

Intro:

In The Civil Rights Act of 1968. America does move forward. And the bell of freedom rings out a little louder.

Christina Rosales:

Hi there. This is A Little Louder, a podcast for wonks, housers, and rabble rousers where we talk about Fair Housing, Community Development, and how we can use these issues to build people power and work toward equity and justice. I'm Christina Rosales.

John Henneberger:

And I'm John Henneberger.

Christina:

And this is the first episode of A Little Louder. I'm the Communications Director at Texas Housers, so it's my job to transfer our knowledge and our expertise out into the world. John's been bugging me for about a year to start this podcast. So why do you want to start this podcast?

John:

Well, I think we have all this snappy repartee that goes on at the office and I think we should share it with the world. No, seriously. We're not able to communicate enough just with the blog, which is our primary way of talking to people. And there's a lot going on in the housing and community development world. And we have a really energetic and effective staff that's doing a lot of good things and into a lot of issues. So it's a way to talk some more about what we do.

Christina:

Every episode will sort of look pretty similar. We'll talk about different topics. The first segment is going to be called In the News and On Our Minds. It's something we've read that we think is pertinent to some of our work or some of the issues that are really hot right now in the housing world. Then, we'll talk about a main issue or main part of our show. So today we're talking about Clarksville and how Clarksville inspired John and really sparked Texas Housers.

John:

Clarksville is a bittersweet story of a neighborhood, a freedman's neighborhood that no longer exists as an African American freedman's town because of gentrification.

Christina:

Yeah. And we'll dive into that really shortly. And then the last thing is there's a 30-something year gap between the older houser John and the younger Houser that's me. So we're going to teach John some millennial terms. He's already taught me a lot in the year and a half that I've been a houser but I think it would be fun if he learned a little bit of millennial slang. So the last segment will teach John something, you'll have a teachable moment here.

John:

Well, we'll see if that works.

Christina:

Okay, so let's dive into it: In the News and On Our Minds. So have you read something lately that you found interesting that you want to talk about?

John:

Yeah, I've been I've been reading a lot about opportunities zones recently. And this week, HUD Secretary Ben Carson wrote an op-ed column in the Washington Post about these opportunities zones. And here among our staff, we've been talking about the implementation of this. This is President Trump's, I guess, his premier initiative around dealing with poverty. I think we've got a lot of concerns about the way it's being implemented by this administration.

Christina:

So I think what's interesting is that this isn't like the first iteration where someone has this bright idea about opportunities zones, Promise Zones, you know, there's always this place based intervention that political leaders want to push. So what's different?

John:

Well, I think what's different is it seems to be a totally free-for-all approach to giving away massive tax breaks. And not being specific at all about the activities that are being funded needing to benefit the communities in which they're located.

Of course, it raises a lot of questions about what we're going to talk about a little later about the implications for gentrification and whether the activities that these private investors will make will actually benefit the people who live in the neighborhoods where the investments are taking place. I think it's a recipe for disaster frankly, and there's a different set of opinions out there in the housing community. There are those who believe that this can advantage communities, that there will be investors who will be wanting to invest their money in in job-creating businesses and in retail and in housing. But there's no requirement that it do that, in essence.

Just a little background: Is it okay if I do a little background?

Christina:

Go for it.

John:

So reel me in here if I get too long winded, but the the opportunities zones are designated by the governor, and nationwide they are like 8,000 some-odd of these opportunities zones that governors have picked. And there's a whole bunch of these are in Texas. And supposedly these are areas that have suffered from disinvestment, where people, businesses have not invested money. And so there's just stagnant, high poverty going on. But when we've looked at where the

governor in Texas has designated these opportunities zones, some of these areas, there has been significant investment, and in fact, many of the areas are what I would characterize this neighborhoods that are undergoing rapid gentrification. For example, in San Antonio, the governor has designated neighborhoods on the near West Side, including the UTSA campus area, which as an opportunity zone.

And that's an area where the longtime Hispanic residents on the west side of San Antonio are definitely afraid of being displaced from their homes and their businesses by influx of new money that are happening right now. There's also opportunities zones on the south side, which is near south side of San Antonio, which is suffered from a lot of rapid transition from low income Hispanic population to higher income Anglo population and the east side as well. So, just in this one city, we see that these opportunities zones are really in areas that are pretty hot for an already for investment and gentrification. The alarm bells should be going off, all across the state and all across the nation, about what's going to happen to the people who really live in and care about these neighborhoods.

And if you're concerned about these affected neighborhoods or you're a resident in these affected neighborhoods, you need to get involved right now with engaging your city council and your congressperson about what you want these investments to look like. Under the regulations that the Treasury Department have proposed, you've basically got no say in this, but there are other ways that cities can use development control powers that they have to sort of regulate things.

So Christina, what's what's on your reading list? What's got your attention?

Christina:

Earlier this month, Mike Snyder at the Houston Chronicle did a really good feature story about Tamina, which is a Freedman's settlement 35 miles north of Houston, and I do know that these kinds of settlements in across the country, but particularly in Texas, were founded within the same time period. And just like Clarksville, here in Austin. Tamina was founded in 1871. At this point, it's 200 homes. But I thought that Mike did a good job of really getting that nuance of that neighborhood tension or that community tension. People are afraid of attrition, they're afraid that this community will die. And they need investment and they need proper drainage systems and and water and roads and lighting.

And I just when I was reading it, it so reminded me of your experience with Clarksville, but also the colonias that we've worked in for a long time in South Texas, the same sort of thing and people in Mike's story they said "what is your hypothesis about why you've been denied the services for all these years" and "why are you being neglected and you're so close to the fourth largest city in the country." And people said over and over, "it sounds like that it's because we're black."

And that's not wrong, you know, that is their experience. And I think it's the same in the colonias. Why are they denied services? It's because the white people in cities, the third, fourth generation Mexican Americans in the cities are Hispanic -- however they identify. They don't value these communities.

John:

Right. I guess Tamina is sort of what we call a non border colonia in Texas. And that essentially means a neighborhood that's a neighborhood of color and low income that has significant problems with lack of public services. And I think in this case, they've got serious problems with their water supply, don't they?

Christina:

Yeah. They've had a deal going for their water supply few times over the last 20 years and the deal's always fallen through, for whatever reason. Some of the residents said it's because of decision makers in the community. It's because they were a variety of reasons. But there's still this neighborhood tension, which reminds me a lot about your experiences in Clarksville. But I think people fear gentrification, right? So if they're like "if we get investment, then people will come in and change the community." There's also this tension between getting annexed by a neighboring city or other community and people are afraid of that means that their legacy... they're not worried about their property prices, they're worried about what this means for their legacy.

John:

And that idea of a legacy or that idea of community is something that I think a lot of people who don't come from neighborhoods like this don't understand. But when you have a neighborhood where multiple generations of your family have lived and grown up together, and where the relationships between the different families who live in the community go back over the course of generations, what has been built is a set is a community in the sense of a much deeper sense than what most people normally think about a community. Most people think about a neighborhood, and the average I think is you stay seven or eight years and a house that you buy, and then you move up to another house or something like that, but in Tamina and other neighborhoods like that and including non border and border colonias, you have people who stay for generation after generation and that's a richness, a cultural richness, a social richness, which you can't buy with money. And if you lose that, you've lost culturally the thing you're grounded in, the thing that makes your life life really valuable to you.

Christina:

Tamina is a good transition to what you are experiencing in Clarksville. You stumbled into Clarksville when you were, what, 20 something?

John:

Yeah, in 1975 when I was an undergraduate sophomore at the University of Texas at Austin assigned in a American Studies class to gather oral histories and they pointed me at a

community in near West Austin, a small African American community known as a Freedman's town, meaning it was founded right after the Civil War of what was then of a suburban community outside of Austin.

It was an area where one man bought multiple acres of land from the former governor of the state of Texas, Elisha Pease, and he subdivided the land and sold it to people, including the state representatives from East Texas who needed to come to Austin have a place to live during the legislative session. And that community grew into a 12 square block neighborhood, not huge. Probably 400-500 people or so at its peak. And it was outside the city, it was very much a non border colonia, without water or without wastewater disposal. The streets are that the people built. There was no lighting. There was no fire protection. In the early days there was no school, and eventually there was what they called the colored school built in the neighborhood, because the white school which was just two and a half blocks away, wouldn't let African American kids in.

So they built a separate wooden, kind of informal, almost a shack sort of building. And the kids went school during the day and the adults went to school at night and learned to read and write. When I came in 1975, it was 100 years old. And it was described to me as a family community. At the time I thought, "well, does that mean like family value stuff? Does that mean? You know, you're they don't want people they don't want young people running around and doing what young people do and cursing"

Christina:

Not appealing to 20 something-year-old John.

John:

Yeah, yeah. But that wasn't what it meant. People meant that it was a family community in the sense that families were interrelated and knew each other and that over the course of 100 years, these relationships were very deep. And early on, one of the first things that happened in Clarksville was the community founded a church right in the geographic center of the community and named it Sweet Home Missionary Baptist Church. And that says a lot about how people viewed community and faith and the like. There's just so much rich history around Clarksville. We can't cover it all. But I just think that the struggle that Clarksville went through facing displacement and gentrification are what got me interested in this work.

Our office today is just two blocks south of Clarksville and my home is nearby. I bought just outside of Clarksville, and because I had developed a set of friends in that neighborhood, and I really wanted to be close to it. And it was something that I couldn't buy into as somebody who'd lived in 12 different places as I was growing up, because my father was in the Air Force. I couldn't buy into community, but I just felt such a powerful attraction to what Clarksville gave to the residents of the neighborhood that I wanted to be associated with it.

So we worked on -- at the time I got involved -- the state had just built a freeway and taken out three blocks of the neighborhood and displaced a lot of families. And the city was talking about building another freeway perpendicular to the freeway that had taken out part of the neighborhood, which made a bunch of really, blatantly racist jogs in order to take out the rest of Clarksville. And the community was organized to fight what was called the "Crosstown Expressway" at the time. And together with the surrounding white neighborhoods, they were able to beat that that proposal to build that expressway back in the expressway never got built in Clarksville wasn't destroyed. But Clarksville ultimately is pretty much ceased to be a minority neighborhood now, because of the explosive growth Austin and the rapid increase in property taxes and land values in the neighborhood.

Christina:

Yeah, it's it's interesting to me because I started working here and we're right near Clarksville and it's like white girl heaven. There's you know salons there's Pilates studios and spin classes and vegetarian restaurants and it's like the only footprint for me is some of the historical landmarks like the Haskell House and Sweet Home.

John:

Yeah, on Sundays the community becomes a neighborhood of color again when everybody comes back to church, but there's only a handful of African American families remaining in Clarksville. Clarksville is a really the canary in the coal mine in Austin, about gentrification because it went through it at a fairly advanced stage back a number of years ago and we see many of the same type of forces which produced displacement of the African American population of Clarksville going on today in East Austin and other parts of the city, as property values continue to rise.

It's really a very useful historical reference for understanding how this works. And I hope in future episodes, we have a chance to explore some of the lessons that I think can be learned and applied today to preservation of community without preserving poverty. When I went to Clarksville the streets weren't paved and they're still wasn't sewer to all the houses. The housing conditions were very bad. That's not acceptable for people to have to live in those type of conditions. But if you have this community that's really worth preserving, and it's very rich, how do you improve conditions without triggering the wholesale displacement of a population. And Clarksville gives us an opportunity to to think about those type of challenges.

Christina:

Yeah, I think it'd be really interesting to see if we can bring somebody who grew up in Clarksville onto the show?

Is there anything else you wanted to add? They had that phrase. What is that phrase?

John:

It's "It's 100 years of struggle and it ain't over yet." Yeah. When the developers first came into Clarksville, there were a group of homebuilders who were young, former radical leftists kids who had gone off into kind of making money. And this was in the 80s. And they began buying property in the neighborhood and redeveloping it for themselves and their friends and they were all white, which was okay, up to the point where they started buying all the rent houses and displace and all the families who had been there for multiple generations and who were renters.

And the neighborhood engaged in a really interesting anti-gentrification struggle where they tried to deal. They tried to appeal to the moral sense of the people who were actually coming in buying up property, building more expensive homes that people couldn't afford and displacing long-term families. And so this campaign had a bumper sticker and yard signs and it was "Clarksville: 100 years of struggle, and it ain't over yet." And the community sought to portray the richness of its heritage and the value of that and appeal to these people coming in from the outside not to destroy what they and their multiple generations of families before them had built. And ultimately, it wasn't successful. I mean, the moral appeal was trumped by the desirability of basically owning for themselves. These new incomers, the owning for themselves a place very convenient to ask to downtown and all the good stuff in Austin. And again, you know, I think this will be an interesting topic to continue to explore and can teach us I think some things we need to begin to talk about doing today to be able to deal realistically with gentrification. We don't want to freeze poverty. We want people have a right to live in a decent community. But we have to be cognizant of what happens when these improvements are brought in.

Christina:

So we're at toward the end of our show. It's the last little bit, so John, I put out a call to the staff half of whom are in their 20s and maybe early 30s. But what millennial term they wanted you to learn. A suggestion that I thought was interesting because it applies to you is the word "extra."

It's when someone is just above and beyond. It's like when you come into the office and you've been over-caffeinated, we describe you is "John is being a little extra today." So, your assignment is to think of a way to describe something related to housing policy or neighborhood and Community Development using the word extra.

John:

So opportunity zones, as proposed by Ben Carson are extra in a very bad way. Does that work?

Christina:

I think it's kind of comes close enough.

John:

Well, I try to stay dope around the office. Where is I think you'll agree things are mostly lit. I listened to how most folks my age communicate and I just have to say oof.

Christina:

All right, everybody that's that's the tea for today. So if you want to find us online, you can follow us at @TexasHousers on Twitter. John, do you have your Twitter handle?

John:

I don't know what it is!

Christina:

We'll post that on our website and I'm [@CLRosales](#) on Twitter, follow us on our website for the latest research at texashousing.org.

John:

And Christina Rosales is totally GOAT.

Christina:

Alright, have a good one. Bye!