



With lights, poems, teens say goodbye to Cabrini

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(AP) CHICAGO (AP) — Every day at sundown, the gutted shell of the last Cabrini Green public housing tower takes on a ghostly aura as lights start flickering sporadically from 15 floors of empty rooms.

It looks like a distress signal — but it's really a goodbye.

This is the final Cabrini high rise to meet the wrecker's ball, the end of an era in Chicago, where public housing has long been a symbol of every form of inner-city agony: crumbling bases for vicious street gangs, darkened stairways reeking of urine, gunfire echoing in the night.

Cabrini had more than its share of horror: A 7-year-old shot dead while walking to school, holding his mother's hand. A young girl raped, beaten and poisoned by insecticide. Two policemen gunned down by snipers while on foot patrol.

But Cabrini had its happy memories, too: Block parties in the July heat. Special Monday reunions for old-timers coming back to visit. Girls eating sticky grape Popsicles, jumping double-dutch.

To mark the end, a Prague-born artist and teacher enlisted a group of teens, many who lived in and around Cabrini, to write poems about the project, the demolition or the meaning of home and community. As they read their words, a computer program recorded their voices, generating patterns from LED lights that beamed from 134 vacant apartments. As the tower falls, there are fewer lights.

The words, though, will live on.

Some are raw:

"What they called hell, We had named home. ...
You can't click your shoes twice,
And disappear.
There's no escape from the pain that's here."

Some are nostalgic:

"Babies crying, sisters arguing, animals cooing,
And the smell and sizzle of chicken frying.
Yet and still, it's unpredictable.
My Home."

Some are angry:

"You move people out
Their comfort zone and
Don't realize they hate it ...
You shatter
The memories and bonds
That were just the greatest."

The idea for this lights-and-sound farewell came from Jan Tichy, a faculty member at the Art Institute of Chicago, who sensed a historic moment: It's not just the last tower of the notorious project to fall, but the final demolition of 82 public housing high rises for families — buildings that had become some of the poorest, most segregated communities in America.

Cabrini, once home to about 15,000 people, was a concrete reminder of the nation's urban policy failures. It attracted a lot of attention, partly because of its proximity to Chicago's exclusive Gold Coast; in the early 1980s, then-Mayor Jane Byrne also made a brief — and much-publicized — move into an apartment there to dramatize living conditions.



Tichy says when he arrived in Chicago four years ago he immediately sensed a segregated city. As he researched its history of public housing, he realized his interest in using art to deliver a social or political message — in this case, that these buildings were a failure — meshed with an idea for honoring the residents.

"People now recognize that's not the way to fight poverty ... ," he says. "Before we take another step, before we build another vertical ghetto, let's think for a moment — what does it mean to build these houses? When you go to hear the poems, the kids are basically asking the same thing. ... It's not the architecture that made a ghetto out of a community. It was us who are responsible for that. And it's us who are responsible to do something about it."

Tichy decided to tap the next generation for his project. He approached housing officials and they liked it.

"We didn't want everyone's final image to be the demolition," says Jadine Chou, the Chicago Housing Authority's senior vice president of asset management. "We wanted there to be some of memorial tribute to the families. (This reminds everybody it's not really the bricks and mortar, it's really all about the people and the community."

Tichy and his partner, Efrat Appel, a social worker, recruited kids from ages 10 to 18 who were participating in writing, mentoring and after-school programs or members of a Cabrini marching band. They held workshops, they discussed slam poetry. Then the kids, 110 in all, sat down to write. Some explored the impact of racism and dislocation on their lives; others focused on Cabrini itself.

Jasmine Dilworth, 17, reminisced about playing with her cousins at Cabrini. She says it was devastating seeing her home disappear — she's the only "poet" to have lived in the last tower.

"I'll never have a place to go back to and show my children and say, 'I grew up there,'" she says. "I feel like they're erasing my history."

The poems, she says, remind the public "we do have a voice and we do have feelings about them tearing down our homes." As for her own? "Defeated, I guess," Dilworth says with a sigh, adding she believes the demolition is intended to take advantage of valuable land, not improve the lives of residents. (The fate of the property has not yet been determined.)

Charles Kilpatrick, a 15-year-old who grew up in Cabrini's row houses (an older section of the project), wrote about the deep bond among residents, which many kids say is often overlooked.

"I feel like Cabrini is forever," he wrote. There's no way we can be apart. ... We all stuck together as one and said: We love Cabrini until the end."

"It's part of my identity," Kilpatrick says. "I'm proud to say I'm from there."

Dantrell Pearson's poem, "Still Kicking" is an ode to survival and a rejection of violence. Pearson has a special tie to Cabrini: His mother once lived there and named him after 7-year-old Dantrell Davis, who was killed by a gang sniper in 1992 while walking just 100 feet to his school.

That tragedy scarred Cabrini. But Appel, the social worker, says many kids see a gap between the media image of Cabrini and reality. The poems fulfill "their wish to be heard more fully, not as people want to describe them from the outside," she says, "but as somebody who wants to be counted and has something important to say."

Justus White, a 16-year-old in the Cabrini band, is among them.

His poem, "Why," addresses stereotypes he knew from experience: He recalls how once while walking a mile from Cabrini with friends, police stopped them and told them to get back to their own neighborhood. The message, he says, seemed to be: "As soon as black kids come around, it's trouble."

"I just really want to spread a deep message to this earth," White wrote, "to say that not all black kids are born the same at birth."

White has been watching the demolition, sad to see Cabrini go, comforted to be part of its final days.

"When me and my friends walked by, just seeing the lights made my heart glow," he says. "There's a piece of me in that building."

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