



# New Hope Housing: Creating Communities for Those in Need

*By Natalya Pomeroy*

**E**vette, a twenty-six-year-old single mother who had fled a toxic relationship, struggled to support her family as she and her sons, Ryan, age nine, and Ar-ian, age three, moved from one shelter to another. She found her way to The Star of Hope's Women and Family Development Center, where she began building her skills and learned about another organization that was also growing and building—New Hope Housing. Every day, she and her children watched New Hope Housing's Reed apartments under construction nearby and dreamed of living there.

Their dream came true in November of 2018 when they moved into their fully furnished apartment and began taking advantage of New Hope Housing's onsite supportive services and educational programs. With the help of Star of Hope and New Hope Housing, Evette saved enough money to buy a car. She enrolled in a GED program at Houston Community College and began working part-time as a health care provider. Evette's long-term goals include becoming a psychologist and—the big one—saving money to buy her own home.

For over a quarter century, the non-profit New Hope Housing has provided low cost, single room occupancy (SRO) housing for single adults living on little to no income in Houston to help them realize their goals. Today, New Hope has expanded to assist vulnerable families like Evette's. It keeps residents' rent costs low to provide affordable housing options and support services by combining federal funding with private donations and effective budgeting and management, "Building Communities, Restoring Lives."<sup>1</sup>

*New Hope Housing's Hamilton property stands in the foreground, adjacent to the construction site for the Houston Astros' playing field, now Minute Maid Park.*

All photos courtesy of New Hope Housing.

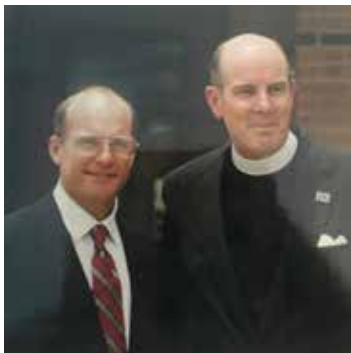


## ORIGINS OF NEW HOPE HOUSING

In the early 1990s, parishioners of downtown Houston's Christ Church Cathedral realized the area around the church was experiencing an increase in the number of homeless people and others who clearly lacked access to adequate housing. Christ Church members challenged themselves and their neighboring communities to take action to provide these people with a stable home environment so they could eventually support themselves.

In 1981, Christ Church Cathedral had founded COMPASS, a nonprofit corporation to help with case management for disadvantaged men and women, which began operation in 1982. Working with COMPASS, the church members noticed that the at-risk, homeless, and low-income community needed more than case management and employment services; they also needed a place to call home.

The church members began raising money as part of their effort to support their fellow Houstonians by providing them with a permanent place to live, rather than temporary shelters and transitional homes. The cathedral's dean at the time, The Very Reverend Walter H. Taylor, introduced the concept of SRO housing to Houston to achieve this goal.<sup>2</sup>



*John Benzou, former board president of New Hope Housing, with The Very Reverend Walter Hamilton Taylor of Christ Church Cathedral at the grand opening of Hamilton Phase II.*

Christ Church Cathedral initiated a fundraising campaign that stipulated for every dollar raised to restore the nearly century-old cathedral, one dollar would be allocated to address community issues. In the end, Christ Church raised \$1.25 million to pave the way for a permanent solution to helping low-income and disadvantaged Houstonians get a foothold and start a new chapter in their lives. That new chapter began with New

Hope Housing emerging as Houston's first organization providing SRO rental housing.<sup>3</sup>

The people at Christ Church Cathedral envisioned New Hope Housing and its first SRO project as "a breakaway" from the church. Nicole Cassier-Mason, New Hope's vice president of philanthropy and communications, explained, "Our founders had the foresight and wherewithal to understand the church's role in the development of affordable housing. Being connected to a church or another religious place of worship can sometimes bring limitations, particularly in accessing government funds, which can hamper growth and expansion. The church played a critical role in founding us, establishing our vision, attracting new donors, and eventually set us free."<sup>4</sup>

New Hope Housing faced challenges pioneering SRO housing. Other major cities already had thousands of SROs,

but Houston had none. Rev. Taylor introduced the concept as a solution to the many needs identified through its nonprofit partners like COMPASS. Having a job addressed a facet of the overarching struggle for homeless persons and those at-risk by offering an income, but having a permanent stable home seemed to be the factor underlying their success moving forward.

In the beginning, New Hope Housing found it difficult to convince local housing director Margie Bingham that the city needed to build SRO housing. In 1993 the *Houston Chronicle* reported she countered this argument, saying, "[The housing department] has no empirical data to issue a letter declaring a specific need for new construction of affordable housing," and that the city was more focused on rehabilitating housing over new construction. However, rehabilitation cost more than constructing a new building by nearly \$5,000 per unit.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, New Hope Housing did not receive the federal funding it needed to start building the first SRO. In its application seeking funds for construction, the organization's proposal reported "an annual \$50,000 operating deficit" with no funding source to cover such a loss, making it a risky venture.<sup>6</sup> Working closely with Christ Church Cathedral, New Hope overcame the operating deficit before reapplying by using the \$1.25 million raised by Christ Church for community solutions.

Those private funds enabled New Hope Housing to break ground on its first project, Hamilton Street Residence, in 1994 and build its first forty units of SROs. The funds were also used to hire New Hope's first employee, Joy Horak-Brown, as part-time executive director. The organization then broke away from the church and started operating as its own board-governed nonprofit, becoming Houston's first SRO housing developer.<sup>7</sup>

After demonstrating capacity with the first forty units at Hamilton Street Residence, New Hope Housing successfully



*A resident and staff member of New Hope Housing Perry enjoy cooking in the community kitchen, where they have access to stovetops and ovens.*



*Preston Roe, president of the Greater OST-South Union Super Neighborhood and long-time Houston civic leader, was joined by Paulette Wagner, former division manager of the City of Houston Housing & Community Development Department, at the ground breaking for New Hope Housing Reed in 2016.*

reapplied and received federal funding from the City of Houston. This helped New Hope expand Hamilton in 1997 and again in 1998, ultimately making it a 129-unit SRO. It was at this time that New Hope established its debt-free business model that has prevented the organization from going into debt, enabling it to keep rents low and manageable for modest- to low-income individuals and families. The nonprofit adopted this business model intentionally because, as Cassier-Mason explains, “If you’re a nonprofit that doesn’t earn much money, and your primary revenue-generating income source is through rent, the only way to pay off debt is to charge higher rents,” which runs counter to New Hope’s mission to provide affordable permanent housing. Thus, a sustainable model aimed at serving Houston’s most vulnerable citizens requires the organization to remain debt-free.<sup>8</sup>

The debt-free model relies heavily on a combination of public and private partnerships, which includes tax credit financing and enables New Hope Housing to direct ninety cents of every dollar donated to housing plus services.<sup>9</sup> The majority of New Hope’s developments also have secured the Leadership in Energy and Environment Design (LEED) certification that ensures its buildings are environmentally conscious. This energy efficiency helps keep building operating costs low, which in turn helps the organization maintain its rents well below the market rate. The result of New Hope’s multi-faceted approach allows the rental revenue stream of each of its properties to support its own operations in addition to a long-term maintenance reserve. Therefore, fundraising efforts can focus on new capital projects, resident services, and corporate office operations.

When the first forty SRO units at Hamilton Street Residence opened in April of 1995, then mayor Bob Lanier contended that in the next fifteen years, “Houston will be

a national leader in helping homeless residents...get their lives back on track.” The Hamilton property served over 1,800 people before New Hope Housing sold the land to the Houston Baseball Partners for Minute Maid Park in 2016. Leslie Friedman, New Hope’s communications manager, pointed out, “With Hamilton, New Hope Housing established what has been recognized as Texas’s model for supportive SRO housing.”<sup>10</sup>

### **NEW HOPE HOUSING EXPANDS**

The relationship between Christ Church Cathedral and New Hope Housing has remained strong over the years. Christ Church has donated money to the nonprofit, while church members have performed volunteer work and conducted Bible studies. Since its inception, New Hope has created more than 1,000 SRO units and 187 units for vulnerable families with children, serving over 9,500 people and shining a light on a sustainable solution to help those in need of adequate housing.<sup>11</sup>

During construction of the Hamilton Street Residence, the plight of those who lacked a stable home environment continued to grow. Although outside observers might ask why these people do not get a job, the situation is not that simple. Friedman indicated, “A lot of them come from a background where they have never worked or had any education. Or they’ve had drug problems, or they have mental health challenges, so they aren’t able to function in a workplace environment.” Other reasons may include family instability, domestic violence, emotional or physical abuse, or being cast out of their home. Once they have a permanent place to call home, however, a new chapter toward creating a stable, successful life can begin anew. “Housing is really just your foot in the door. It takes a lot more than a roof and four walls to help you address the issues that have gotten you into the situation you’re in,” Cassier-Mason explained.<sup>12</sup>



*When called upon by the City of Houston in response to Hurricane Harvey, New Hope Housing transformed an abandoned homeless shelter into The Residences on Emancipation, temporary housing for hundreds displaced by the storm. Joy Horak-Brown personally welcomed many who sought shelter there.*





*HouTex Inn on the Gulf Freeway, I-45, prior to its development as New Hope Housing Brays Crossing.*

New Hope Housing stands out among residential options for the disadvantaged because its goal is to give people a permanent home in contrast to shelters that provide temporary or transitional spaces for a finite period of time. Rev. Taylor said in 1995, “It’s absolutely crucial that as a community we find our way to a philosophy that says the end objective here is to get those homeless who are prepared to make that step into permanent or at least transitional or supportive housing so we’re not just recycling people through the shelters and then through the streets.”<sup>13</sup>

Over its twenty-seven-year history, New Hope Housing has expanded by constructing new buildings and renovating others. Its fully-furnished SRO apartment units include free utilities and access to cable TV, refrigerator, microwave, and a private bath. The majority of their properties’ community areas offer internet, computer access, kitchens, libraries, and spaces to socialize. Creating spaces inside and outside the buildings that draw residents out of their rooms and encourage them to interact with each other is another key principle of New Hope’s philosophy to help them reacclimate to society. In coordination with other community services, New Hope can assist with education, job preparedness skills, and accessing healthcare.<sup>14</sup>

Following the opening of its Hamilton Street Residence, New Hope Housing opened more locations in the downtown and near-downtown area. In the East End, just a block from the original Ninfa’s Mexican restaurant, the Canal location opened with 134 units in 2005, the same year East End Chamber of Commerce gave the Amigo Award to New Hope for being a pioneer in SRO housing.<sup>15</sup>

In 2010 New Hope Housing opened two newly renovated properties to house more residents. The Brays Crossing location opened after architect Ernesto L. Maldonado, AIA, designed the renovation of the HouTex Inn on the Gulf Freeway. The inn originally housed NASA contractors before it changed hands several times and became a certified public nuisance. The city approached New Hope about



*The façade at New Hope Housing Brays Crossing incorporates an extensive public art display by Chicana artist Carmen Lomas Garza.*

repurposing the property. Seeing an opportunity to house more Houstonians, the organization converted the motel into a 149-unit SRO, which features a distinctive steel mural on the exterior by Chicana artist Carmen Lomas Garza.

Like Brays Crossing, New Hope Housing’s Congress location reopened in 2010 with fifty-seven SRO units after architect Val Glitsch designed its renovation. The property was originally the Del May Hotel built in the 1920s until falling into disrepair in the 1990s. In 1998 the Downtown Management District purchased the building and turned it into SRO housing. New Hope assumed governance in 2002, operated it for a short time as SRO housing, and then closed it in 2008 for extensive redevelopment.

The newly constructed Sakowitz location, with its extensive outdoor space, also opened in 2010 and became the first LEED certified “green” affordable multi-unit housing development in Texas. With 166 units of SRO housing, Sakowitz is located in Houston’s historic Fifth Ward.

The Perry location opened in 2012 with 160 SRO units.



*At New Hope Housing Reed, Evette found a home that offers a safe community where her boys can play with other children their age.*



Former New Hope Housing board chairman Mack Fowler, left, celebrates at the Harrisburg grand opening with Sheriff Ed Gonzalez, NHH board member and former Houston City Council member Melissa Noriega, East End civic leader Jessica Hulsey, and Commissioner Adrian Garcia.

Prior to the building's construction, two elms and signage on the property had to be removed, so architect Glitsch repurposed the trees as furniture and refurbished the metal signs to hang in the lobby. Incorporating the trees and the sign into the new homes reflects New Hope Housing's commitment to the community, responsible land use, and sustainability.

In 2014 the Rittenhouse location became home to 160 SRO units. Rittenhouse greets its residents and guests with a park atmosphere around the property, which has a stand of mature oak trees, prairie grasses, and a garden. In addition, the entry features stained glass panels by local artist Kim Clark Renteria.

While New Hope Housing had historically focused on serving individuals through SRO housing, most recently, it opened its Reed location. The Reed development includes 187 units on a seven-acre site. It is the organization's "first supportive housing property serving vulnerable families with children" offering furnished one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments with fully equipped kitchens. For families like Evette's this is critical. Research shows that children in low-income households who live in affordable housing score better on cognitive development tests than those in households with unaffordable rents. This is partly because parents in affordable housing can invest more in activities and materials that support their children's development.<sup>16</sup>

While the Hamilton Street Residence was a crucial cornerstone of New Hope Housing's model for SRO buildings, Houston's first SRO raised discussions about the costs of maintaining the Hamilton Street location. It was in dire need of renovation. At the end of the day, Friedman noted, "New Hope's general contractor advised it would be more cost-effective to demolish and build a new property." As a marvelous confluence of interests, at the same time the organization was considering a renovation, New Hope

received an offer from the Houston Baseball Partners to purchase the Hamilton location and, in turn, to contribute toward constructing a new affordable housing property nearby. This led to New Hope's Harrisburg location, which opened in 2018 in the historic East End neighborhood. It offers 175 SRO units and is home to New Hope's corporate offices.<sup>17</sup>

### THE NEXT CHAPTER

Today, those served by New Hope represent a broad spectrum of Houstonians: 80 percent have incomes under \$10,000 a year, 70 percent have a disability, 65 percent have been homeless at some point in their lives, 25 percent are elderly, 20 percent are working poor, and 10 percent are veterans.<sup>18</sup>

New Hope Housing provides a steppingstone towards stability in people's lives. A stable home is more than just a place to call your own; it offers a place to build relationships and foster hope, where people are nurtured and grow in difficult times. New Hope found a way to create a sustainable financial model to be a pioneer for SRO housing in Texas, housing residents with compassion. In the fall of 2020, the nonprofit will open the 170-unit Dale Carnegie SRO development in Sharpstown. In the spring, it will break ground on the Avenue J property in the East End, which will have 100 one- and two-bedroom apartments to offer affordable housing to low-income working families. New Hope continues to provide a place to call home and a home-base community for its residents as part of the organization's commitment to sustainable, long-term solutions to the need for affordable housing.

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