used as urinals. Carpets became worn and were not fixed. Tiles were chipped down to the cement slab, and when they were replaced---by no means an automatic repair---the new tiles often were of differing thickness, creating another hazard.

"The property got worn out and tired," says HUD engineer Julio Martinez, a Berkeley-trained architect. "The owners and management were not keeping up."

## Crime and Drugs Hold Residents Hostage

But the worst problems were associated with drugs. Dealers used the Towers as a sheltered bazaar, establishing elaborate fiefdoms on separate floors. Drug sellers blocked access to pay telephones in the lobby, so that residents sometimes had to ask permission to make a call. Shootings and assaults were common; and, according to Mike Reynolds of the San Francisco Fire Department, firefighters answering calls were pelted with trash, including bicycles and even a bowling ball thrown from upper balconies.

Police were a particular target. Deputy Chief Richard Holder remembers, as a young patrolman in the early 1970's, stepping from a patrol car and then taking a step back. A body had landed beside the patrol car. He said the Towers were particularly frustrating because police couldn't know ahead of time whether calls for help were authentic or set-ups for an ambush. Drug dealers inside the building held the high ground, and police could not radio for backup once they were inside the Towers because the concrete and steel construction thwarted communications. As a result, calls from the Towers were routinely answered by at least two cars. "It was scary," Holder says. "I was shot at several times."

Many residents deplored the violence, but feared to do anything about it because of the possibility of reprisals. Tenants often were related to the criminals; and although these tenants did not necessarily approve of the criminal activities, they were reluctant to turn in a loved one, friend or relative.

The Towers developed such a bad reputation that service people declined to answer calls to replace broken glass. Cab drivers wouldn't accept fares there. Pizza deliverymen avoided the buildings.

However, there was another side to the Towers; one that receives little publicity according to residents. "A lot of people said the Towers was a bad place, but of course those people, who thought that, did not live in the Towers," says Missy Raglin, who is president of the Youth Council. "We used to have so much fun when it was time for our traditional stuff like our Easter egg hunts, our Halloween haunted houses, our sports tournaments, our Fourth of July barbecues, our talent shows and our parties. All the fun that came out of those activities---you just had to be there."

"To me, we had more good times than bad ones. It's just that as soon as something bad happened, that's all people talked about. We never had a chance to show how good we were; and every time we invited other people from other places and communities, most of the time it was just the Tower Family that came."

Vernon Long who lived there from 1970 to 1981 says that at first the Towers were a good place to live. "I have good memories. My children were raised there."

But for Long, all that was to change. "When crack cocaine hit, it all went down hill," he said. "It changed the place. It changed the atmosphere. Families fell apart. Crack cocaine ruled. The Towers became like a grocery store for drugs. If I didn't know the people, I would not have gotten out of my car."

Drug dealers became so bold they sold their wares on the sidewalks outside the Towers. The sellers were there with such regularity that one resident recalls they welcomed her home each night from her job. By

1991, conditions had become intolerable. Three homicides were reported inside the buildings, four more on the property. There were 66 assault and batteries, 30 assaults with a deadly weapon, 33 shootings, and 48 batteries.

## HUD Takes Over Geneva Towers

HUD had had enough....

After the failure of repeated attempts with the private owners to remedy the situation at Geneva Towers, HUD regional administrator Robert DeMonte took an unprecedented legal step. Although the owners, Geneva Limited Partners and Geneva Towers Associates, had belatedly made their mortgage payments, they had not kept up their maintenance on the property as required by the mortgage agreement. Conditions were so bad that the Towers no longer provided decent,

sanitary and secure housing for the tenants, as required by the mortgage.

A minimal repair program would cost an estimated \$7 million for which there apparently was no financing, even with HUD picking up two thirds of the cost. DeMonte



*Robert DeMonte, former HUD  
Western Regional Administrator*

decided to file for foreclosure.

The legal move was unprecedented. Although the government had foreclosed on developers for failure to meet financial obligations, both sides agreed that this was the first time HUD had attempted to foreclose because of failure to maintain the property. With 17 pages of fire and safety violations as proof, DeMonte's strategy prevailed. On the sunny afternoon of June 6,



1991, in a ceremony on the steps of City Hall, without opposing bidders, HUD became the legal owners of Geneva Towers.

HUD turned to The John Stewart Company, an experienced management firm, to end the chaos at Geneva Towers. With HUD paying the bills for rehabilitation, the company promptly sent in a select team that included Larry Fleming as maintenance manager. He quickly determined that conditions were as bad or worse, than HUD had maintained in court.

Fleming's first goal was simple: make sure everything in people's units worked. Until then whole floors had been out of bounds for repair crews intimidated by drug dealers with hands in their pockets. Fleming says he doesn't blame the workers for not wanting to find out if the dealers really were carrying guns.

"I made a work force truce with factions on different floors so my people could go to work there," Fleming says. "I told them we were maintenance people. We weren't reporters with cameras, we weren't snitches, we weren't cops. As long as you let my people do what I sent them to do, you're not going to have a problem with me. You have a police problem that's going to be settled anyway, I'm not out to settle it. I'm coming here with a toolbox, not a camera."

Fleming pointed out that his work was for the benefit of the gangs and gangsters' relatives. "I'm coming to fix your sister's toilet that's been stopped up for two years. I'll guarantee you that I'm going to get it done. It got to the point where they believed me."

Fleming said that he developed a reporting system whereby residents whose units had problems could expect the condition to be corrected within 24 hours, or 72 hours for anything of major concern that required going to a vendor outside the building. He hired a work force that at its height employed 103 members, most of them from the Towers. He had one strict rule: when the workers went to make a repair in the building, they had to remember they were representing the company and deal with tenants with respect, even if they were friends or relatives.

He began his job with a survey into every nook and cranny in the Towers, taking care not to upset drug dealers in the area. "I wasn't foolish," he says now. "I didn't challenge them. I said I'm not the one who's going to put you in jail. They're coming, but it's not me."

Fleming did everything he could to make the Towers clean and livable. His crews laid sod outside the buildings so that residents could enjoy grass. Crews removed enough trash to fill 56 dumpsters. More than 100 abandoned cars were hauled from the parking areas.

Graffiti was painted over as quickly as it was put up, and a fence was erected around the base of the Towers. A private security firm provided roving guards who patrolled in pairs, one pair to each building. Other guards monitored an elaborate security television system and controlled access to the buildings by unauthorized visitors.

Hallways were screened by television cameras, lighting was improved and alarms guarded entry and exit doors. Sophisticated cameras scanned the exterior of buildings and bulletproof glass replaced plywood in security rooms and offices. Fleming's crew built an entryway with a sturdy roof so that legitimate visitors could come in and out of the building without having to wear hard hats for protection from dropped debris.

The television system meant that any calls to police could be verified in advance, that responding police officers would be met by guards from within the Towers, and the films would back up officers' reports in court.

The security was expensive, more than \$100,000 a month, but HUD and The John Stewart Company figured it was worth it. Crime dropped dramatically. Stewart reported that in the first year there were no homicides, compared with seven the preceding year. Calls to police dropped from 729 to 403. The Stewart Company regarded the 45 per cent reduction as encouraging, but hoped to do even better.

The security measures meant that the Towers had become a difficult place for drug dealers to do business. Most opted for a venue with less scrutiny. As HUD administrator Pat Goray recalled, the word went out in the community "don't mess with Geneva Towers. The Feds have taken over."

In addition to correcting security and physical problems in the building, HUD encouraged an extensive array of social programs. For youth there were such programs as Headstart, an after-school program, hot lunches and a teen and sports program, as well as summer jobs and a jobs fair. For adults there were such services as women's health counseling, pre and post natal care, an on-site clinic and food distribution. An on-site social worker was available to assist with senior services.

## Community Participation in Decisions

Critical to the future of the Towers was the establishment of a Residents Council to represent the views of tenants. The seven council members were elected with a total of 110 ballots cast under the oversight of the League of Women Voters with the results announced in the April, 1992 issue of *Geneva Towers News*.

In January, 1993 Henry Cisneros was appointed Secretary of HUD and the following June former San Francisco mayor Art Agnos was named western Regional Administrator, Pacific/Hawaii. As a trained social worker, whose first San Francisco assignment was in the nearby Sunnydale public housing development, he shared with Cisneros a strong commitment to community participation in decision making. Agnos' social worker skills and his philosophy about community participation would shape the development of Geneva Towers and Visitacion Valley in important ways. Agnos would insist that local residents share in the decision making.

Since immediately after the foreclosure, HUD had been undecided about what were the best solutions for resolving the problems of the new property. As



*Art Agnos, Secretary's Representative, HUD Pacific/Hawaii.*

HUD planners began looking over preliminary cost repair estimates of more than \$100,000 a unit, they started having a lot of second thoughts. The original plan was to rehabilitate the Towers, but Agnos encouraged considering other options. "I favored demolition," he says now. "Rehabilitation of failed housing would never correct the social problems. To maintain a 20-story high rise would only perpetuate the social problems. We needed to think about how you could create housing on a human scale consistent with the neighborhood. I believed that once the residents had a chance to consider the options they would come to the same conclusion."

HUD planners also considered rehabilitating the Towers for elderly housing. High rises elsewhere had often worked well for senior citizens. But in San Francisco, planners were very concerned about the location of the property; whether it would be attractive enough to achieve sufficient occupancy because of the remote site as compared with buildings downtown and because it had a number of problems regarding crime and security.

"We could see a real reluctance by residents of other parts of San Francisco to move into that neighborhood," says Keith Axtell who was then Director of Housing. In addition, housing rehabilitation for the elderly would be more expensive than for families, because

it would mean breaking units up to make a larger number of small bedroom-sized units. Turning Geneva Towers into a project for the elderly didn't seem financially or socially feasible.

Demolition had some attractive aspects, but destroying more than 500 living units in a tight housing market could be a political bombshell. Planners were wary. In addition, Pat Goray remembers, "we were never comfortable with any of the options, because the variables were so complicated." With the support of the Resident Council, HUD then set up wide-open meetings for all residents and spelled out the options.

As HUD analysts saw it, there were six alternatives, each costly and each with other significant drawbacks:

1. *Rehabilitate existing two buildings for family housing; approximate cost \$37-\$45 million, approximate time 3-4 years, approximate number of units 404-560.*
2. *Rehabilitate the existing Towers but convert one to elderly housing; approximate cost \$40-\$49 million, approximate time 3-4 years, approximate number of units 202 family, 360 elderly.*
3. *Rehabilitate and convert existing buildings to elderly housing; approximate cost \$44-54 million, approximate time 3-4 years, approximate units 720-840.*
4. *Rehabilitate and convert Building A for elderly. Demolish Building B, construct 3-story family housing on site. Approximate cost \$36-\$44 million, approximate time 2-4 years, approximate units 90 family, 360 elderly.*
5. *Demolish existing buildings. Construct new 3-story family housing. Approximate cost \$28-\$33 million, approximate time 2-4 years, approximate units 150-170 family.*

6. *Demolish both existing buildings. Construct new housing for current residents, including units on another site. Approximate cost \$51million, approximate time 4-6 years, approximate units 330.*

At the community meetings, the Agnos team went over rehabilitation problems, like the cost of putting in new elevators, widening corridors or constructing separate entrances for seniors. There were social issues as well. Some seniors objected to being segregated while others preferred it. Residents' ideas were solicited on whether the location would be attractive to prospective renters concerned about security and the project's distance from downtown.

"Right there at the meetings, we basically took a vote of the group, kind of an informal poll, to get a sense of what they wanted to do," Axtell says. "The overwhelming response was that they thought the best thing to do was have the Towers demolished and new housing built to replace them."

The vote was in no sense binding; but Agnos understood that if the residents approved demolition, there would be a smooth road to the ultimate outcome with active participation. He knew that they would have to be guaranteed first rights on the new housing.

Guiding his thinking was his belief in the new HUD philosophy of focusing not just on structures, but on the surrounding community as well. In Visitacion Valley he and the HUD team were taking on a major challenge.

Isolated by the Bayshore Freeway (Highway 101) to its left, McLaren Park to the north and right and the San Bruno Mountains to the south, Visitacion Valley had become the South Pole of San Francisco, out of sight, out of mind. Services were fragmented and the area had lost many of the larger businesses like Safeway and Mayfair.

The families of earlier Italian settlers moved to the suburbs to be replaced by lower income African



Americans, Filipinos, Latinos and Laotians. Nearby industries spawned by World War II closed. Geneva Towers and Sunnydale were lowering income levels. It was clear that the Valley was under-served in comparison with the rest of the city.

Agnos and his top aides realized that, if services were to be improved, the concerns of the entire community would have to be addressed. Staffers were taken on a van tour of the community. Meetings were held with local residents, and a unified approach was developed for improving health care, youth and social services and police protection in Visitacion Valley.

## Visitacion Valley Task Force

As former San Francisco mayor, Agnos was familiar with what the city could do. He brought to Mayor Frank Jordan a proposal for a neighborhood-based Visitacion Valley Task Force, who in only 90 days hammered out a community plan.

Working with Agnos, the Task Force set four goals relating to housing social services and safety. In housing, the task force recommended leaving the Geneva Towers untouched until the current residents were resettled, either in the area or in a place of their choice. The understanding was that Geneva Towers would then be demolished. The recommendations noted that the residents should be given first option on returning to the new, replacement housing when it was built. The Task Force, considering the broader needs of Visitacion Valley, also recommended that the buildings in Sunnydale be torn down and replaced with new two to four bedroom units. The Task Force called for setting aside a number of these new units for rent and purchase by current residents.

The Task Force also endorsed improving communications and working relations between the police and the community to assure a safe community for families and their children. Turning to educational, social and recreational services to children and youth, the Visitacion Valley Task Force recommended

expanding youth services and recreational programs through collaboration between public agencies, community-based agencies and families. And to revitalize the business community, it called for creating an environment that encourages new businesses to invest in the community. With these ambitious goals in mind, the Task Force then set out developing specific strategies for achieving these objectives.

To implement housing recommendations, the Task Force recommended involving designated key players: the Mayor's Office of Housing, Commission on Aging, the Housing Authority, HUD and the Visitacion Valley Task Force.

Safety strategies were specific. In addition to calling for a police sub-station and neighborhood crime watch programs, the Task Force urged improved lighting for twelve specified streets, and increased police patrols between 5 and 10 p.m. especially near Visitacion Valley bus routes. The increased patrols were at the suggestion of the Asian-American community, as was the recommendation for more bilingual police officers.

Youth recommendations included providing more day-care slots, a resource bank and phone line for parents, a drug education program, a sophisticated academic improvement program, and a Teen and Working Family clinic for day and evening use to educate on drug and pregnancy problems and to develop a truancy program. To improve the Visitacion Valley economy, the Task Force recommended revitalizing the Merchants Association, developing apprentice programs, beautifying Leland Avenue, building a multi-purpose employment center and attracting a large grocery store like Lucky's or Safeway.

# Chapter 3:

## Commitment to Community

**T**

### he Memorandum of Understanding--Commitment in Writing

While HUD, the City and the community worked out the details, with Agnos' personal participation, he did some deep thinking. Agnos was sensitive to the damage and scars that came out of the redevelopment of the Western Addition in the earlier sixties. Federal renewal had resulted in the bulldozing of entire city blocks, some of which still stood empty. Residents were callously relocated. African American families were driven from the city, never to return. "We needed to address these legitimate, historical concerns. The neighborhood had a lack of faith born of neglect. We needed to show why this time it would be different," Agnos said.

Because of his own experience in city government, Agnos knew that administrations change. The commitments of one administration become the forgotten policy of the next. To prevent this from happening, to Visitacion Valley, Task Force goals were specifically guaranteed in a written agreement signed by HUD and the City of San Francisco. The document would mean that Visitacion Valley residents would have a written guarantee that their plans would be carried out.

Under the proposed memorandum, passed out for community comment, HUD agreed:

- To demolish the Geneva Towers and to sell the land to the City for \$1 so the land could be used to build affordable housing.
- To provide relocation assistance to Geneva Towers' residents in obtaining permanent or temporary housing at an estimated cost of \$535,255.
- To provide up to \$19.4 million in Section 8 vouchers to provide housing options for the temporary or permanent relocation of Geneva Towers residents.
- To provide the City a listing of Geneva Towers residents so that the City could give them return rights guarantee for housing developed as part of this plan.
- Consider requests for project based Section 8 subsidy, covering between 20-50 per cent of the residents of the newly constructed family housing (estimated value \$32.4 million) and 100 per cent of the elderly housing (estimated value \$14.2 million).
- Continue cooperation with the City and the Mayor's Task Force on the long range plans for Visitacion Valley including economic development plans.
- Provide HUD staff assistance to facilitate the creation of economic opportunities in training, employment and contracting for low and very low income residents in the neighborhood and for local businesses in connection with current and future HUD assisted developments in Visitacion Valley. Such technical assistance would be designed to assist the City in achieving a goal of 30 per cent of residents of Visitacion Valley for each of the following categories: trainees, employees and contractors/subcontractors which can be applied to meet the City's overall goals as imposed by overall local and federal requirements.
- Notify the Private Industry Council (PIC) before any construction activities occur at Geneva Towers, Sunnydale and surrounding neighborhood; and, that this agreement has been signed, in order that the PIC as they work with appropriate organizations can develop a potential pool of job applicants and job training programs for residents of Geneva Towers and the surrounding Visitacion Valley neighborhood.
- Ensure that bid documents for all HUD-assisted construction in Visitacion Valley will contain a plan to hire 30 per cent of their total construction force from the designated pool of applicants.

- Continue supporting the rehabilitation of the Sunnydale public housing development in partnership with the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) and through interactive technical assistance, and insure that sufficient funds (estimated \$54 million) are allocated from comprehensive grant funds to insure project completion.
- Coordinate with SFHA to ensure that additional protective services are provided to the Sunnydale development over and above that which is required by the existing City/SFHA Cooperation Agreement for Sunnydale.
- Collaborate with other local or federal government agencies, non-profit and community-based organizations as requested and appropriate to assist in identifying other available resources which can be applied to the revitalization of the Visitacion Valley.
- Provide technical assistance to facilitate compliance with all federal civil rights requirements, including accessibility requirements for the disabled.

It was a long list, the result of many hours of HUD and community efforts. In return, the City and County of San Francisco would agree to:

- Follow through on the commitment to lend \$2.5 million of its housing funds to the non-profit housing development corporation to purchase the site known as 250 Britton Street for future affordable housing.
- Work with non-profit housing corporations to locate and obtain site control on properties in Visitacion Valley appropriate for 50 to 100 units of elderly housing and for a senior center providing services to seniors in Visitacion Valley.
- Work with non-profit housing corporations to construct 300 units of new affordable family housing to be located in Visitacion Valley.
- Improve City police services in Visitacion Valley. The City will revise police service boundaries so that the entire valley is covered by a new and closer police station in the Bayview district (later changed, to the Ingleside). The City has adopted and will implement the philosophy of community policing and problem solving in Visitacion Valley utilizing an on-site 24-hour

neighborhood resource center and patrol personnel on or before the occupancy date of the new housing at Geneva Towers. The crime problem at Geneva Towers will be addressed by a separate working committee.

- Initiate a City planning effort to develop a detailed economic development plan for Visitacion Valley in conjunction with the Mayor's Visitacion Valley Task Force. Upon completion of the plan, the City will provide CDBG or other funds to implement the plan.
- Continue Public Health Department medical services provided at Geneva Towers at another accessible location



in the community. Public Health will work with the Task Force on a possible expansion of needed services.

- Ensure continuity of day care services by city purchase or construction of a suitable facility for the existing Geneva Towers Head Start program and for other needed day care services.



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- contractors/subcontractors which can be applied to meet the City's overall goals imposed by the existing Minority Business Enterprise (MBE), Women Business Enterprise (WBE), Local Business Enterprise (LBE), Ordinance or other local and/or federal requirements.

- Enter into agreements with established building trade and labor organizations to create partnerships which will facilitate the achievement of the numerical goals contained in this MOU. Such agreements will emphasize methods of integrating neighborhood residents into training/apprenticeship programs and possible long-term employment opportunities. Assistance shall be sought from these established building trades and labor organizations to identify and obtain additional resources in support of this effort.
- Provide \$6 million of CDBG and/or other city funds over a five-year period to fund above activities and other City/neighborhood identified neighborhood improvements and services.
- Commit to work with and provide technical assistance to neighborhood groups to increase their capacity to assist the City in implementing neighborhood revitalization and economic activities in Visitation Valley.
- Work with residents and property owners to make Visitation Valley a "drug free" community.
- Guarantee preferences for Geneva Towers residents at initial occupancy for newly constructed housing under this plan.
- City agrees not to collect future Housing Authority Payments in Lieu of Taxes (Pilot) to insure the financial integrity of the SFHA and provide the necessary level of services required by the existing Cooperation Agreement between the City and SFHA for Sunnydale.
- Ensure compliance with all federal civil rights requirements in connection with HUD-assisted developments in the Visitation Valley, including accessibility requirements for the disabled.

Based on community, HUD and City negotiations, the MOU was signed February 14, 1995. It was a charter for the future of Visitation Valley.



*Nicolas Retsinas, HUD Assistant Secretary, and (to his left) former mayor Frank Jordan, joins community and civic leaders at the signing of the MOU on February 14, 1995.*

## Relocation of Residents Begins

HUD realized that it faced extensive relocating of Geneva Towers residents. A 1993 survey showed that 334 units were occupied. All would have to be vacated whether the Towers were rehabilitated or demolished. Of the 248 responding to the survey, 193 requested permanent relocation.

"Some had lived in Geneva Towers for their entire adult life," recalls HUD's Pat Goray. "They didn't know how to seek other housing. We tried to make it financially neutral. We would pay moving costs and other costs associated with moving like, having to buy window coverings for the new place. We hired folks to work with them on a case management basis. Then we asked: OK, what are your problems?"

If a resident had baby-sitting for their child provided by a grandmother living nearby, HUD tried to find housing in the neighborhood. Residents' preferences were acceded to whenever possible. Landlords came to speak at Geneva Towers, residents were counseled on the financial realities of living outside a project, and HUD paid for cab fares so that residents could inspect prospective apartments.

"Some people had been living in Geneva Towers for 20 years," recalls Mike Greene, a HUD point man on the project. "Some had been born there and didn't know what a PG&E bill was. It was an educational process. Basically we had taken care of them. If they were late on the rent, we sent them a note. A lot of landlords weren't that nice."

To receive relocation expenses, tenants had to be up to date on their rent or on a repayment plan. They were entitled to \$60 for house hunting and transportation, \$150 for a PG&E deposit if required, \$45 for water deposit if required, \$35 for a telephone hookup. Funds were available for other expenses. For those eligible, HUD arranged Section 8 funding.

A turning point in HUD's relationship with the residents came when HUD insisted that all tenants be treated equally. Previously, a small but vocal number of residents had avoided paying rent, manipulating the system and new management, by hiding behind allegations of property mismanagement. At the same time, other tenants continued to pay rent and follow the rules. HUD took the scofflaw tenants to court, in a jury trial, and evicted the cheaters.

HUD treated the residents with such concern for their needs that a public television documentary shown nationally on MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour backfired. The show was to answer the criticism of lawmakers from Southern states unfamiliar with Bay Area rents, who had been asking why HUD was spending so much. The negative criticism of HUD was turned into positive praise of the extraordinary neighborhood building HUD was pursuing.

## Geneva Towers' Residents Give Their Insight

Delores Gaddies, a member of the Geneva Towers Residents Council, was generally pleased with the way HUD was treating the residents. Born in Beaumont, Texas, the daughter of a longshoreman, she had come to San Francisco from the Middle West and, prior to moving into Geneva Towers, had never been associated with any housing whose name included "project." As a result, she knew the kinds of challenges her neighbors would face outside Geneva Towers: charges for turning on electricity, telephones, cable TV, what to do with furniture, paying movers, finding a house.

"HUD was helpful," she says. "HUD was good to us. They dealt on good terms. HUD and Geneva Tower tenants were more like partners." That was typified in how HUD found a place for Georgette Allen; although she had, as she said, two and a half children (she was pregnant.) When that location didn't work out, HUD helped her find another place.

The Geneva Towers relocation was completed in December, 1995. The relocated tenants were so pleased with the way they had been treated they celebrated with a party and HUD was invited.

Not all Geneva Towers residents were happy with the changes being made at the Towers. Linda Frazier, who had been there since 1986, thought that the John Stewart rehabilitation improved conditions

considerably; but she couldn't help wondering at the amount of money being spent when it seemed obvious to her that the tenants would be moved out.

Another group led by Louise Vaughn objected to security measures like the fences and hallway cameras which she thought were an invasion of privacy. She and her allies hung huge banners from the Towers, visible over much of the valley, saying "Homes Not Jails." The banners themselves became an issue. Since Tower residents enjoyed using their balconies for barbecues, the Fire Department said the flammable banners were a hazard and had to come down. When the media picked up the story, the case became a free speech issue and went to court; but after HUD offered to treat the banners with fire retardant, the protest was settled.

In January of 1994, on behalf of the Geneva Towers Tenants Association, Vaughn also protested against scofflaw evictions, which she said violated due process, and the number of vacancies which had not been filled in the two and a half years since HUD took over the Towers.

In late 1993 residents became concerned about lead levels in their water. Rumors swept the Towers as residents worried that they could be slowly poisoned by their water supply. Sure enough, preliminary tests announced November 19th showed an elevated level of lead in water. Although the tests were preliminary and inconclusive, HUD acted at once, passing out bottled water to all residents for cooking and drinking. Residents were told that tap water could be used for bathing and laundry. In addition, HUD immediately set up public health educational programs to make sure residents were fully informed, along with free medical advice and free blood testing.

Approximately 190 residents submitted to the blood tests. By the beginning of January the test results were in. Blood lead levels, the Health Department said, showed there was no reason for concern. "In fact," interim director Florence Stroud of the



San Francisco Department of Public Health said in a letter, "the lead levels of the residents were lower than we would expect to find in a general population survey."

For children and adults, the results were the same. It's interesting to note that among the adults tested the two highest lead levels were recorded for a heavy smoker and for a worker in a battery factory.

"The lead testing was an example of a critical public health intervention," Stroud said. "We hope we were able to break down some barriers to access and trust, and we look forward to seeing more residents at the weekly health clinic we hold at Geneva Towers."

## Joint Decision: Demolish the Towers

In July of 1994, a little more than three years after acquiring Geneva Towers, HUD officially announced its community based decision. The Towers were to be demolished. The decision was based on the need for extensive repairs and upgrading. Another official reason was the "exceedingly high concentration of family housing units on a small site."

"In addition," the HUD narrative went on, "the repair and operation of the property would require rents exceeding the maximum allowed." HUD said it intended to sell the vacant land to the City of San Francisco for development of affordable housing on the site. There was, however, some good news for residents who would have to move. All 321 eligible residents would receive Section 8 vouchers and relocation assistance.

In a separate letter, then Director of Housing Keith Axtell reminded residents that the

plan had been prepared after several meetings where their ideas had been heard. The letter enclosed a summary of the proposed disposition plan for the residents' review and comments and solicited suggestions for any relocation services the residents would feel helpful.

**Help Decide**  
**How Geneva Towers Will Be Demolished**  
**How It Comes Down... It's Up to You**  
**WRECKING BALL**  
**or**  
**IMPLOSION**  
**?**

Geneva Towers will soon come down to make way for new homes and community facilities.

You are invited to participate in community meetings to discuss the demolition options, and their impact on the community. Meetings will be held at the following locations:

August 19, 1997 (7:00PM) Church of the Visitation 656 Sunnydale Avenue	1997年8月19日(下午7時) 耶穌聖心堂教堂 太陽谷路656號
August 20, 1997 (7:00PM) Visitation Valley Community Center 50 Raymond Avenue	1997年8月20日(下午7時) 威爾遜谷社區服務中心 雷德路50號

You can make your choice known by signing the Geneva Towers Demolition petition before September 12, 1997.  
 您可以在1997年9月12日之前簽署一份關於威爾遜谷社區服務中心的請願書。

Geneva Towers Demolition petition displays can be found at the following locations:

- Bank of America - 8 Leland Ave.
- Visitation Valley Library - 48 Leland Ave.
- Visitation Valley Pharmacy - 100 Leland Ave.
- 7-11 Store - 2200 Boylston Ave.
- El Rancho Supermarket - 2865 Geneva Ave.
- The Village - 33 Richmond
- Visitation Valley Community Center - 50 Raymond Ave.
- Homeless Community Development Center - 205-1333

All Visitation Valley residents, and the new/young/intermediate families, who are interested in the demolition of Geneva Towers, please call 415-831-8338 for more information.

**415-831-8338**

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) thanks you for your participation in this next step in demolishing Geneva Towers.

Posters, flyers, fact sheets and videos were utilized in the community outreach campaign.

## Chapter 4:

# "How It Comes Down Is Up to You"

**T**o prepare Geneva Towers for demolition, HUD had to see that all asbestos hazards were removed. The requirement was turned into a plus for the community as Visitacion Valley Jobs and Education Training program (VVJET) prepared residents for jobs in the new industry. Asbestos had been mixed in the paint for walls, floors, ceilings and stairwells when the Towers were constructed. Now all this had to be removed so that when the building was demolished the dust would not be a health menace. It was a tough, demanding job. As a federal department, HUD had to meet the highest standards of state, federal and local environmental regulations. HUD turned the requirements into a plus for the community, helping VVJET train local residents for jobs in the new industry.

At first the numbers were very small as reported in a September 1996 Status Report on Employment Development in Visitacion Valley. The low numbers were a result of the asbestos removal contract being interpreted to call for only 30 per cent of the new hires to come from the neighborhood. Future goals were set at 90 percent of the new employees. New classes were formed by VVJET and more workers were placed after it was discovered that there was asbestos in the paint on the outside of the 20-story Towers. In what was believed to be a first, former residents and their neighbors were employed in the demolition of their former homes.

HUD now asked Visitacion Valley residents to decide how Geneva Towers should be demolished. A community consensus had already favored demolishing the Towers over taking on a prohibitively expensive rehabilitation. Now the question became *how* to demolish it, by wrecking ball or by implosion. It was the first time in the nation that a community had

been asked to participate in such a decision, and the vote drew nearly 3,000 ballots.

When Art Agnos was announcing the results of the community poll at a community meeting and press conference, he capsulized the significance of this community decisionmaking. "This is the first time in the nation that community residents have been asked to decide how we will take down a dilapidated and unfit building," said Agnos. "It is a full recognition that the Visitacion Valley residents have a right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and that government has an obligation to honor that participation. We will comply with the wishes of this community as expressed in this election."

"More than ninety percent of those voting want us to implode rather than use a wrecking ball to take down Geneva Towers. This is an absolute mandate and we will now go forth to apply for the permits for an implosion. I want to thank and acknowledge the many community members who have worked hard to assure a full level of participation," Agnos said. "The fact that thousands of residents cast ballots is proof that our effort to rebuild faith with the community is taking hold. Our pledge is to continue this partnership in ways that benefit the community."

Behind this turnout and participation was a remarkable community outreach campaign. The job of informing the community about the choice between implosion and the wrecking ball fell to John Phillips, Community Builder and Senior Staff member of HUD, and to the multi-cultural integrated marketing/community outreach firm, Imtech Communications of Berkeley.

The outreach team began in May, 1997, with a preliminary list of representatives of community

organizations, including Geneva Towers Development Corporation, Geneva Towers Resident Council, VVJET, Visitacion Valley Task Force, the Communication Collaboration Committee of Visitacion Valley, housing project developers, Grapevine community newspaper, Asian Alliance, school principals, Samoan community and Little Hollywood representatives, and many other church and business leaders.

"We'd contact one after another by telephone, set up face to face meetings where we, in turn, heard from the groups about others who needed to be included," recalls Kathleen Cha, project manager for Imtech. "We got ourselves on the agenda of every kind of community meeting that was happening in the Valley."

At the meetings the message was "this is what's being projected. Talk to us. What do you think?"

Cha says that "no one had ever come to them quite like this, before a process was even started, to ask them for their opinions, to ask them for insights, to figure out how it was going to proceed." She and John Phillips both reiterated that people appreciated being asked.

Each meeting led to another meeting. It was immediately clear that those at the meetings would represent their communities, but not lead them. To the outreach organizers that was just fine. Their mission was educational, and time was short. Contractors told them that in order to file for permits, a community consensus was needed.

Imtech put together a video presentation explaining the differences between implosion and the wrecking ball and answering the questions most frequently asked at meetings. Art Agnos, demolition contractors and the outreach team spoke at many big and small community meetings. One community forum, conducted in English and Chinese was attended by more than 200 community members. Chinese translation, as needed, was the standard at most large meetings, with Spanish translations provided later

when the demographics began to change in a couple of neighborhoods.

## Implosion Or Wrecking Ball?

One of the key questions from the community centered on the length of time that the two methods take. The answer in printed materials distributed in the community was that the wrecking ball method took six to eight months with noise, dust and debris. The implosion, by contrast, would take 15 seconds followed by four or five hours to clean up dust and approximately two months to remove debris. The hand-outs answered the questions about noise: the wrecking ball produces a pounding sensation throughout the neighborhood along with other noises such as back-up beepers and various noises from construction vehicles over several months. The implosion was said to produce a pulse-like sensation from the air blast generated during the implosion.

The extensive hand-out materials said the wrecking ball, because it took much longer, increased the likelihood of accidents. The materials, based on information from the contractors, Aman Environmental Construction and Controlled Demolition Incorporated, said implosion would probably require a safety perimeter of about 600 to 700 feet, would definitely not set off an earthquake and said that though damage was unlikely, the contractor would assume responsibility for any that occurred. It also explained that photographs would be taken of the surrounding areas before the implosion to document and evaluate any damage claims. Then came the challenge: "How it comes down is up to you!"

In August, with the schools closed, the outreach team asked for an extension. They felt that the middle and elementary schools would be a way of reaching parts of the community that were not attending meetings. Determined not to drag out the process, the outreach team in two weeks put together a presentation for the schools that included the video and classroom materials suitable for a student social science laboratory. The



students also were given flyers and ballots to take home as an exercise in civic participation.

"Everyone in the family could vote," Cha says. "The only age restriction was that, they were under 18, they had to say so on the ballot." The student votes were counted separately.



*John Phillips, HUD Community Builder, records community vote on demolition.*

The outreach program uncovered many unfounded but reasonable fears about the demolition among Visitacion Valley residents. Implosion was an unknown method to many residents; but once they had heard Agnos and the experts and seen the videos, opinion began to shift. More than 4,000 households received materials in English and Chinese. All 9,870 households and 450 businesses in the 94134 zip code received information about the election. Ballots could be picked up at 33 locations, including businesses, government offices and community centers.

Cha says the small businesses were particularly effective in spreading word about the election. When Agnos announced the final vote September 24, 1997, it was no contest. Implosion won 2,589 to 216 for the wrecking ball and 48 with other ideas. Visitacion Valley had spoken and HUD was listening. Geneva Towers would be the largest structural implosion in California history.

## **Building Community Partnerships**

HUD and Visitacion Valley Middle School worked together to make the implosion day a success. It was the kind of inter-agency cooperation that typified the new Memorandum of Understanding spirit of community uplift. The tool for HUD's funding of community activities on the day of the implosion was the Beacon Center located at Visitacion Valley Middle School.

## **The Role of Visitacion Valley Middle School in the Community**

Visitacion Valley Middle School had been the worst middle school in San Francisco. Test scores were regularly the lowest in the district; attendance and discipline were wretched. "They closed the school down because it wasn't working," says principal John Flores. "It was beyond redemption. So they started over again in 1995."

The school had been "reconstituted;" the principal and all but four of the 36 teachers assigned elsewhere. When Flores arrived at Visitacion Valley from Phoenix in 1995, he was determined to make a fresh start.

Previously the school's failures had been blamed on the community. The area was a tough one for schools, the litany went. There were housing projects, first generation Chinese who lacked English skills, the kids are in the streets, there are gangs, violence, parents in jail. "We accepted all that," says Flores. "We designed a school that was going to meet the needs of these kids and their parents."

Class sizes were cut, the curriculum made more relevant. Teachers spent more time with students and their families. Parents learned that the school really wanted their children to succeed. Flores says that when he was a child he went through rites of passage like being a Boy Scout or an altar boy that gave him a chance to learn from adults. "That seems to be missing now in terms of modern society," he says. "What we did was we tried to bring services into the

school. We sponsor activities for kids and some adults during school, after school, evenings and on weekends. I have adults here who are providing activities for youths and their families, filling up their time. English as Second Language classes are held from 9 to 11, Monday through Thursday evenings for adults with child care provided during class hours."

## Community Beacon

The catalyst for many services in the school is the Visitacion Valley Community Beacon. Located in Room 101 of the middle school, it offers both youth and adult programs including tutoring, arts and crafts, scouts, conflict management, peer education and various health programs for youths, as well as ESL and computer classes and family workshops for adults. Funded by a creative mix of private foundations and public agencies, it has provided a model for middle school principal John Flores, a master grantsman, in establishing social services programs throughout his school.

"We brought in three social workers full time here at the school. I also have a mental health director who works with me three hours a weeks and sits with me at meetings with the social workers."

This year the Beacon is extending its services to three elementary schools to strengthen after-school academic

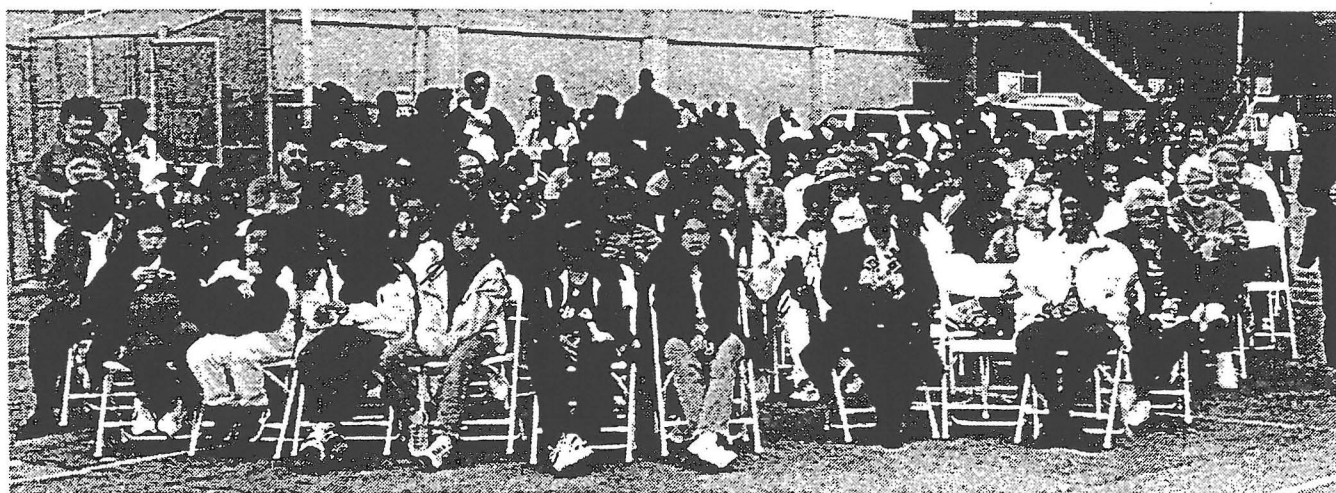
programs. Kids are paid for attending with coupons redeemable at the Middle School store on Saturdays, giving kids and their parents a non-threatening way to get used to the Middle School in advance.

This caring attitude toward the students is paying off, although school administrators will tell you they are not yet satisfied. In reading, 29 per cent scored in the bottom quarter in state tests, compared with 44 percent a few years ago. The hallways are cleaner, the students more polite. Attendance has improved. "It's a dramatically different school," Flores says.

## The Middle School Becomes the Site for Pre-Impllosion Gathering

Because of Visitacion Valley's ethnic diversity, the school meets district integration standards, meaning no busing is required and the students come from the neighborhood. As a result, the school was an excellent way for HUD to reach out to families with information on the upcoming demolition and with ballots to decide on whether to use a wrecking ball or impllosion.

"The demolition was a very powerful psychological experience for many people in the valley because it was their home," Flores recalls. "HUD wanted to do something for the community, to have a ceremony and make the transition to not having the Towers as neat as possible. They came to see me."



*Community residents, shown here at the pre-impllosion ceremony held at the Visitacion Valley Middle School, eagerly await the impllosion.*



*The faces of Neighborhood Day and the future of Visitation Valley.*



"Kay (Nomura, assistant principal) and I and some other people were putting on the street fair. We didn't have any money, so when we were discussing the pre-implosion ceremony and event, I told HUD why don't you give me the money and I'll do whatever you want."

"So they did, they gave us the money under the auspices of Beacon, and I paid for all the prizes for the street fair, for about 500 T-shirts, additional T-shirts for the basketball tournament that day and the band performance because the Beacon was here. "It was really nice. HUD was able to support what we were doing in the Valley. It was win-win for everybody."

This was another example of community HUD partnership. Instead of bringing in outside event vendors to provide services during the implosion events, the community Beacon Center and schools provided the support services, facilities and volunteers. It was a true neighborhood community event.

Leland Avenue. Called a "resource center," it also has a special feature to accommodate the Asian community.

"Part of the problem in Visitacion Valley is the language barrier," says Captain Rick Bruce of Ingleside station. "There are a lot of Chinese-only speaking people down there so I assigned three Chinese-speaking officers to Leland Avenue. My mission to them is to get out into the community and make it known to that community that you are there and, not only that you are there, but that you are bilingual so that we can do some outreach to the senior Chinese. We're trying to set up a resource center, a small storefront where we hang out a shingle, and people know they can come and see us."

"It's not going to be staffed full-time because I want the officers in the field, in the community, walking around, riding around. But we'll be there a few hours every day so people can come by, sit down and talk with the officers, talk about community problems, neighborhood problems."



*The Visitacion Valley Middle School band performs at the pre-implosion ceremony.*

## Community Police Partnership

These kinds of agency/department partnerships continued. As suggested by the neighborhood in the MOU, San Francisco police created a substation on

Captain Bruce says Ingleside already is operating a similar facility in Sunnysdale. "We opened up the first substation in San Francisco on Housing Authority property. I went down there and took three officers and we opened our office. They're there right now.

That program has been so successful that the captain of Bayview has been given a mandate. She was told by the command staff to open substations in all the housing projects in the Bayview."

"As a result of the success that we had in the Sunnydale, here are the kinds of things we are trying to do. We have a graffiti program that's been extremely successful. Other districts have been trying to replicate what we've done with that. I developed a relationship with the juvenile judge who was sentencing all these kids and giving them fines and giving them community service hours. Rather than just writing a police report and sending it off into space, I write a cover letter on every single graffiti arrest we make and send it to the judge. She personally handles the cases and sends the kids back to me and they have to do community service here. We take them out every weekend and they paint over every graffiti in the district."

Bruce says community members love it when they go out on Sundays and see eight or 10 kids with orange vests and paint sprayers painting out graffiti. "They know that these are the kids who put the graffiti up. They get some sense of justice." He said that often community members become disillusioned, feeling there is no justice, that the kids are not having to pay the price for what they've done, that they aren't learning anything, they aren't accountable. So the community gets the graffiti painted over and they feel the justice system is working.

In the Sunnydale development, the top police priority is getting out the "gangsters," as they call them. "We've been extremely successful," Bruce says. There were two gangs out there when I came here. They were the Up The Hill and the Down The Hill gangs. They routinely went out and killed each other. The first night I was assigned here, literally the first night, three guys were shot. One of those killed was shot about 35 times. It was the Up the Hill and the Down the Hill. One Down the Hill group came out in ski masks. They shot three Up the Hill guys and killed one of them. Shot up the house. That was the first night I

was here and it was a kind of wake-up call for me." Bruce says that police decided to focus on the gangsters. "We know that, if we can get this small group of troublemakers out of there, we can start to turn the corner on the entire neighborhood. So we targeted these guys, we went after them."

He said that police succeeded in convicting the main gangster. He was sent to prison and, when he returned, the police were ready. "The main gangster down there got out two weeks ago. We went to his parole officer and we said to him that we want, as a condition of his parole that he can not return to Sunnydale. He didn't live there. He lived over in Ocean View. But he did all his dirt down there."

When the gangster violated the parole stay-away order, he was arrested and put behind bars as a parole violator. The stay-away orders are under legal scrutiny, but Bruce believes they will be upheld.

Ingleside district works closely with the community, as envisioned by the Visitacion Valley Task Force. As suggested by the Memorandum of Understanding, all of Visitacion Valley has been put in one police district, the Ingleside, so residents know where to call to discuss police services. One substation is open and another nearly so. Bruce and his officers speak regularly at 50 or so clubs, ranging from large neighborhood associations to small block clubs. Liaison officers are assigned to each club.

Bruce has established a system of Fax alerts through which he sends messages of community interest to some 60 leaders who then distribute the news to their neighbors. He also maintains an open-door policy, welcoming residents who want to confer with him personally.

Visitacion Valley is getting a voice on police services. It's another example of community uplift.

# Chapter 5

## How a Community Built its Home

**I** was standing alone in my kitchen about 2:30 in the morning and I thought wouldn't it be nice if we could become developers of the land we came back to," Mrs. Gaddies recalls. She knew that the land would be turned over to a non-profit developer and the Geneva Towers residents already had a non-profit organization. The development idea scared her a little, she admits now, smiling. She had no previous political experience outside the community. But the idea of the tenants developing their own housing appealed to her so strongly she took it to a former HUD official, L.P. Lewis, and asked for his help.

"Do you really want to go through with this?" he asked. "I said yes, right to the bitter end." She told Lewis that although she had never done anything like this before, she thought with help she could succeed. "We went to HUD and they were very kind."

"I thought, 'Oh, my God, I'm dealing with the government. Who in the world do I think I am?' But I was dealing with a wonderful part of government. They listened and they helped. They made the road not so hard. Anything can happen. I believed HUD was behind me. I had this gut feeling they would listen and they did." She singled out HUD administrator Mike Greene and regional director Art Agnos as particularly good listeners.

"HUD was great," she says. "They really did something for poor people. They did. They really did. It's not just for me, it's more than 500 families that they did this for. We didn't have to be rich. It should make people all over the United States feel good."

"It should happen again. If you give people the chance to do something for themselves, it makes them feel good."

### Geneva Valley Delopment Corporation

One of the people Mrs. Gaddies approached with her idea for the Geneva Valley Development Corporation and the tenants developing the land they had left was Brenda Lopez, then Director of Children's Programs at the Visitacion Valley Community Center.



*Delores Gaddies (at podium) speaks to community and agency representatives.*

"The GVDC came straight out of the desire of Delores Gaddies to keep the residents intact," Brenda Lopez responded. "They knew what they wanted, but they didn't know exactly how to go about getting it." Like Mrs. Gaddies, she said that consultant L.P. Lewis played a key role. The idea became, "Let's get together and partner with someone to develop it."

The GVDC kept in touch with residents of the demolished Towers and helped nourish the sense of family they shared. The residents shared in decisions about the replacement housing, choosing the street names, picking the colors of the houses, selecting the design. "It was very much a non-traditional

redevelopment-relocation project for the residents," she says. "We treaded new ground."

"Has it been difficult?" she said in response to a question. "Absolutely. The reason it's been difficult is that none of us had a clue as to what we were doing. We stumbled and bumbled along, gaining a lot of information in the process. None of us had done anything like this before. We just kept asking the difficult questions. I think now everyone understands that we are here to stay and they're taking us seriously. Decisions don't get made without our participation."

## Replacement Housing Development

GVDC and its experienced non-profit partner Mercy Housing broke ground October 29, 1998 on the former



*Architect drawing of Heritage Homes*

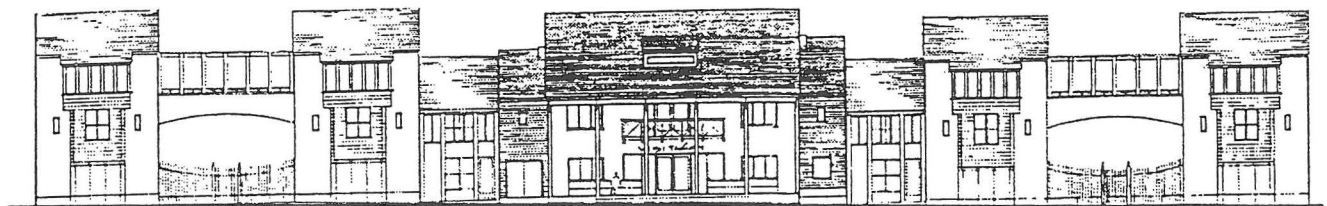
Towers site at Schwerin and Sunnydale. Heritage Homes, as the development was named by the former Towers residents, will offer many amenities including a large courtyard with a childcare center and a community room accessible to all residents.

Families will enjoy either private backyards or balconies, one of the most popular entertainment features of the old Towers. A total of 148 one-to-four bedroom townhouses with on-site parking are included in the design by Powell & Partners and Hardison, Komatsu, Ivelich and Tucker architects. The landscaped courtyard will feature a childcare center and community room accessible to all families.

GVDC and Mercy Services will oversee development of Heritage Housing and operate the project once it is completed. Mrs. Gaddies' dream is well on the way to coming true.

Other development teams are making progress on low-income replacement housing. Ground was broken August 13, 1998 by San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown and HUD's Art Agnos on Britton Street Family Housing. Located on Sunnydale between Britton and Loehr, the development will offer 92 units for low income families: 63 two-bedroom, 21 three-bed room and 8 four-bedroom apartments.

HUD and San Francisco Mayor's Office of Housing is funding the development with low-income housing tax credits. Close to schools and shopping on Leland Avenue, its apartments will offer either a private outdoor backyard or deck. Developed by the Housing Conservation and Development Corporation, the townhouse and flats are grouped into 32 attached two-and-three-story buildings. Architects Michael Willis and Associates and Solmon Inc. have included shared parking, secured garden, laundry room and garbage facilities. A childcare and community room are located near the two entrances.



*Architect drawing of Britton Street Family Housing.*



The John King Senior Community will consist of 90 one-bedroom apartments at 500 Raymond Avenue. The two and three story buildings will include maintenance and storage space, parking, a service center and a childcare center. The Service Center will be operated by the John King Senior Center. Slated for a groundbreaking next spring, the developers are Mercy Services, Housing Conservation and Development Corporation and John King Senior Center. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi of the 8th District, a fiery advocate for the John King Center and the presence of child care centers in all three replacement housing developments, saw to it that \$700,000 was earmarked for Visitacion Valley in a special purpose grant.



*Architect drawing of John King Senior Community.*

## Chapter 6

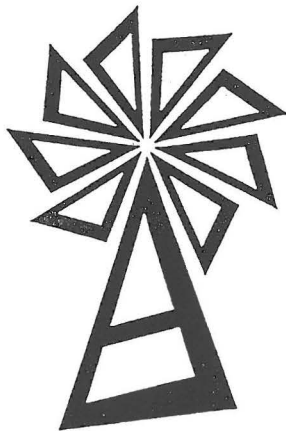
# The Village

**S**ometimes The Village, a rented industrial building at 333 Schwerin, across the street from the Geneva Tower site, seems like one of the busiest places in the Valley. Committees are meeting, toddlers are playing on the floor, Camp Fire City Kids are busy with homework, former Towers residents are checking in with the Neighborhood Health Team. The people know each other and there's almost a family feeling.

"It came to me while we were being relocated," Mrs. Delores Gaddies, president of the Geneva Towers Resident Council recalls. "We wanted to keep the residents together. I asked HUD to keep a building for us to be able to have meetings and do things for the tenants that were being relocated, so if we should come back we would still have this bonding together no matter where we had moved."

"We knew we wanted to come back, so this idea I had was to keep everyone together. The council said in a meeting it would like to ask HUD to keep everything we had in our recreation center, all these things we had in Geneva Towers such as our health care, youth programs and Head Start: all these things that we had so that when we got ready to come back, it would be in place. All we would have to do is move in; we wouldn't have to start up again. It would all be there in the building across the street. We'd still be together and we'd still have the Resident Council."

The five agencies originally relocated from Geneva Towers were Camp Fire City Kids, the Department of Public Health, EOC Head Start, Geneva Towers Recreation Program and the Geneva Towers Residents Council. This service relocation was part of the Memorandum of Understanding between HUD and the City and County of San Francisco for revitalizing the neighborhood.



## The Village

"The five of us who were giving services (to Tower residents) wanted to stay together so we moved over here," says Judith Sandoval then of Camp Fire City Kids and now executive director of Geneva Valley Development Corporation. She and Vernon Long, director of Village Recreation Center (now under auspices of Columbia Park Boys and Girls Club) stayed in the Towers until October 5. "We've been here ever since then, and when the time comes, we will return. We have the same kids, the same staff." The Camp Fire after school program serves boys and girls ages 5 to 12; the Village Recreation Program, ages 12-17

provides homework help, computer training, team sports and counseling.

"In summer we combined the young and the old and both staffs worked with all 150 kids together. With the Youth Council we went on trips together and even wrote poetry." During the school year, she said, the Camp Fire Kids come to do about 45 minutes of homework, followed by structured arts and crafts activities.

## Visitacion Valley Jobs and Education Training (VVJET)

Many activities take place at the Village besides work with young people. Because it is the headquarters for the Residents Council and its development arm, the Geneva Valley Development Corporation, the front wall of the meeting room often is papered with architects' charts and sketches. Larry Fleming, who led the Towers rehabilitation after HUD took over, plays a key role in these meetings. Fleming is now Executive Director of Visitacion Valley Jobs and Education Training (VVJET) which recruits, trains and places valley residents for employment in the soon-to-be burgeoning Visitacion Valley development.

During 1997, the last full year for which figures are available, VVJET trained 185 persons and placed 182 on the job. Fleming says 1998 is an extension of 1997. "We're doing more of what we did in 1997; we just got a little better at it," he said. "We've made more contacts, we've made more inroads into different organizations. We've made more applications to foundations for fundraising. We've made out-of-state contacts. We place community members in jobs every day."

VVJET has moved swiftly to correct problems encountered in 1997. Fleming says that clients are now checked ahead of time for literacy, freedom from drugs and draft status in one assessment to eliminate redundancy. "I don't want the client to be assessed to death," he said.

As intended, VVJET has begun placing workers on the Heritage Homes and Britton Street sites, the projects to which Geneva Towers' residents will be relocated. Both projects are just getting started and more jobs are expected as construction progresses, looking ahead to the third project, John King, which is scheduled for groundbreaking next spring.

At Britton Street, the first laborer hired was a VVJET placement, Fleming says. "We're working really closely with the developer and the job superintendent and the

manager. We're coordinating. They don't hire anybody unless they come to VVJET first. If I don't have the personnel they request, I go to the union and work with them."

"It's good for the client. That way we're sure we got the community representation. The contractor's happy because he knows he's got a person that's already pre-screened and all his dues are paid up. He's not getting a person with a whole lot of baggage. He knows that we believe the person is going to be at work every day."

Working with the union, VVJET has developed a way to pro-rate dues. "Local 2 requires \$500 to join the union," he says. "Needless to say these people don't have \$500." Fleming hopes that eventually a revolving bank fund can be established, so that workers can borrow the union initiation fee and then pay it back once they're on the job, and initiation money will be available for the next applicant. "That way, they'll be self-sufficient," he says.

VVJET isn't the only Village agency coming up with innovative ideas. The Urban Institute of San Francisco State University has run a remarkable package of programs from the Village. The Words Project for instance grew out of a search for new ways to interest kids in reading. After consulting with the kids themselves, the program started teaching youths to write rap, glided into poetry and soon the participants were reading on their own. Two from one family were reading two years below grade level. After one semester both had improved by two grades. The Institute has trained staffers in The Words Project techniques so they can replicate it if the Institute is unable to obtain refunding.

In a move toward healing the rift between the African American and Chinese communities in Visitacion Valley, the Institute is planning a public rehearsal by prestigious Asian musicians and dancers in the Village. It will be sponsored by the African American community. The idea is to encourage Asian Americans



to visit The Village. The Institute is cooperating with Chinese for Affirmative Action in planning the gala.

In an unusual project with VVJET, the Institute is organizing a for-profit catering service called The Hungry Stomach to furnish meals at the relocation housing construction sites. The caterers who will be trained by VVJET, will gain experience to help land good jobs in the culinary industry. In other matters, Institute experts are teaching skills from designing brochures to researching and writing funding proposals.

In return, The Village is offering San Francisco State students a chance to learn the rich satisfactions of community service. It's a good deal for both sides.

## Community Uplift

The GVDC likes to say it isn't just about housing, it's about building a community. Executive director Judith Sandoval recalls the early days. "The Resident Council, one of the original five, branched out into the Geneva Valley Development Corporation whose purpose was to keep track of people who were evicted, to educate, to stay with them and keep people involved. The former residents helped design Heritage Homes, they held community workshops. The residents were there and they had major changes. The architects were wonderful. They wanted to have garages without dividers. The residents said 'no, things will be taken. No, if we're going to have to be bigger or take units, take the units.' So the architects redesigned everything so all the garages have dividers."

Sandoval says there's a new spirit at work in this development. "I've been community organizing since the sixties and I've always been at loggerheads with the city. This is the first place I've ever been where the city, and that includes HUD and the government, were our advocates. They not only meet with us, they advocate for us. And that's unheard of. That's why it's so good, they want us to succeed, and there are huge obstacles, human obstacles, financial obstacles,

physical obstacles. But they're here and they want us to succeed."

She recalls that it took three months to name the development on the site of the demolished towers. "It was all negative. We don't want Geneva. We don't want Towers. It finally got named Heritage Homes, but it took three months. Then it only took five or six minutes to decide the names for the streets inside, A Building and B Building, leftover from the Towers. No problem there."

She said the former residents finally came up with Heritage Homes after Missy Raglin, president of the Youth Council picked up a Roget's Thesaurus and sat down for an afternoon, playing with it. "She pulled out two or three names and took them to the next meeting."

The GVDC hopes ultimately that the tenants will own their own homes. Once the former tenants move into the replacement housing, the plan is for them to self-manage and govern it. They will then become housing advocates and form a valley-wide housing council with other developments. Finally they will, it is hoped, own their own homes. Working with the Consumer Credit Counseling Services of San Francisco, the GVDC is proposing a series of workshops on basic credit management, saving and investment. There also will be a tie-in with job preparation through VVJET, as well as workshops on maintaining, managing and governing replacement housing.

## Bringing a Diverse Community Together

Aside from the demolition of Geneva Towers, one of the most dramatic changes in Visitacion Valley in the past 20 years is the influx of Chinese immigrants, many with limited skills in English. Attracted by inexpensive housing and good weather, they have turned Leland Avenue into a little Chinatown where

shops hang out signs in Chinese and Asian food specialties are routinely available. From 1980 to 1990 the Asian population increased some 74 percent to 7,992. In the years since it has soared until leaders like Marlene Tran of Visitacion Valley Asians Alliance estimate that 60 per cent of Valley residents are Asian.

"They make excellent neighbors," says Marjorie Ann Williams, an African American who has lived in the valley for 42 years and is a VVJET staffer. "The only problem has been a lack of communication. We used to be a really, really close community. I raised five children and had 10 grandchildren here. I used to be able to go to sleep with my door open. My next door neighbor, who was Jewish, kept an all-seeing eye on the neighborhood. Our neighbors always looked out for each others' children. There were a lot of block parties that kept the neighborhood together."

"Much to my dismay, when I retired from the Presidio and started volunteering, I saw that this (closeness) was now lacking in the community because of the language barrier."

Williams, who as a teenager attended Galileo High School and whose aunt taught for 45 years at Commodore Stockton, both schools with large Chinese enrollments, says she always felt comfortable around Asians. She says, however, that there is often a lack of understanding between the Chinese and African American communities. To try to improve these relations, a committee has been formed that has called in Chinese for Affirmative Action for help.

One person who is deeply concerned about the language barrier is Marlene Tran, who is an English as a Second Language teacher. She says many Chinese immigrants are being left out of programs because they are not proficient in English.

"There is a huge communications gap," she says. Tran explains that many of the immigrants are new to the country and come from politically repressive societies where they were not encouraged to speak their minds.

They are not familiar with police procedures, can not express themselves to non-Chinese speaking police and are reluctant to participate in community meetings without an interpreter. She says that Chinese-Americans in the Sunset and Richmond districts who have been in the United States longer are able to speak more English than those in Visitacion Valley.

The issue of race is the one challenge that few in Visitacion Valley like to talk about and yet are trying to honestly deal with. Many acknowledge that a Chinese-African American tension exists, but its seriousness seems to depend on the speaker. Julia Kavanaugh, Executive director of Visitacion Valley Community Center, says that despite sincere efforts "race is still an issue in this neighborhood."

"Lots of problems are blamed on race, and that makes them a racial issue," she says. "We need to get together and talk more openly about race. The only way you can put these issues into proper perspective is by facing them. If there's 100 people in this neighborhood who think race is a problem, then we have got a racial problem and we need to talk about it."

The Valley faces other problems beside racial tension. The revitalization of the commercial section appears stalled because of the departure of a key planner. Some residents worry that, despite assurances, some former Towers residents will not be admitted to replacement housing because of poor credit records. Others fret about guaranteeing their fair share of uplift programs. But the most exciting part for the community is that the mechanism for resolving these and other concerns is now in place.

## The Dawn of a New Era

Like other neighborhoods, Visitacion Valley is not static. Local leaders are coordinating their efforts at building a new community. The chain of events started by HUD's decision to foreclose on Geneva Towers has brought together a wide cross-section of the Valley into deciding its own future. Thanks to the written

commitments of the Memorandum of Understanding, the City and HUD are on record as promising affordable housing for the Valley. A special effort has successfully brought low income residents into the decision making.

Although the Valley still faces many problems, a new era is dawning. In the poetic words of former resident Lela Jones, which she wrote five days before the Geneva Towers were imploded:

*"The residents put together this great plan  
with all the differences set aside.  
The dawn of a new day where we can  
finally enjoy living stable again."*



# Chapter 7

## What We Have Learned

I

n carrying out the Visitacion Valley uplift, administrators relied on principles that can be replicated elsewhere.

*One of the most important was trying new strategies as events and issues unfolded.* Robert DeMonte, Agnos' predecessor, had the courage to push for what he thought was right, even though it was unprecedented. For two years he struggled to convince Washington that conditions in Geneva Towers were so deplorable that the government should take over private property through the legal process of foreclosure. He finally succeeded, went to court and won, thus beginning the uplift of Visitacion Valley.

*Another critical principle was expanding the possibilities for solutions, instead of doing the familiar.* HUD traditionally had followed a policy of rehabilitating its worn out projects. When Agnos took over, he told his staff to think out of the box, to sit down and look at issues in a fresh way. As part of this, staffers were encouraged to break bureaucratic tradition by speaking up if they had a different point of view. It worked. Gradually a consensus emerged that demolition of Geneva Towers might be a better option than rehab.

At this point, the administrators involved the community, seeking their insight. Decisions had to be bought into by the community. The neighborhood's insights were given heavy weight. Agnos saw that the area affected was not just the Towers, but the entire Visitacion Valley. HUD was thinking beyond its property line. *The principle involved was that decisions had to be validated by the community.*

HUD went a step further and *established the basic principle of accountability of all parties.* This principle

of accountability was written into a Memorandum of Understanding. "We needed a solid, irrefutable tool: a memorandum to set out the rights, responsibilities and obligations of all parties," Agnos said. "It had to be more than an expression of good will and policy. It had to be nuts and bolts so that people could point to it with certainty to overcome the skepticism and cynicism of residents."

A second use of the Memorandum was to require a firm commitment from local government that would withstand the pressures of changing leadership. Urban communities face competing priorities, and leadership changes can result in yesterday's commitment being shelved. Agnos was sensitive to this issue, since his mayoral administration was replaced by a new administration that sought to alter existing policies and funding allocations.

By making the City, and not the mayor, a party to the agreement, Agnos was able to assure the residents of Visitacion Valley that their contract terms would be carried out: not only in the administration then in office, but in a future administration that might seek to revamp or even end the City's commitment to the neighborhood.

The wisdom of this course became apparent when former Mayor Frank Jordan was succeeded by Mayor Willie L. Brown Jr., whose planners had priorities of their own. "We don't have any agreement with the people of Visitacion Valley," they protested on encountering the obligations in the Memorandum of Understanding. "That's right," HUD said. "You don't have obligations. The City does." The City administrators recognized the wisdom and the needs of the community as expressed in the binding MOU. The Memorandum is being honored.

To Agnos, the memorandum was also a sign of respect for the community. "When a community doesn't trust government, you must have something more than the rhetoric of politicians and bureaucrats," Agnos said. "They have to have something that middle class and wealthy people have every time, a contract enforceable by rule of law. We told poor people or low income people in a disadvantaged neighborhood that we didn't want to tell you what goes in it. You have to decide for yourselves."

A turning point in HUD's relationship with the residents came about when scofflaws were finally held accountable for their illegal behavior. These scofflaws were a small group who had over the years successfully manipulated Geneva Tower's management to avoid paying rent. *The principle was establishing a no-nonsense approach to dealing with trouble makers and shady practices.*

When a technician reported finding lead in the water at the Towers, rumors were spread that residents were being poisoned and a group quickly formed to monitor the water supply. A proposal for \$4 million in HUD funds was included in the water report, with the recommendation that a "study" should be monitored by some residents and supervised by experts who were found to possess dubious credentials. The proposal was quickly approved by San Francisco City Hall, and might have

received full funding under some administrations. But Agnos and local HUD officials insisted on a due diligence review based on merit, not political accommodation.

The proposal was not funded because it was evaluated as lacking merit and proper credentials. HUD was winning respect. "The water scam and the rent scam sent a signal that HUD really meant it when we said it's important for both of us to play by the rules," Agnos said.

## HUD Principles of Community Uplift

- Trying new strategies
- Expanding the opportunities for solutions
- Establishing accountability of all parties
- Enforcing a no-nonsense approach to shady practices
- Validating community decisionmaking
- Establishing a neighborhood council
- Responding to problems personally and effectively

The water report also offered *an example of another important principle, do what's correct even if you have to do it yourself.* The possibility of lead in the water was reported to Agnos late on a Friday afternoon. He was told that it would be corrected immediately on Monday morning. "Stop!" he said. "We don't wait over the weekend." He and other top HUD staffers personally saw to it that bottled water was delivered to the Towers by Friday evening along with a full explanation of what was going on. The situation was investigated and the concerns proved unfounded. The

residents were kept informed at each step.

In another example of personal intervention, a whistleblower informed Agnos that overzealous asbestos workers were breaking into the city sewer system and

dumping contaminated water into the Bay, a violation of their contract and environmental regulations. The offenses, a response to El Nino flooding, were occurring over the weekend when monitors were not around.

Agnos had himself and his staff designated as government inspectors. For the next three months, they made unannounced visits and personally ordered immediate corrections of reported violations. The situation was corrected and the community had another example of the new spirit at HUD: no shortcuts, the rules must be obeyed.

*HUD was the catalyst for neighborhood empowerment by fostering the formation of a neighborhood council, an integral principle of community uplift.* HUD encouraged ethnic groups, church groups, neighborhood groups, educators and individual leaders to bank into a Task Force which could legitimately speak for the community. Faced with half a million dollars a month in upkeep costs, HUD waited while the task force came up with a program for improving its community. In only four months the Task Force produced a comprehensive series of recommendations, most of which found their way into the Memorandum of Understanding. The community was having a major influence on deciding its own future.

Meanwhile HUD was proving its good faith to the community, planning and carrying out relocation from Geneva Towers. Overall policy was made with the cooperation of the Residents Council. A professional relocation firm was hired and relocation was settled on a case by case basis. At the recommendation of the residents, for instance, HUD granted \$25 to relocated families for a fee to turn on cable TV. Other accommodations have been detailed earlier in this report. The same respectful treatment HUD gives its relocated employees was accorded the Geneva Towers residents.

The successful lessons and achievements in Visitacion Valley emerged because neighborhoods and federal

bureaucracy worked together to uplift a neglected community. Now, more than at any time in its history, the people of Visitacion Valley have the capacity and resources to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and their community.





## **GENEVA TOWERS TIMELINE**

## GENEVA TOWERS TIMELINE

<b>1964</b>	Geneva Towers is constructed by private owner developers.
<b>1965</b>	Geneva Towers' owners receive HUD mortgage insurance for \$10,094,000 to finance the building as low income housing.
<b>1976</b>	At request of the private developers, HUD grants project based Section 8 assistance, allowing low income families living at the Towers to pay no more than 30 per cent of their income in rent.
<b>1991</b>	After years of the private owners failing to maintain the property in safe, decent and sanitary condition as required by their mortgage, HUD Regional Administrator Robert DeMonte forecloses on the mortgage. This is the first time in the nation that HUD forecloses on the basis of poor conditions in the property. HUD immediately begins correcting deficiencies in the Towers. Fire and safety code violations are abated, security improved, crime reduced and more than \$8 million in repairs begun.
<b>1992</b>	The democratically elected Residents Council is chosen by the residents and a master plan is developed to study possible options for the future of Geneva Towers. Secretary Henry Cisneros appointed by President Bill Clinton introduces the concept of Uplifting Neighborhoods.
<b>1993</b>	On July 1, Art Agnos is appointed Regional Administrator for HUD's Region IX. In December, three meetings are held with Geneva Towers residents and an additional three meetings with Visitacion Valley neighbors to discuss the future of Geneva Towers. Options include renovating the Towers or demolishing them to be replaced with low-rise family and senior housing. A majority of all groups informally express a preference for the demolition option.
<b>1994</b>	In March, Mayor Frank Jordan forms the Visitacion Valley Task Force and, in July, it publishes a report based on the demolition of the Towers and requests for replacement housing for families and seniors and economic development for the Valley. In September, HUD meets with Geneva Towers' residents to discuss disposition and relocation plans.
<b>1995</b>	In February, HUD and the City of San Francisco commit themselves in writing to the development of Visitacion Valley. This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) addresses the specific suggestions of residents, spells out the details of replacement housing, and guarantees efforts to improve schools, security and economic development. A charter for community uplift, it is the first such signed agreement in the nation.

1995	<p>By the end of the year, the relocation of residents is completed and social services, which had been located in the Towers, is set up in The Village, an industrial building across the street and rented by the city. VVJET, a community-based employment, development and training program, is also headquartered in The Village.</p>
1996	<p>In February, in a prelude to demolition of Geneva Towers, asbestos removal begins. The job becomes more protracted than expected after more asbestos than anticipated is found in the building and a contract dispute ensues. VVJET trainees from the community are employed in the removal.</p> <p>San Francisco schools carry out the City's promise in the Memorandum of Understanding to create a Beacon Center in Visitacion Valley Middle School. It is the first Beacon Center in the San Francisco Unified School District.</p>
1997	<p>HUD sponsors an extensive outreach campaign by Imtech Communications to allow Visitacion Valley residents to determine how Geneva Towers will be demolished. The election, following weeks of community education, drew upward of 3,000 ballots and the results are announced in September. More than 90 percent of those voting prefer an implosion to a wrecking ball demolition method. Art Agnos said the voter turnout was proof that HUD's efforts to rebuild faith with the community are taking hold. The election is the first of its kind to be held in the nation.</p> <p>Meanwhile former Geneva Towers residents are helping develop replacement housing through the Geneva Valley Development Corporation. Through 1997, VVJET trains 185 individuals and places 182 in jobs.</p>
1998	<p>The asbestos abatement project is belatedly completed and the Geneva Towers project is turned over to the implosion contractor, Aman Environmental Construction, on March 31 and work begins April 6. The building implosion, the largest ever in California, is witnessed by thousands on May 16. The site cleanup is finished on schedule in September.</p> <p>Meanwhile, San Francisco police have opened a substation in Sunnydale, and assigned Chinese-speaking officers to a similar "resource center" on Leland Avenue as urged by Memorandum of Understanding planners. The police department also has redrawn its boundaries to put all Visitacion Valley under one station, Ingleside.</p> <p>Ground is broken in August for 92 units of replacement housing for low income families. Another groundbreaking, this one on the site of the demolished Towers, is scheduled in November for Heritage Homes which will feature 148 one-to-four bedroom units. The John King Senior Community of 90 one-bedroom senior units is being planned, again with community participation. Groundbreaking is set for Spring of 1999.</p>

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