

URBAN
INNOVATOR
AWARD



'09

Renee Lewis Glover

CEO, Atlanta Housing Authority

December 8, 2009



MANHATTAN INSTITUTE FOR POLICY RESEARCH



URBAN INNOVATOR AWARD

As part of its effort to promote effective approaches to improving life in America's cities, the Manhattan Institute's Center for Civic Innovation annually presents its Urban Innovator award. This nonpartisan prize has been awarded since 2000 and is based in the Institute's view that effective government is key to the safety and prosperity of our cities, historically the engines of the U.S. economy and the vehicles for upward mobility for their residents. The award has gone to Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels for his use of private financing to improve public infrastructure; to Miami Mayor Manuel Diaz for securing the city's finances and for crime reduction; to Philadelphia (now New Orleans) school superintendent Paul Vallas and to Chicago Mayor Richard Daley for the dramatic improvement in the performance of their respective cities' public schools; and to Florida Governor Jeb Bush for initiatives ranging from disaster preparedness to the use of vouchers for special education services. We seek not to reward those whose approaches fit some preconceived notion of what makes cities work. Instead, we look for "what works"—and try to spread the good news.



HOWARD HUSOCK & RENÉE LEWIS GLOVER

Renée Lewis Glover has been CEO of the Atlanta Housing Authority since September 1994. Prior to joining the AHA, Glover was a corporate finance attorney in Atlanta and New York City. She received a J.D. from Boston University, an M.A. from Yale University and a B.A. from Fisk University.

Howard Husock is vice-president for policy research at the Manhattan Institute and director of its Social Entrepreneurship Initiative. He was formerly the director of case studies in public policy and management at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.



URBAN INNOVATOR AWARD 2009

Howard Husock: Good morning. I'm Howard Husock, vice-president for policy research at the Manhattan Institute. Welcome to the presentation of the 2009 Urban Innovator Award. This nonpartisan award has been presented annually since 2000 by the Institute's Center for Civic Innovation. Recipients have included Indiana's Governor Mitch Daniels, Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley, New Orleans school superintendent Paul Vallas, and former governor Jeb Bush of Florida.

Our award this morning goes to someone who has clearly brought both innovation and improvement to a big-city public-housing system. That combination of terms is so seldom used in relation to public housing that it bears repeating: innovation and improvement.

Of course, long ago and far away, public housing was considered a great innovation, and it seemed at first to be an improvement over the slum housing it replaced. Conceived as a way to provide safe and sanitary housing to working families, the American public-housing system was expected to be self-sustaining: rents from tenants would pay for its maintenance. Today, public housing has a much different meaning for most Americans. "The projects" are known as areas with high crime rates and concentrations of our very poorest households. New Yorkers are rightly proud that Sonia Sotomayor moved from public housing in the Bronx to the U.S Supreme Court, but that kind of upward mobility has, unfortunately, been rare. Far too frequently—though not always—housing projects are bleak,



isolated places, where the law-abiding are cowed by the criminal, where intact families are scarce, and where children see few role models of success.

When Renée Lewis Glover left her career as a successful corporate finance attorney in Atlanta and New York to become chief executive officer of the Atlanta Housing Authority, she did not try to gloss over that system's failings. She dared to say that public housing, conceived as reform, had instead become a toxic environment. And she embarked on a program of what can only be called radical change. That change has been so dramatic that virtually none of the 14,000 apartment units that the Atlanta Housing Authority owned and operated twenty years ago are standing today.

Renée Lewis Glover deserves this award because she had the courage to demolish aging public housing, but also because she had the imagination to envision and the courage to implement an alternative. Too often we think of management as the key to success in the private sector and policy as the key in the public sector. But as political scientist Aaron Wildavsky once observed, implementation is 90 percent of public policy. Renée Lewis Glover has done a great job of implementation. And she's done it while running the Atlanta Housing Authority very much as a business, contracting out for management services while reducing the authority's own payroll from fourteen hundred to three hundred.

The Authority has been so resourceful under her leadership that it has not only demolished public housing, it has charged Hollywood producers for the right to film the demolition. Renée Lewis Glover is the leading example—but not the only one—of a new generation of public housing authority managers who, not content to wait for new money from Washington, D.C., are giving out vouchers instead of apartments, attaching work requirements or time limits to those vouchers, replacing poorhouse-style public housing with mixed-income apartment complexes that are privately owned and managed, or selling land for non-housing purposes.

During Ms. Glover's tenure, the employment rate among Atlanta's public-housing tenants has risen from as low as 13 percent in some projects to above 60 percent. Her success is influencing policy. New York's own Shaun Donovan, the U.S. secretary of Housing and Urban Development, has signaled his desire to give thousands of public housing authorities the same flexibility to experiment that Atlanta has. He can do this credibly because of the courage and success of Renée Lewis Glover, chief executive officer of the Atlanta Housing Authority and the Manhattan Institute's 2009 Urban Innovator.



Renée Lewis Glover: Good morning. I have given a lot of thought to the remarks I'm going to make because there is so much passion around the issue of public housing. I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, during the Jim Crow era, a time when the larger society was writing off generations of people of African heritage. But my community was very strong and close-knit. It believed in its young people, and believed in their possibilities. There was never a day we didn't hear that we were being prepared to be the next leaders of the country.

So this morning I am going to talk about the importance of setting standards. I am going to talk about the importance of personal responsibility. And I'm going to show you how, just by setting your expectations of people at the very highest levels, you can inspire them to achieve great things.

The condition of Atlanta's public housing in the 1990s was truly unacceptable. I remember going to visit a property that was referred to by residents as "Little Vietnam," not because Vietnamese people lived there, but because it was so dangerous. Even though I was the head of the housing agency, there were so many drug dealers and shootings on that property that I was advised not to go out there. We had women and children living in this community. There were elderly and disabled persons living there. But the police officers told me, "Don't go out there without a police escort." This was the 1990s, a time when the city of Atlanta had more public housing per capita than any other city in America. It was also a time when Atlanta was the most violent city in America. As violent as Atlanta was, the public housing properties in Atlanta were many more times as violent. For example, our first effort at revitalization under the federal Hope VI program was in a community that, though it was only sixty acres in size, experienced thirty-five times the number of violent crimes as the rest of the city of Atlanta. To me, a statistic like that is fundamentally indecent. I didn't think, "Well, can we put a better management strategy in place to bring that number down?" No, I thought, "What do we really have to do to solve this problem."

I came to this job from the private sector. When I started, I told myself that I would not get pulled into the mindset that had governed public housing for decades. But I also wanted to be strategic. I wanted to solve these problems because the families who were suffering under this terrible system looked like me. They looked like my family. They looked like so many folks that I knew and loved and cared about. So I never questioned whether these families had the capacity to be successful. I knew that in the right environment, and with the right set of standards and expectations, they could be.

By the way, the families that lived in public housing at that time didn't trust anyone in power. For too long they had suffered officials who told them that



everything was fine, even while they literally feared for their lives on a daily basis. “Everything is fine. It’s just a matter of, you know, getting work orders done or whatever, whatever, whatever.” This is the kind of stuff that gets said in the bureaucratic morass. But the people of the community would sit there and think to themselves, “I live in the United States of America, and I have to sleep on the floor or in a bathtub every night in order to make it.”

We got together—we being the agency and families—and said, “How can we change this?” And only when we started talking sense rather than nonsense did we get buy-in from the families. So we set about trying to figure out how to set standards and expectations for personal responsibility in a way that would help solve the chronic problems plaguing public housing in Atlanta.

I go to church most Sundays, because I’m a sinner and I’m trying to get to where I need to be. I very much value the simple notions that I hear every Sunday in my church. All people are children of God with unlimited human potential. Not some people, not most people, but *all* people are children of God with unlimited human potential. That is such a powerful notion, because it makes you realize that the work that we are doing as a society is for God’s people. Approaching the world in this way exposes you to a whole different level of accountability. You stop asking, “What are the expedient decisions that need to be made in terms of setting standards, because, after all, these things are so complicated.” They are complicated. And policy is set by human beings, and heaven help us, we are all so human. We worry: Are people going to be successful? Are the standards too high? Will people fail? But if you buy into the idea that all human beings have unlimited potential, then you don’t need to worry whether God made a mistake when creating any individual. Our challenge—indeed, our duty—is to set standards and expectations for these individuals as high as possible. And, by the way, this notion of personal responsibility doesn’t apply just to the people in this room, or to me. It applies to everyone. The notion that some people are responsible and others aren’t is just a whole lot of malarkey.

So we developed some guiding principles based on common sense, and we went to work. First, we wanted to end the practice of concentrating poverty. There have been thousands—probably more—of research projects done on the adverse effects of concentrating poverty. This is not a statement about families. This is a statement about a failed social design. It hasn’t just failed here in America. It has failed everywhere. Why? Because predators—drug dealers, criminals, bad folks—are drawn to hopelessness. They know that there will be an abundance of “easy marks” in places where poverty is concentrated, so they set up shop and dig in.



There is an irony in all this. The very people that you think you're helping, law-abiding citizens—and about 90 percent of the families in public housing are law-abiding citizens and don't want to be caught up in all this mess—become victims of the social design that concentrates poverty. So we said: Let's stop this. It hasn't worked for the last several decades. So why are we going to do a newer version of a failed strategy?

Second, we wanted to allow market forces to help close the “affordability gap” for families that had difficulty paying their rent. To do this, we partnered with the private sector to create market-rate communities that contained an affordable component. We worked with developers to bring private-sector know-how and market principles into public housing. This included a work requirement, and everybody bought into it. So now, when people visit the sixteen mixed-income communities that we created and tell us, as they often do, that our developments don't look like public housing, we say, “Well, thank you. It isn't public housing.” That's the highest compliment we get. We work with the private sector to buy down the cost of the units so that families on housing assistance can afford the rent.

There's an old saying: You have to plan with the end in mind. Mainstreaming families is what we are all about. Our families often ask us not to refer to them as public-housing residents. They want to blend in. They want to take advantage of all the opportunities that exist in these communities. They want a shot at the American dream, and I promise you, their dreams and aspirations aren't different from yours. They want their children to go to college. That's why we were sure to include a brand new elementary school in the master plan for Centennial Place, one of our first mixed-income communities. Mind you, we didn't want an elementary school that was going to fail. We didn't want a mediocrity, but a globally competitive elementary school. We knew we could do mediocrity any day of the week. We wanted a school that would truly challenge the teachers, the staff, everyone. And one of the goals was to have the students who were on assistance, if they so desired, cross the street to go to Georgia Tech, one of the finest schools in the country. During the entire seventy-year history of the Techwood/Clark-Howell Homes, not a single student had ever crossed that street. It's literally just across the street. I'm happy to report that a couple of years ago we had several students make that journey across the street. And now they are on their way because, as we all know, education is indeed the great equalizer.

Third, we look both comprehensively and holistically at these communities. The twin notions of “mixing uses” and “mixing incomes” are critically important. I'm sure you've been sitting there saying to yourself, “Who are these people that



moved into the market-rate rental units?” We were very fortunate, because it was a time when people were actually moving back into the city. Atlanta is a transportation mess—yes, it often does take two hours to get into the city—so rather than live in a distant suburb, a lot of folks decided that they were prepared to move in to our mixed-income communities and give it a shot. When I started in 1994, the population of the city of Atlanta was probably around 375,000. It’s now north of half-a-million.

So people were moving in, and we also had a partnership with the school system. Centennial Place, which was the first elementary school that we collaborated on, became one of the top schools in the state of Georgia. Now there is a waiting list, and nothing drives success like success. When people see kids going across the street to Georgia Tech, all of a sudden they start to buy in. We know that great schools make great communities. Families that receive public assistance know it, too. When we were growing up, we heard it every single day: Education is the great equalizer. There was never any question about it. We were expected to go to college. The only questions were, “Where are you going to college, and how well are you going to do?” And guess what? It worked. Setting standards and expectations is very, very important.

We’ve also looked at the quality of the parks and quality of the recreational facilities so that families can live, learn, work, play, and raise their children in these communities. And we have not had the kind of resistance that people worried about when we started. That’s because we were honest with everyone and said, “Yes, the standards and expectations will be high. If people are not going to live by the rules, they will be put out.” Politically, it was bit challenging, but we believed in the families we were serving, and when you believe in people, you can set the standards that much higher. If you had to sleep in a bathtub for the better part of a year, I suspect—now, I don’t know—that you would be laser-focused on the kind of screening requirements and other requirements that go into making great communities. When I was living here in New York, we—I was married at the time—applied to purchase an apartment. And the co-op board looked us up and down three times over. They wanted to make sure that we were the kind of people that they wanted to have living next to them as neighbors. So I know that New Yorkers are very familiar with this notion of screening requirements. Well, we have to do the same types of things. We don’t focus on credit ratings, of course, because people with fewer resources often have challenges in that regard. But setting *some* standards allows you to predict with confidence that a year from now, or ten years from now, whatever, the community is going to be great.



If we want families to be successful, it really comes down to two things: education and work. I have never heard a success story that didn't include at least one of those two things. So when we engage with families who are receiving housing assistance, we impress upon them that the subsidy is going to help, but that they should view it as a tool. We don't want the subsidy to be thought of as an end in itself, something for these families to aspire to.

When HUD offered us a deregulation agreement, we were able to do at the local level the types of things that we knew worked, based on our experience with the mixed-income community revitalization program. In 2004, we instituted a work requirement. And no, we're not fools. We understand that there are ups and downs in the economy. We also know that families have to be supported. As a midcourse correction, we started hiring professional coaches and counselors to help the families make connections to the larger community and help them with job training and education. I can tell you that the investment has been incredibly important to the success of these families. People have gone way beyond what we anticipated and hoped for. In fact, people have two and three jobs because now that they're into this thing, they're saying, "I want to open up my own business. I want to buy my own home." That, my friends, is God at work.

Now, about two-and-a-half years ago, other communities started coming to us and saying, "What about us? When are you going to get to our property? We've seen what you've been doing all over the city, and we want it for our community, too." We had ten large family public-housing communities that we had not yet treated with this mixed-use, mixed-income revitalization program. And we said, "What do you want to do?" They said, "Well, we want out." So with our deregulation agreement, we crafted a program called the Quality of Life Initiative, which basically provided families with a voucher so that they could move. We also invested in about three years of human-development services and supported the families as they looked for new homes. That's when all the so-called advocates came out of the woodwork. "Oh, you can't do this. This is terrible," they said. But what they failed to appreciate is that these families *actually wanted to go*. This was not a "top down" type of initiative. This really was a partnership. We sent some cards out and asked the families to vote on whether they wanted to stay or go. Ninety-eight percent of the families said that they wanted to go. We asked, "Do want a voucher or not?" Ninety-eight percent of the families said, "We want the voucher." (The most frequently asked follow-up question was, "How soon can we get the voucher?") Finally we asked, "Do you support the initiative or don't you?" Again, 98 percent supported the initiative.



Meanwhile, the “advocates” were out there saying, “Oh, this is terrible. We can’t lose these housing projects. They are a precious resource.” Well, this precious resource had been underfunded for decades. These properties had higher crime rates than anywhere else in the city, and the families were saying to us, “Look, we want out of this.” We shared the survey information with HUD, which finally approved demolition. These families have successfully relocated three to four months ahead of schedule. My point is: The families weren’t fighting us. There may have been one or two, but they had other agendas that they were attending to. The fact of the matter is that all of these families recognized that the environment they were living in mattered greatly. We hear from them now on a regular basis, and they are thrilled to have departed that environment. We had a major meeting at one of the convention centers, and the stories that we heard from these families would just make your heart sing. People were saying, “I found a great location. I’m working. My children are so proud of me because I’m working.” And it went on and on and on.

The fear of setting high standards and high expectations of personal responsibility is our problem. The families on housing assistance are not afraid of these high standards. They need us to do the right thing. If we have faith in them, I promise you that we will all be amazed by what God can do.

So I want to thank the Manhattan Institute so much for this recognition and this award. I’ll tell you a funny story about Howard Husock. I think he was skeptical, to say the least, when he first came down to Atlanta. I think he felt that perhaps these efforts that I’ve just told you about were nothing more than smoke and mirrors. But when he got on the ground, I think he recognized our passion.

And we are passionate about this work because we understand what is at stake. I hope that in generations to come the work that we dared to do will have a huge payoff, because if we keep the children in mind—imagine your children trying to navigate Little Vietnam—I think we can find both the political will and the corporate will to do what needs to be done. Thank you very much.

URBAN INNOVATOR AWARD

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- 2007 **Jeb Bush**
Former Governor, State of Florida
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Education Leader
- 2005 **Raymond Kelly**
Commissioner, New York Police Department
- 2004 **Manuel Diaz**
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