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CHARTING A NEW COURSE

An unlikely pairing of golf courses and public housing is succeeding in Atlanta. But will it play in New Orleans?

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ATLANTA -- The skyscraper magnate faced a political gantlet, a seemingly impossible sales job sure to raise suspicions of a rich developer profiting at the expense of the poor.

His team faced dozens of potentially explosive appearances before wary public housing residents. They needed support for tearing down Atlanta's East Lake Meadows public housing complex to make way for a mixed-income development -- one linked to, of all things, a restored golf course next door. Not just any course: a private, rich man's golf course, a potent symbol of a realm foreign to the East Lake residents.

Starting in 1995, the tenants crowded into meeting rooms, some openly hostile, suspecting a real estate grab. They stared down Greg Giornelli, an emissary for Tom Cousins, the developer who wanted to tear down their homes. The fact that the complex had long ago become infested with drug-dealing and murder didn't necessarily pave the way for Cousins' grand vision, which residents feared would result in their displacement, not their benefit.

They hit the developers with pointed questions: Where would they be moved to during construction? Who and how many could return? How would the next place look?

But slowly, through patience and compromise, Cousins softened the East Lake tenant leaders. In a novel twist, the storied East Lake Golf Club, once home to legend Bobby Jones, would spin off money into education and recreation programs that would help anchor a revitalized neighborhood. During the next two years, the developers solidified the support they needed for what today has become a manicured enclave of 541 mixed-income apartments, Atlanta's first public charter school, a YMCA, a day-care center and a second, public golf course that daily welcomes children who have never walked a putting green.

Eva Davis, 72, a longtime tenant leader, recalled tense early dealings with Cousins, who usually spoke through intermediaries. "He thought I was a mean ol' black woman, and I said, 'Oh Lord, he's rich,'" Davis said.

But she came to realize that Cousins wanted many of the same things she wanted for her community. And today Davis couldn't be more pleased by her neighborhood's transformation.

"I can have some pretty flowers without people stealing them. I can sit and just look at the beautiful green hills on the golf course," she said. "It used to be where you couldn't even sit on your porch and (watch) the children out in the yard without bullets flying all over the building. . . . It's a miracle."

A dozen years after the East Lake project launched, a unique coalition of New Orleanians led by the Fore!Kids Foundation, a philanthropic organization that stages charity golf tournaments, aims to use the East Lake development as a model for overhauling the shuttered St. Bernard public housing complex -- and for reviving flood-ravaged golf courses in City Park, just across Bayou St. John.

Featuring two charter schools, a shopping complex, a YMCA and more than 900 mixed-income apartments, the plan from the newly formed Bayou District Foundation would cost at least \$240 million and, in some respects, would be more ambitious than East Lake. Still facing revisions, the initiative won the Housing Authority of New Orleans' blessing, but it still needs approval of the City Park Board of Commissioners. It also will require major help from private donors across the nation.

In another improbable marriage of golf and public housing, the New Orleans proposal calls for part of the income from City Park golf to go to programs for children and families in a revitalized St. Bernard housing complex.

A convert from N.O.

Byron Williams, a 41-year-old coach raised in New Orleans' St. Bernard complex, has a unique perspective on both the East Lake project and the New Orleans plan. The burly, gregarious Williams got a taste of Cousins' bold brand of social engineering after he fled Hurricane Katrina and became part of a group of New Orleanians temporarily given lodging at East Lake Villages.

Compared with the hard-scrabble life in the St. Bernard, the East Lake complex seemed strikingly placid and prosperous.

"They have a great school; they have a great house. And also the kids play golf as part of the academics in school," Williams said of East Lake Villages' more than 1,500 residents. "They have no crime -- and it's still public housing."

Now living on his own tab with his wife, a flight attendant, and their son in the east Atlanta complex, Williams is eagerly touting the plan for the St. Bernard complex in an alliance with prominent New Orleans businessmen.

"My thing is to say, this is a better way of life," Williams said recently as he cruised the hilly public golf course at East Lake in a cart, pointing out handsome clusters of apartments.

He is echoed by Rod Harris, 34, who grew up dodging harm in East Lake Meadows and now lives a short drive away.

"I grew up seeing people die, get shot, get robbed. I saw it all," Harris said. "My mama always said, 'It's not where you're from, it's where you're going.'"

Now Harris marvels at the quiet, verdant area fashioned by Cousins' East Lake Foundation, with backing from donors and the Atlanta Housing Authority. The computer analyst has one son attending Drew Charter School and another at Sheltering Arms Child Development Center, each a key feature of the development. Both boys are thriving.

And Harris said he just might rent one of the market-rate apartments that overlook the public golf course, named in honor of Charlie Yates, a 1930s amateur champion who played with Bobby Jones at East Lake.

"I'm thinking about moving back so we can be really close to the school," Harris said.

From golf to housing

Before September 2005, East Lake caught the attention of New Orleans golfing enthusiasts Gerard Barousse, Mike Rodrigue and Gary Solomon. But the business executives, longtime supporters of Fore!Kids, had trained their attention on restoring the rundown golf courses in City Park -- not on remaking public housing.

Katrina changed their outlook. Invited to Atlanta by Cousins and Charlie Yates Jr., son of the golfing great and a former teacher at Country Day School in Metairie, the New Orleans businessmen toured facilities at the 200-acre East Lake complex just a few months after the flood. With prodding from officers of the East Lake Foundation and Cousins, who would later visit New Orleans, the three men began drawing up a similar venture.

They saw that student test scores and property values both soared in the East Lake area since the development's 2001 completion. They knew crime had plummeted, that a place once dubbed "Little Vietnam" because of its rampant violence -- where drivers ran red lights in fear of the men loitering at the corner -- had, remarkably, become a walkable neighborhood, with a new full-service grocery across the street.

"We felt that if we could make it happen, we could have a city that we could stay in for the long term," said Barousse, a hotel developer.

For Cousins, a Presbyterian, the East Lake effort reflected his Judeo-Christian ethics. But the Atlanta developer's comprehensive approach to remaking a public-housing enclave also drew inspiration from a 1993 New York Times

op-ed piece detailing how most criminals in New York state came from a handful of New York City neighborhoods. Cousins asked Atlanta's police chief whether the same pattern held true in Georgia, and was told it did indeed -- and that East Lake harbored many of those violent criminals. Cousins resolved then that that East Lake Meadows demanded major intervention, not scattershot philanthropy.

Robbed on the third tee

In 1995, Cousins and others launched the East Lake Foundation to assemble money, plans and government help for the daunting task.

At first glance, the revival effort might seem a move to guard Cousins' own investment. Cousins, himself a golfer, had family ties to the East Lake Golf Club and bought the once-hallowed course in 1993 after its membership dwindled and its aging facilities fell into disrepair. The businessman spent more than \$24 million buying and restoring the golf course and its old clubhouse and knew all too well that crime threatened the club's survival.

"Some people were held up while playing golf," recalls Cousins, now 75 and semiretired. "A guy stuck a shotgun through the fence there on the third tee, scared everybody to death. They threw their wallets over the fence."

But Cousins said he didn't attack social ills only to protect the exclusive club's flank. Cousins and the CF Foundation, formed by his family, launched projects in the neighborhood long before the private club went up for sale. While honoring the memory of Bobby Jones, whom he called "probably, next to Martin Luther King, the greatest citizen the town (Atlanta) ever had," Cousins saw the private club's revival as an innovative way of helping turn around a prostrate neighborhood.

Cousins donated the East Lake Golf Club to the CF Foundation and suggested that well-heeled new members donate \$200,000 each to the East Lake Foundation. Also, the course's profits from green fees go to the East Lake Foundation, whose board chairman is Charles Knapp, a former Tulane University executive.

The East Lake Foundation reports that its total capital investments of \$128 million in the East Lake complex, which paid for a long list of community projects, were drawn primarily from private money. It raised \$68 million through a variety of donations, \$32 million through the sale of multifamily revenue bonds and tax credits, each involving a public process, and \$5 million invested by the Publix grocery store chain, recruited by advocates for the development. Public sources, including state money and the Atlanta Housing Authority, were tapped for about \$22 million.

The philanthropic focus now has shifted to services. Tapping money from the East Lake Golf Club and other fundraising, the East Lake Foundation spends millions of dollars each year on school and family programs, many of which also serve the wider neighborhood. The latest available Internal Revenue Service form filed by the East Lake Foundation, from 2005, reported \$3.5 million in such expenditures. In addition, the CF Foundation spends \$250,000 a year to provide credit counseling and day-care center scholarships for residents of the East Lake Villages.

Honest work; no crime

The physical transformation of public housing at East Lake, with attractive apartments and townhomes overlooking finely cropped grass and sand pits, has been accompanied by dramatic changes in who is allowed to live there -- and the rules they must live by.

After some tense early negotiations about the percentage of complex apartments that would be devoted to subsidized housing, the East Lake Foundation and housing advocates agreed on a 50-50 split between public and market-rate housing. Today, most say the even mix seems to work fine. Monthly rates for market-rate apartments range from \$800 for a single-bedroom to \$1,400 for a four-bedroom, and low-

income residents qualifying for a subsidy must pay at least 30 percent of their income for rent, managers say.

Middle-income residents who might otherwise choose to avoid low-income neighbors are attracted by the development's amenities, including a pool and access to the nearby school, YMCA and public golf course. It's nearly impossible, in fact, to tell who lives in a subsidized unit and who pays market rent. "How do you tell?" said Hattie Lundy, 51, a retail worker who moved into a market-rate apartment a year ago. "I don't know. I don't care."

In a practice that would seem foreign to public housing observers in New Orleans, East Lake Villages won't rent a unit to anyone with a felony record from the past seven years, or with any past violent-crime or drug conviction. And it requires those applying for a subsidized unit to hold a job or participate in a job training program, unless they are disabled or elderly. The rules extend to young adults, 16 or older, living in the affected households. Engineering a sea change for public housing requirements across the city, the Atlanta Housing Authority strongly backed the new East Lake rules.

One result, said East Lake Foundation Executive Director Carol Naughton, has been the disappearance of "drug boys" who carried on a multimillion-dollar street trade at East Lake Meadows in the past, and sometimes lined a back wall as an intimidating presence as mostly female lease-holders held tenant association meetings. Another effect, residents say, is that the sprawling apartment complex seems empty during the day -- because nearly everyone is at work or in school.

Now, the backers of the New Orleans proposal plan to institute similar work rules and criminal background screening procedures for the revitalized St. Bernard development.

Tavarez Tate, 13, who moved into East Lake Villages with his mother seven years ago, said apartment grounds are peaceful, even late at night -- a far cry from the old East Lake Meadows, where his aunt lived in fear.

"Sometimes I come home about 9:30, 10 o'clock. It's just quiet. You don't hear noise, you don't hear people yelling," he said. "I feel safe. I meet neighbors and friends."

School anchors complex

A quiet dedication to a comprehensive approach in fighting poverty weaves through the East Lake story. And Drew Charter School embodies that strategy.

For the three New Orleans businessmen now envisioning a new St. Bernard development, a visit to Atlanta's first charter school sparked a revelation. There, they found an orderly, clean building with lots of sunlight through its big windows, a building built almost entirely with private donations, replacing a bunkerlike school with a reputation for chaos.

"Each of these kids walks up, reaches out a hand, says, 'Hi, I'm Jared,' looks you in the eye," Barousse said.

A visitor walking through the school finds animated exchanges between students and teachers, many of whom have an assistant. Hall lockers show barely a scratch or mark. And a teacher can be heard scolding a bunch of students returning from recess who are fidgety and smiling, but far from disruptive.

"You know, I just gave you an extended recess, and you all are talking," the teacher said. "Girls, it's not the beauty parlor."

The prekindergarten-through-eighth-grade school attracts students from across Atlanta, with priority given to those from the East Lake development.

Private donations give the 820-student school the benefit of extra staff, hundreds of computers and an extended school day, not to mention enrichment classes, called "specials," in music, art, Spanish and drama. A New York for-profit company, Edison Schools, assists with management tasks, and the East Lake Family YMCA, linked to the rear of the charter school, serves as the school's well-equipped gym, complete with a pool.

Abysmally low test scores at the old Drew Elementary have been replaced by steady gains at the new charter school. And as students move on to other Atlanta schools after the eighth grade, their progress is individually tracked by a support project at Drew Charter, CREW Teens, short for Creating Responsible Educated Working Teens, which maintains a study lounge with tutorial help for the older students. The program tracks more than 200 students and has found only one to be at risk for dropping out.

Golf teaches values

On a recent weekday morning, a class of fourth-graders from Drew Charter, all African-American, could be found running down a green driving-range slope at the Yates public golf course, right across the street from the school. Students were accompanied by instructors from the First Tee program at East Lake, which teaches hundreds of neighborhood children each year about golf fundamentals.

On this day, the children gleefully gathered balls, as if at an Easter egg hunt, so they could try their hand at driving. Their lead teacher, stern but quick to praise, was Jeff Dunovant, a PGA golf pro and the son of a one-time golf pro at New Orleans' Pontchartrain Park.

"All right, everybody that's on the mat, get your ball, get your grip, get set up!" Dunovant shouted out to several club-wielding students.

"Good! Good swing! All right, get set up."

"Clubs down! Y'all need to follow directions!"

Beyond the financial support for social services offered by an exclusive golf club, beyond scenic views provided to residents of East Lake Villages, golf can help bring a sense of quiet and discipline to children who sometimes lack both.

"It can be calming and relaxing, and it takes off stress," said Herneshia Weldon, 9, after taking her turn at the driving range. "I like my teachers because they say what they feel, and they teach you great things: golf swings, participation."

First Tee instructors, whose services come at no charge at East Lake, must overcome perceptions such as "This is boring!" and "This is a white man's sport." But it doesn't take long, and the game teaches integrity, patience and other important values, Dunovant said. Golf skills and life skills overlap, he said.

Struggle to build trust

At the time that East Lake Meadows was depopulated in 1996, just before buildings were razed, 425 families lived in the public housing complex, said Naughton, the East Lake Foundation's director. Just 78 of the families returned after the mixed-income development opened its doors, she said. Others were given Section 8 certificates or moved into another public housing complex, she said.

No one doubts that returning families enjoy a far better quality of life now. But in the mid-1990s, some urban policy experts called for rapid repairs at rundown public housing developments to prevent a lengthy displacement of residents.

The Rev. Nibs Stroupe, minister of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, a few miles from East Lake, said many East Lake residents who were handed Section 8 vouchers struggled to find decent places to live. Comparing Tom Cousins' East Lake venture with the forced removal of Cherokees from north Georgia in the 1830s, Stroupe said: "It's really the same old thing dressed up. Those who have money want the land, remove the people, praise themselves, and that's it."

Naughton concedes the East Lake initiative caused painful repercussions for some families. Some former residents couldn't return because they balked at the work requirement or refused to part with adult children who had drug problems and a criminal record.

She recalled the explanation of one former East Lake Meadows resident: "Baby, I'm the only thing standing between him and oblivion."

But the East Lake Foundation draws comfort from research by a Georgia Tech economics professor showing that social and economic conditions facing displaced residents improved over time -- especially if they moved back to the mixed-income complex -- or at least got no worse if they resettled elsewhere in Atlanta.

Viewed as paradigm

Many Atlanta housing advocates and federal housing officials now tout the complex as a model. "As a point of transformation, it was remarkable . . . this was a dangerous place for Atlantans to be living," said Milan Ozdinec, deputy assistant secretary of HUD's Office of Public Housing and Voucher Programs. "How do we take care of these people who need our help the most? Do we put them in dilapidated public housing developments, or do we provide them a value-added way of life?"

As he picked at a salad recently during lunch at the East Lake Golf Club, Byron Williams searched for a telling illustration of the vast difference between what the rebuilt East Lake community offers and the St. Bernard etched in the collective memory.

How many killings you had in East Lake in the last 10 years, five years?" Williams asked Naughton, the East Lake Foundation director.

"None," she said. Then, correcting herself: "I'm sorry -- one. It was a domestic situation, involving two men."

But even though he's seen East Lake's success firsthand, the former coach had no illusions about the how residents of the St. Bernard public housing development would greet the idea of bringing a similar complex to New Orleans. He knew he would run into a wall of anger and suspicion, even from people he knew, and who knew of his credentials as a community leader they once trusted to keep their children out of trouble.

He couldn't blame them: They were torn from their neighborhood by the flood and still harbor suspicions that powerful people want to keep them out. They believe terms like "revitalization" and "renewal" often mask plans to purge neighborhoods of the poor.

He prepared for questions about whether he had been bought off to lobby for their plan. Aside from the rent-free stay in an East Lake development, given to many Katrina victims, and some money to travel

back to New Orleans to check on his home, he has no financial ties to the people behind the Atlanta project. And he said he has none to the New Orleans development team.

He simply wants better things for his old neighborhood, especially its young people, he said.

Idea faces hostility

During an Oct. 11 public forum at a recreation center next to St. Bernard, Williams and representatives of HANO and Columbia Residential, an Atlanta firm picked to redevelop housing in the complex, got just what Williams expected.

Bitterness poured from the crowd of about 40, who said units in the complex should have been reopened. Some said relatives and friends had died trying to find an affordable way to return to New Orleans.

"Our development is not turning into a golf course! They can forget it!" fumed one former resident, Sharon Sears Jasper. "Don't come here and tell us you're going to take our homes and talk about demolition!"

Williams responded calmly, even when shouted down. And this week, he remained optimistic he could persuade enough people to trust in the promise of better homes, a better life -- especially as some of them are planning a road trip to Atlanta, at the invitation of Columbia Residential, to see for themselves.

"They attacked me -- that was the only face they knew, that they were comfortable with," Williams said. "They're directing all their anger to me. I understand. Those are my people."

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