

When Public Housing
Was Paradise
Building Community in Chicago

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Alkalimat, born Gerald McWhirter in 1942, lived in the Frances Cabrini Homes until his family moved to the West Side in 1953. He attended Ottawa University as an undergraduate and started work on his Ph.D. in sociology at Chicago's Roosevelt University in the 1960s.

"That was when they used academic ranking as a basis for the draft. And several of us graduate students who were teaching said, 'What the hell is this?' There was a protest, and I was canned from Roosevelt. Yeah, yeah, I was thrown out. They said, 'You'll never work here again.' But you know, I did work there again, but that's another story. . ."

He is now chair of the Department of African-American Studies at the University of Toledo. An early advocate of Black Studies, Alkalimat in the late 1960s helped establish Atlanta's Institute of the Black World, which would later become the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. He has taught, among other places, at Fisk University, UCLA, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Oxford.

I think Cabrini was an experiment. I have nothing to prove this, but I perceive it as an experiment by CHA to see what would happen if you integrated a community by race, nationality, language, and religion. There were lots of social activities where the residents could interact. And it was a kind of supervised interacting, so that people weren't just left on their own. People were kept within a series of relationships that kept them from polarizing. It prevented conflict that might otherwise have occurred.

But there was also a lot of independence allowed then compared to now. In other words, when you moved into public housing, it wasn't like you were signing a contract with some kind of prison facility, which is the way these housing projects are today. You still had a sense of being in an apartment. It just happened to be a subsidized place the government had set up. So you still had your independence.

Though I remember, in families, people outside the project saying, "Ah, you're living on welfare, kinda." But I think I had a childhood second to none. I remember those years as golden years, frankly. I cherish having grown up in Cabrini. If there were a place like our Cabrini today, if you had that kind of thing, with community rooms, with child care, etc., yeah, I think you could stabilize it without any question. But you would have to have stabilized employment.

There was a real role that parents played in the neighborhoods within the projects. I can remember knowing—when you were going from one little area to another area—who the patriarch or matriarch of that area was. And so there was an informal organized structure: if you were somewhere and you needed some help, you could go to somebody's house. All that was operating, so it was a very safe environment.

But, you know, there was some delinquency. We were cutting school and doing all kinds of stuff. But not anything antisocial to the people in Cabrini. I mean, look, this area was like Disneyland to me. We had a doughnut factory on Chicago Avenue, we had a tamale factory. I lived across the street from a comic book factory. Can you imagine what that was like? We'd sneak in there over the weekends and literally break into the factory. So we had extensive comic book collections.

Cabrini was the center of a kind of left-wing cultural and intellectual activity. The Communist Party had a real base in Cabrini. At the community center, people like Win Stracke, the Pete Seeger of Chicago, would be there regularly—people knew him, and people gathered around him. And there were house parties, where the parents got together and did things like playing charades.

My general impression is that they promoted social awareness and intellectual stimulation, as well as discussions and leadership. These were the people who were the leaders of the community. I'm not talking about somebody that lived in a middle-class neighborhood, who was sort of doing their work by going over into another neighborhood. These were people who lived there, who were part of the community, and emerged as the leaders of the community.

I remember us as being a real enclave, and people really bonded. I mean, we were all in each other's houses. There weren't any subghettos where we lived. On our block, Chestnut, there were Irish, Filipino, Mexican. Some blocks were more diverse than others, but my memory is that it generally was mixed.

When you're assessing integration, you have to ask: Did people work together? Did people go to school together? Did they really live together? And when you look at all three environments in Cabrini, you find real integration. My dad worked with Italians at National Malleable Steel, for instance. On weekends he would be over with them making what they called—what he called—"Dago red." Cabrini was right in the heart of the city. Look, I think of Cabrini as an idyllic, golden, wonderful time.

But you know, I think that to oppose all-black projects is a very dangerous thing to do. To oppose them in a way that denies or stigmatizes the people who live there is a terrible thing. There shouldn't be a pejorative connotation for anybody who grew up in that environment. You know: "We're better and you're obviously limited because you grew up in a segregated environment." If you then ask the question, "Why did the integration stop?" I think it was a lack of will by those in a position to make the decision.

Clearly, living in a multicultural setting with a lot of diversity provides unique opportunities for growth and development. It gives you survival skills and achievement skills that one needs in the kind of world we live in. On the other hand, I can't bring myself to say there's anything wrong with an

all-black environment. While we have to uphold the general value of diversity and create as many opportunities for it as possible, at the same time we have to raise everybody's quality of life, which in the next generation or two will involve a lot of people who are living in all-black or, for that matter, all-white settings.

In other words, if you live in an all-black housing project and go to an all-black school, the question is, "Can you get a decent education?" In an all-black school, a poor all-black school, you'd go out and find things like the Algebra Project. You would put additional resources in schools like that so students would have the opportunity to score well on national standardized tests.

Actually, you should go back and look at the way some black schools were under segregation, where you had a concentration of black people who got advanced degrees. Horace Mann Bond did a study and found some high schools throughout the South disproportionately produced the people who went on to college.²³ So let's reproduce those schools. What you'd find is, if you got schools going like that, they would no longer remain all-black and poor. Everybody else would go there, because they want their kids to make those same scores. That's the direction the struggle for integration would have to take.

Ultimately, color discrimination still defines the American experience. To eliminate it, we have to have the kind of commitment we thought we were getting in the 1960s. But, as we know, that period of change lasted for maybe one generation. Shortly after that, the door was slammed shut.

On the surface, everything is wonderful. You can talk about the difference between now and the time when you wouldn't see anybody black working in the stores on State Street. But when you look at fundamental issues of quality of life—if you look at dealings with financial institutions, if you look at health care, at longevity—I mean, just go into almost anything, and the aggregate condition of African Americans is still much worse than white Americans. And that's a function of racist oppression. There is not an instance of institutional behavior where black people are not getting screwed. Take mortgages, take any dealings with banks, any dealings at any financial institutions, any dealings with a fair thing in the government.

The vast majority of black people are still existing under conditions of racist barbarism. That's the only way I can describe the state of race relations in the United States. I don't care what Clarence Thomas thinks. If he walks down the street without his robes on, then he faces the same thing that all black men face relative to the criminal justice system. I mean, it's barbaric.

I would say that one-third of the black community faces chronic problems of unemployment and is acculturated in a marginalized cul-de-sac. The upper one-third, of course, is mainstreamed. And the middle third is bouncing somewhere in between: they're one paycheck away from disaster. I think that's why, for example, you get such turnouts to the Million Man March.

Now the overwhelming majority of the marchers were in this middle one-third. These people in the middle are scared to death and are prepared to go for Farrakhan's rap. Which is something I've been thinking a lot about. I've been thinking about why it is that in the late twentieth century, in an urban postindustrial society, we have such a problem with reason. People may say the march had nothing to do with Farrakhan's message, that they just went to show solidarity, but that's all rhetorical. It also had to do with Farrakhan.

The people who are in control now are rapidly redesigning industrial democracy. In its place, they're developing a much more exclusionary meritocracy, where privatization is turning the public sector over to the private sector to reengineer it for its own interests. We're going into the twenty-first century with people being set back to conditions before the New Deal.

When you had that industrial economy, you had the social basis for stability. You had institutions that you, your family, and your neighborhood were a part of. When I lived in Cabrini, you had a community where everybody was cooperating to keep everybody on track.

I'm just not sure we could replicate that. I think that was a time when all the people—be they black or white—were going through the experience of proletarianization and urbanization, and it was a new experience they were sharing.

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, with an expanding economy, immigrants, be they from Italy or from Mississippi, could be incorporated, absorbed, into the industrial setting. And therefore they would be brought up to speed with everybody else. The public school could play the role it's historically played in the country, of being an institution to socialize the second generation.

But what happened in the late 1960s—and really hit in the 1970s—is that the Ford model of mass production is replaced by the Toyota system. And the computer comes in. So you get a shift. People are no longer absorbed in that kind of industrial setting. The school is no longer a bridge to industrial employment with fairly reasonable wages. And therefore, the projects begin to shift from being a way station for working people who are on their way to somewhere else. Instead, it becomes a dumping ground for people on welfare. There is no way that federally subsidized housing could have remained a form of subsidy for employed workers in the industrial sector because, in fact, the overall economy was shifting.

Cabrini was an opportunity to experience democracy and the joys of growing up in the multinational, multiracial working class. I lived the poem by Langston Hughes, "Let American be American again." Now we have a completely different situation. The mass employment of the industrial factory period is a thing of the past. However, I still believe that such places as Cabrini can live again. People can have lives full of meaning and purpose even when they don't have a job. Rich people do, so poor people can, too. The

main thing is that the society has to redefine rights so that everyone continues to eat, to have a place to stay, education, health care, etc. This is the kind of country worth living in. This is the kind of country I am dedicating my life to build.

MAUDE DAVIS

Maude Davis is retired principal of the George S. Patton Elementary School in Riverdale, a suburb south of Chicago. She moved into Altgeld Gardens in 1949. She currently operates a settlement program in the city.

We have 546 kids in the Patton School. At least four hundred of our children come from Pacesetter Homes, a federally subsidized development but not public housing. Their townhouses remind me very much of Altgeld, but I don't think they have the same appreciation for the housing that we did. I don't see the pride in the houses.

Over there—and it's even true of Altgeld now—there is this concept that low-income housing is for the poor. Low-income housing is for the gangs. Low-income housing is for those who have nothing better to do or no other place to go, who don't want to work. That concept is associated with low-income housing, and even includes these privately operated developments. We didn't have that concept in Altgeld. We felt it was just paradise. We felt this was just the greatest housing that we could live in! There was pride in it.

We never looked at Altgeld as public housing. We would do our little yards and the flowers, and we just thought that was the way people lived. We had the freedom of leaving our doors open at night, or staying out late. I remember sitting on the porch many nights at twelve o'clock, freely talking, freely having fun out there. We would go to the store late at night. We felt very safe in doing those things.

We didn't have a problem with safety. Your neighbors looked out for each other. It was a real friendship, a caring. You felt free to go into your neighbor's house, free to ask your neighbor for anything, because they were always sharing and giving. That was the general feeling out there. It was not one being better than the other. We freely shared toys, whatever we had. Altgeld is where I learned to ride a bike. And it was on someone else's bike. I guess we didn't realize we were poor, we felt we had so much.

Altgeld was divided into thirteen blocks, and during the summer, the baseball teams from each block would play against each other. I was a short-stop at the time, and then I got on the all-star team, which was thrilling for me. And Halloween was always a marvelous time in Altgeld. They would have big bonfires, and the children would put on their costumes, going from house to house, freely. Then we would go back to the children's building and have apple cider and candy. We would just have such a marvelous time.