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Thursday, May 22, 2008

# Hamtramck welcomes back displaced

### 40 years after pushing out black residents, city helps their offspring buy homes, as court ordered.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

**HAMTRAMCK** --When Julius and Regina Smith moved north from Talladega, Ala., in the 1920s, they bought a beautiful little Craftsman-style house with a peaked roof and a big wooden front porch on Hamtramck's Grand Haven Street, in a neighborhood where black people felt welcome.

But by the '60s, terrible things were happening in the Grand Haven-Dyar-Dequindre neighborhood, one of three sections of Hamtramck that were heavily African-American.

The city stopped maintaining the streets and the sewers, basements filled with unsanitary overflow and toilets wouldn't flush. And in other African-American neighborhoods, whole blocks were razed for "urban renewal."

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Now 40 years later, justice has finally arrived. The beginning of a 33-home development was celebrated Wednesday, the newest phase of restitution. The displaced residents and their descendants are eligible for up to \$35,000 or more toward the purchase of the homes, valued at about \$140,000 on average.

It's a bittersweet justice that for many, now deceased or settled elsewhere, has come too late. But for Judy Mills -- the grandchild of Julius and Regina -- it's a chance to move home. She was raised with five siblings in that home on Grand Haven, nicknamed "Tombstone," because children played at the bottom of a dead-end street.

"I want to move back because my family is rooted there; that's where I grew," said Mills, now 54, who hopes to buy one of the new houses. "When I look at things and I think of how I grew up ... it taught me things, but the pain I went through as a kid, I just don't understand."

It all stems from a landmark case brought in 1968, the flashpoint of the '60s when Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, racial tensions culminated in the shooting of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and riots exploded across the country. Damon Keith, senior judge of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, ordered the city to make restitution by rebuilding neighborhoods and offering displaced families financial assistance to move in.

When Mills married in the early '70s, she wanted to live in Hamtramck but settled in Detroit.

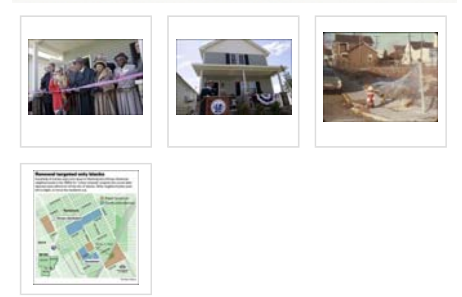
"We all were trying to move, and there were no homes in Hamtramck where we wanted to live," Mills said. "There were no black people in certain areas."

The case of Garrett v. City of Hamtramck started with Sarah Garrett and several other residents of the Holbrook/Jos. Campau neighborhood. They were told they had to move out so their homes could be demolished. When they didn't move fast enough, the city shut off their water, according to Michael



Hamtramck Mayor Karen Majewski, to the right of Judge Damon Keith, Beatrice Woods and Yvonne Myrick lead the ribbon-cutting ceremony. (Ankur Dholakia / The Detroit News)

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## Hamtramck welcomes back displaced

Barnhart, the Ann Arbor attorney who brought the case and still represents the plaintiffs.

Keith, in 1971, ruled that the urban renewal carried out by the city of Hamtramck and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was racially discriminatory and ordered restitution. But it would be 30 years before Hamtramck had the political will or the money to follow Keith's orders, Barnhart said.

"The city was in and out of receivership; we could not see how to actually develop the housing," Barnhart said. "That changed in 1999, on all fronts."

Then-Hamtramck Mayor Gary J. Zych obtained \$30 million in federal money to finance the new housing. Wayne County also got on board, offering funding and technical assistance to push the project forward.

A new sewer system, sidewalks and other improvements were made in the Grand Haven-Dyar-Dequindre neighborhood where Judy Mills grew up. New rental homes were built and, in 2002, construction planning began for homes that would be sold. Wayne County pledged \$1.7 million for construction of the 33-house development launched Wednesday.

It's all too late for Garrett, for whom the landmark case is named. Now senile, she's confined to a nursing home, according to Barnhart. And her grown son, just a baby when Barnhart took the case, has settled elsewhere.

"We can say, 'Justice delayed is justice denied,' " said Keith, who was selected at random to hear the case in U.S. District Court. When he was appointed to the appeals court in 1977, he asked to stay on the case and kept his seat on the district court while simultaneously hearing cases in the appeals court.

"A number of people who started this cannot be here because they are gone, but their children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy the fruits of this case, which was brought 40 years ago."

Mills previewed the model home on Trowbridge Street this week and was overcome with emotion.

"It was gorgeous, a perfect place for me," Mills said. "I want a place where my grandchildren can roam all over. It had three bedrooms, skylights, the kitchen was adorable. I almost wanted to get on my knees and thank the Lord."

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