



Everything Jersey

Developers turn Newark eyesore into affordable housing for abused, homeless women

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By **Victoria St. Martin/The Star-Ledger**



Enlarge

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Maria Yglesias and Maria Del Mar Lopez, the M and M , in one of their units. M and M development, a women owned developer, rehabilitated 98-102 Broad Street in Newark and had a ribbon cutting in Newark on Wednesday, March 4, 2012. Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger

Building Rehabilitation in Newark gallery (7 photos)

NEWARK — One telephone call sticks in Maria Yglesias' mind.

It was a woman who was looking for an apartment. She said her husband abused her for years and she wanted to leave.

Yglesias, a Newark developer, scanned a list of vacant apartments that she had inside a newly renovated building she and her business partner just finished renovating.

A one bedroom for \$600. A two bedroom for \$700.

"She said, 'No, no, no. I don't want those, I want the affordable ones,' " Yglesias said. "And I told her, those are affordable. But she said, 'Listen, I am working minimum wage and I can't pay that rent.' "

Yglesias said she referred the woman to the city's housing authority but knew that because of a waiting list, her chances of getting an apartment there were very slim.

She never heard from that woman again, but Yglesias always wondered what happened to her.

And when she and her business partner, Maria Del Mar Lopez, started working with the city of Newark to rehab 98 Broad St. in 2008, they immediately knew they wanted to make housing that could help women just like that caller.

"We are women and we wanted to do something for women," said Lopez. "I wanted people to come into this building and have that warm feeling. When you come through these doors to feel like your home and it's your sanctuary."

But the building wasn't a sanctuary before the rehabilitation. Instead, the building was a horrible thorn in the side of the North Ward community. After two fires -- the last blaze closed the place in 1989 -- it became the home of squatters and a hideout for drug addicts. Eventually, it was boarded up

"It made the neighborhood look bad, you know it made it look dangerous," said Joel Conaway, 52, of Newark, a former tenant who lived next door and is now the building's superintendent. "It was an eyesore. I wouldn't let my friends come visit me."

The Broad Street apartment building was transformed by the women developers into Harmony Square Apartments, a 16-unit affordable housing development where 10 units are set aside for homeless victims of domestic violence and single mothers.

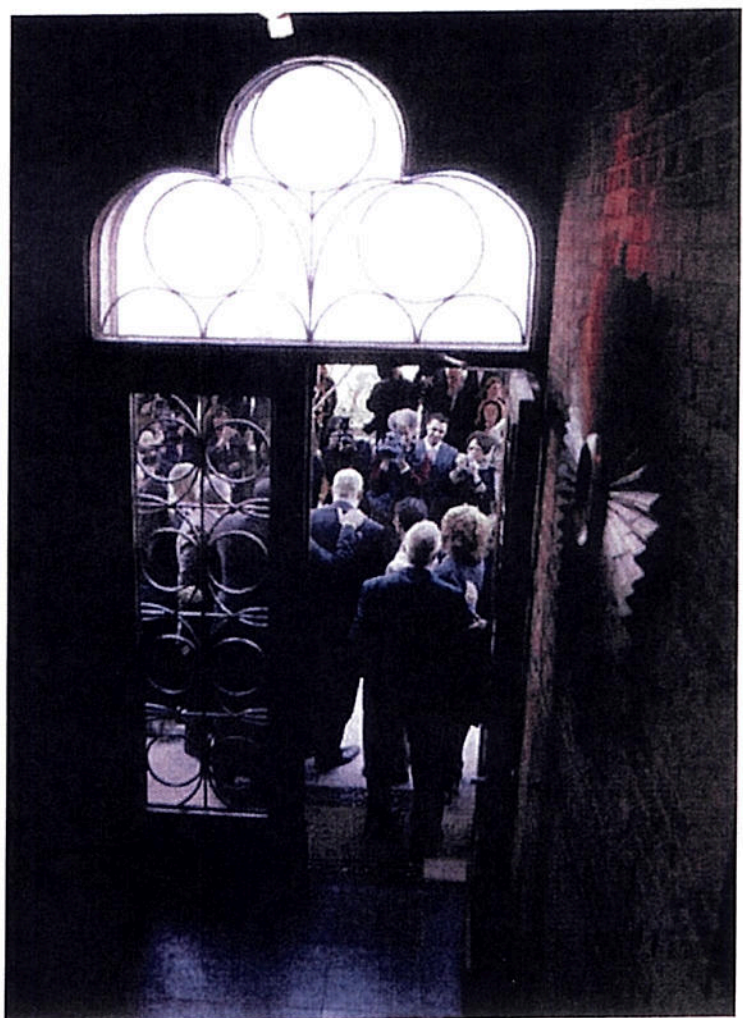
"It's freeing," said Luciano, a domestic violence victim who declined to give her first name, during a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Wednesday. "It's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. To move on and be on my own -- it's like doing it for the first time again, without the eggshells."

While Yglesias had the idea for the Harmony Square development, it was Lopez who found the site.

She said she was on her way to a party in 2007 when an accident on the highway had her and her husband veering off onto Broad Street.

"When I saw this building, I told my husband, 'This one is mine. I'm going to redo this building,' " she said.

The project, which cost a total of \$3.9 million, began in 2008 with obtaining



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funding and approval of architectural plans. Construction began in 2010 and took a little over a year and about \$2.6 million to complete.

Ribbon cutting with Mayor Cory Booker, from the entry hall, on Wednesday, March 4, 2012.

The developers said a combination of loans and grants from the city of Newark, the state and the county helped pay for the project.

Lopez and Yglesias have been working together for more than 25 years. They got their start in 1985 when they rehabilitated houses in Elizabeth, and their company, Newark-based M&M Development, was born.

Yglesias said the 98 Broad St. project was their "first face-to-face look at poverty."

The pair put what they call their "womanly touches" -- like refashioning the old doors into mirrors for every floor of the four-story building -- on the places they rehab.

Conaway said the building is now "like a shining bright light in the neighborhood."

"People are coming down the street and peeking in the windows to look in the entrance way," he said. "It's like a museum."

And the developers believe the building has not only changed people outside its four walls but within them, too.

One of Harmony Square's tenants couldn't even look at Lopez when she inquired about an apartment a month or so ago. Lopez saw the same woman during the ceremony on Wednesday and she didn't even recognize her.

"I couldn't believe it was the same person," she said.

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