

Interviewee: Gene Bell, Executive Director, Housing Authority of the City of Asheville  
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Interviewers: Bill Murray, Outward Bound Professional, NC Outward Bound  
Holly Waltemyer, Assistant Director/Internship Coordinator Career Center, UNC Asheville  
Date: December 10<sup>th</sup>, 11-12

1. Can you tell us a little about yourself and your path to your current leadership role? Also, can you describe your current role and responsibilities with the Housing Authority?

Gene has been the Executive Director for two years and has been with the Housing Authority since 1995. The former ED, Mr. Jones, was with the Housing Authority for 30 years, so he took over from a long standing ED. Prior to joining the Housing Authority, Gene worked for IBM for 20 plus years and then owned a construction company in Charlotte that did work for the Charlotte Housing Authority. Several years later he joined the Charlotte Housing Authority and worked there for four years, which led him on his path to his current position.

As ED, he also has responsibility to manage the Brevard Housing Authority.

Gene grew up on a farm in Kentucky which he credits with teaching him how to manage people and to treat people fairly. He recalled visiting some relatives who lived in public housing when he was young and it made a strong impression on him. Coming from a farm where they did not yet have indoor plumbing, the public housing with indoor plumbing and basketball courts seemed relatively luxurious. At that point in time, public housing was what was called “workforce housing” and had less of the problems that currently exist in public housing today.

The first public housing in Asheville was built in the 1950’s and was segregated. Lee-Walker, which was according to documents for “colored” people and Pisgah View, which was de facto for whites, were both considered transitional housing and not intended to be permanent housing for people.

Historically, several events were particularly significant in public housing being what it is today. The first was the passage into law of the 30% rule, championed by Sen. Brooks of MA in 1978. This rule mandates that rent cannot exceed 30% of a person’s income, regardless of how little they make. The perhaps unintentional impact was that this severely depleted the financial resources for this housing. Workforce housing became public housing. The second event was urban renewal which primarily displaced African-Americans and had the impact of moving many of them from homeowner to tenants. The third event was the development of Section 8 Vouchers which has had the impact of facilitating the movement of many poor whites into trailers in rural areas.

2. How would you describe the mission of the Housing Authority of the City of Asheville and what is the future vision for the authority?

The mission of the Housing Authority is to provide safe, decent, sanitary, affordable housing.

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Gene believes a key focus for the Housing Authority should be to get people into the workforce. Ideally, it would be helpful to require people to go to work, but the 30% Rule prohibits that and in effect the 30% Rule penalizes people for working. Gene would like to change that and at the same time collaborate with local organization such as A-B Tech to help people get better jobs.

The Housing Authority has a one strike policy on drugs. If anyone living in the unit is charged with illegal drug use or possession, the family is evicted. And unfortunately they do have to evict people relatively frequently. Recently, they had to evict an 85 year old grandmother whose grandson was arrested for drugs. The grandmother felt an obligation to try to help her grandchild and the grandchild had nothing but resentment for his grandmother. This is obviously a heartbreaking situation.

3. What role do you believe the Housing Authority plays in economic development?

Being the largest landlord in western North Carolina, the Housing Authority has an integral role in economic development in the region. The Authority has a 10 million dollar budget and 130-140 people employed. They are also the only entity in which the board is appointed by the mayor.

4. Lack of affordable housing continues to be an issue here, what is your perspective on this issue?

Yes, affordability of housing is a major issue and certainly one of the biggest facing the region. As property values have increased dramatically, affordability had become more skewed. The reality is that 40% of Asheville residents cannot afford a \$200,000 house. For the developers there is more profit in higher end homes and as a former builder Gene understands the challenge and lack of market incentive for developers in building affordable housing. There needs to be financial incentive or compensation for those willing to build affordable housing. Without that there is little business reason to build affordable housing. Without affordable housing, Asheville runs the risk of becoming a less diverse and more exclusive and elite community. There is also the issue of how service workers, including teachers, firemen, policemen etc can afford to live here.

5. What are the major problems facing the region?

Affordable housing—as above. Gene also mentioned that one-half of African American males drop out of school which is a major issue and believes collaborating with A-B Tech to offer jobs and training is a step in the right direction.

6. Are there others in the community you would recommend we talk with to get their perspective on community leadership?

Jacquelyn Hallum, MAHEC Director of Health Careers & Diversity Management  
Gene Ellison, Attorney  
Don Locke, Retired Director of Asheville Graduate Center

7. How many units does the Authority currently support? Where are they located? Do all of the residents live in public housing communities or do some receive vouchers for other units mixed in various housing communities?

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As of September 2007, there were 1,540 units in the Housing Authority serving over 3,000 residents. Over 2,200 residents are African-American. Almost half of all the heads of households are single parents and the vast majority of these are females. The average family annual income is \$8,277 and the average monthly rent is \$197.

8. Recently there has been considerable press on gang activity, what is your assessment of the situation and how it should be addressed?

Gang activity is significant and it needs to be addressed. The bigger issue is what makes it attractive for a kid to join a gang. The problem is the conditions that allow gangs to flourish.

9. Who has been a significant role model or mentor for you in your leadership approach?

Gene is very close to his father and he was his most significant mentor. His father was a union official; in fact he was the first black local official in their area. Gene's move from the for-profit world to that of public service can largely be attributed to his father's influence. His father told Gene that people who pull themselves up by their bootstraps only do it with help from people. So if you ever get in a position to be able to help, you need to help. His father's strong sense of service clearly carried through to Gene.

From his grandfathers, he learned both the value of treating everyone with respect and the value of hands on work. Gene is very hands on in his leadership and is very visible in the various housing units reflective of his grandfather's belief that "if you are the leaders and you get too far away from the people they will not follow you."

His grandfather was also firm believer in hard work. He used to tell Gene, "If you hear of someone who worked themselves to death, take me to their families." He did not believe you could work too hard.

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