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## Chip Off the Old 'Block'?

**By Bret Yager**

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**Windsor** -- Like just about anyone who grew up in Windsor, Jessie Gobin had heard about “the Block,” the mass of squalid, undersized apartments bee-hived into a brick and steel building that once sheltered crime and misery.

So Gobin, the mother of a 7-month-old boy named Eli, had some understandable trepidation when she moved in. But what she found at the former Armory Square Apartments pleasantly surprised her.

“Now it's like a friendly home place,” she said. “I've only been here three months and there are so many people who are Eli's grandparents.”

Faustino Ramirez has his own unpleasant memories of the earlier days. He moved into the Block 21 years ago from Las Vegas, remembers racism, a handgun being pulled on him, drunkenness. He managed to stomach it all for eight months, then moved to another part of Windsor. On disability, he recently found himself in need of affordable housing, and came full circle.

“For me, it's nice,” Ramirez said. “It's a good place.”

Eight months after the refurbished building reopened under the name Union Square Apartments, the new complex seems to be striding past its old reputation. Forty of the 58 expanded and made-over units have been rented under a rigorous screening process designed to weed out the unsavory element that had caused trouble before. To access the building, residents have to be buzzed through locked doors or have their own key. There is on-site management and maintenance now, and kids play on the polished pine floor of the community room.

Around town, it's hard to find someone to say a bad word about the place.

Richard Paquette has a line of sight from the window behind the cash register of his second hand store to the broad brick face of Union Square.

“It's better than it was,” said Paquette, owner of Our Community Thrift Store on Union Street. “I can just tell. There's not people hanging out out front like there used to be. It's cleaned up pretty good. It's kind of a middle-age group now.”

Ryan Stewart, of Stewart Property Management, the company that oversees the property, called the outcome of the renovation “a 180-degree turnaround from what it was.” These days, the complaints the property managers get are from the people who say the rules are stricter than other apartment complexes, or perhaps guff at the no smoking policy.

“We want people to know that if they live here, they need to be respectful of their neighbors,” Stewart said. “It's their apartment, but it's also a community.”

Stewart acknowledged that filling the last units has been a slog.

“Even if it takes longer to fill the building, we're going to fill it with the best folks we can,” he said. “It only takes a few really bad residents to ruin it for everyone. To the extent that we can be careful, we are.”

The building, raised in 1922 to house industrial workers in a once-thriving town, is now owned by the nonprofit Housing Vermont in conjunction with the Rockingham Area Community Land Trust and private investors. Roughly half of the units are subsidized, and the market value rents for one-, two- and three-bedroom units range from \$680 to \$935 a month, with heat, hot water and parking included.

Lynx Brammer, who teaches theater part time at Castleton State College, said the locked doors and abundance of fire escapes helped attract her to Union Square, where she has an apartment on the third floor.

“It's all about my kids' safety,” said Brammer, who moved into Union Square from Perkinsville in late March and is the mother of 3-year-old twins Journey and Jason.

“I saw the place, saw the open-house sign, fell in love, took pictures and filled out an application instantly,” she said.

People are decent to each other, tolerate minor nuisances like kids slamming doors, and an elderly tenant who lives down the way plays with the kids when they venture into to his territory, she said.

The old Armory Square had 72 units before the renovation reduced that number and expanded living space in the remaining units.

The building was responsible for 30 percent of the town's police calls for domestic violence, nuisance complaints and drug reports, town officials said in 2005 report.

Police Chief Stephen Soares said there's been nothing comparable to that lately. From early meetings surrounding the massive \$17 million renovation, it was clear the new property manager would be focused on doing their job, he said.

Oversight was lacking under previous managers, he said.

“We've had a couple of incidents, not unlike what you'd have in any other place,” Soares said.

“We're optimistic we're going to continue to focus on how it's run and kept, so between police and the management, it never goes back to what it was.”

In the community room, sitting on the sofa across from tables covered in bright red and yellow cloth -- having never met each other before -- Gobin and Brammer struck up a friendship. Eli was the catalyst. Brammer was soon holding the child who was not her own and chatting with the mother. Gobin said she's trying to get community games and movie nights together in the common room.

Justin had just had one of his toes painted pink. He displayed it proudly.

Then he and his twin sister stood in front of Ramirez with two stories going at once about the ant hill they saw out back.

Ramirez didn't catch all the words.

“I just nod my head yes,” he said.