

## Building Neighborhoods

Coverage of Federal Urban Policy from United Neighborhood Centers of America

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# Purpose Built Communities Combines Community Revitalization, Cradle-to-College Pipeline, and Accountability

Fourteen year old Martavious Adams stepped up to the tee. The PGA Tour Championship crowd was already applauding 97 year old Ernie Ball, the oldest surviving player of first Masters Tournament, who had just sent a shot more than 200 yards down the middle of the fairway. Now it was his turn.

Martavious sized up the shot, took a back swing, and drove the ball 293 yards. The crowd went wild. Martavious beamed.

It was a moment where the East Lake's past and future had come together. Martavious is a participant in East Lake's First Tee program, which teaches etiquette, goal setting and other life skills.

"I could care less if we got great golfers, a Tiger Woods or Phil Mickelson," said Nyre Williams, who runs the program. "My goal is to supply them with life skills on and away from the golf course for a lifetime, to be a better citizen and person."

The program had worked its magic on Martavious. "It's about being focused and just repeating my routine," he said, talking about both golf and school. Previously a C student, he was now earning As and Bs.

## **Transforming a Community**

Martavious was just one of many success stories to come out of Atlanta's East Lake community. As recently as the mid-1990s, East Lake was considered a war zone, with rampant crime, unemployment, and failing schools. By 1995, Tom Cousins, a local real estate developer and philanthropist, had had enough. That year he decided to address the community's challenges head on and launched the East Lake Foundation. Cousins was not interested in a piecemeal approach that might help around the margins. He wanted wholesale community change.

Since then, the effort has centered on several critical strategies:

- **Mixed-income Development:** In a strategy similar to the one underlying Choice Neighborhoods, the initiative transformed East Lake Meadows, a severely distressed

public housing complex, into mixed-income apartments, called the Villages at East Lake. Half of the apartments are now rented at market rates to middle-income people and half are rented at below market rates to low income residents of the community;

- **Developing Community Facilities and Services:** The East Lake Foundation brought a new YMCA and new public golf course to the community and restored a precious community asset, the historic East Lake Golf Club, which now hosts the annual PGA Tour Championship and generates profits that are reinvested in the community through the East Lake Foundation; and
- **An Education Pipeline:** Physical redevelopment has helped the community, but transforming lives required more. The strategy focused on developing a cradle-to-college continuum of services centered on a newly built, high performing charter school, called Drew Charter School, and combining high quality education with wrap around services provided by the East Lake YMCA and Sheltering Arms Early Education and Family Learning Center, among others.

The community's subsequent transformation attracted new residents and commercial development, including a Publix grocery store and two bank branches, which together generated 178 new jobs. It also dramatically reduced crime. Between 1993 and 2007, violent crime dropped 96 percent. Property crime dropped 41 percent. The neighborhood transformation has spread beyond the footprint of the original 200 acre campus and transformed the larger East Lake neighborhood. The average sales price of a home in East Lake was \$45,000 in 1996. Now it is over \$200,000.

## **Results and Accountability**

Transforming the physical environment was one strategy. Transforming the learning environment was another.

East Lake's educational efforts centered on Drew Charter School, a state of the art facility opened in the year 2000 that provides schooling for 860 children from three years through the 8th grade. The school features an extended school day and school year, which provides an estimated 2.1 years more instruction for each student that stays at Drew from kindergarten through 8th grade. It also features a comparably low 15-1 student-teacher ratio.

The results have been outstanding. In every grade, students at Drew Charter School outperform statewide and city averages in reading, language arts, math, science and social studies tests. Moreover, the longer students stay in Drew, the better they do. For example, only 68 percent of the incoming class of 4th graders in 2006 met or exceeded language arts standards. By 2010, 97 percent of the same class of 8th graders met or exceeded those standards.

While the student body is disproportionately low income, Drew's outcomes are comparable to the top schools in the city with far more economically advantaged student populations. Approximately 80% of the students at the school are eligible for free or reduced price lunches (98% are African American). While any student who lives in the city of Atlanta is eligible to attend, children who live in the Villages of East Lake have a first priority to attend Drew Charter School. Seventy-five percent of the students live within two miles of the school.

Why has it been so successful? According to project staff, the primary reason is “extraordinary school leadership and faculty who have both the believe in every student’s ability to excel, and the skill set to help students fulfill that potential.” Beyond its extended school day, school year and low teacher-student ratio, students are also supported by an extensive array of services. These include early education programs, before school and afterschool programs, financial literacy, health and wellness programs emphasizing preventive care, and a college prep program, called CREW Teens.

The East Lake Foundation and Drew Charter School also believe in a “relentless focus” on outcomes and accountability. Funding relationships support this approach. The East Lake Foundation owns the land and building where Drew Charter School operates. It has representatives on the school’s board of directors and the school principal is empowered to make performance-based hiring and firing decisions.

Moreover, grant agreements with other service providers emphasize quantitative and qualitative outcomes, including incentives for meeting specified metrics. Foundation staff meets with providers that are underperforming expectations, addressing reasons for underperformance with resources but also making hard accountability-based decisions when necessary. This private accountability is supplemented by a more public accountability mechanism, where results are released in a Public Report Card.

### **Purpose Built Communities**

Not surprisingly, the East Lake community has become a popular place to visit for other communities eager to replicate its success. To help, in 2009, Warren Buffett joined Cousins and Julian Robertson, a retired hedge fund manager and philanthropist, to form a new organization to assist business and civic leaders in other communities with replicating the East Lake framework. The new organization, [Purpose Built Communities](#), is an UNCA member.

Purpose Built Communities focuses on bringing the lessons of East Lake to scale nationally. Purpose Built Communities’ framework includes mixed income housing, a cradle through college education pipeline, and community services and facilities. The “secret sauce” in the Purpose Built model is the presence of a new, nonprofit “lead organization” with a long term commitment that works with community members and stakeholders to develop a shared vision, marshals resources, assembles new partners and brings a relentless focus on accountability to the initiative. The lead organization concept, modeled on the East Lake Foundation, distinguishes this model from other efforts.

One of the neighborhoods in the Purpose Built Network is in the Bayou District of New Orleans, which recently drew a visit from President Obama. “New Orleans is going to prove if it can be replicated,” Buffett told the New Orleans Times-Picayune. In addition to the Bayou District Foundation’s New Orleans initiative, Purpose Built Communities is supporting transformative neighborhood revitalization strategies in Indianapolis, Omaha, Birmingham, Galveston, Charlotte, Clarkston (GA), Rome (GA) and Atlanta, and exploring partnerships with leaders in several other cities. Over the next four years, Purpose Built hopes to help launch 25

comprehensive community revitalization initiatives that will transform the lives of people and the neighborhoods in which they live.

Leaders of Purpose Built Communities are well steeped in the East Lake experience. Purpose Built CEO Shirley Franklin, former mayor of Atlanta, was a board member of the East Lake Foundation and the founding chair of the board of Drew Charter School before she became mayor. Greg Giornelli, Purpose Built's President and COO, was the founding Executive Director of the East Lake Foundation. Carol Naughton, the Senior Vice President of Purpose Built, worked first for the Atlanta Housing Authority as general counsel and then as the Executive Director of the East Lake Foundation.

The leadership team believes that their hands-on experience in East Lake provides a unique benefit to the Purpose Built Communities Network Member projects. Says Naughton, "When we work with our Network Members to solve problems and overcome barriers to success, we bring our own significant experience to bear as well as what we have learned from our partners in Atlanta and around the country."

There are commonalities among several Purpose Built Communities initiatives and both the Promise and Choice Neighborhoods programs. The Bayou District Foundation effort will also include a \$10 million Educare Early Learning Center, another effort backed by Buffett. Educare facilities are cornerstones in several other neighborhood revitalization efforts, including the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative and a similar effort in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

If they are successful, there will be more stories like East Lake's Martavious Adams.

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By [Patrick Lester](#) – May 18, 2011