

INSIDE

TRANSITIONS. A-12
CLASSIFIEDS. A-14

www.tulsaworld.com

Focus

Homesick for shelter

After enduring untenable living conditions, residents seek better

By CURTIS KILLMAN
AND GINNIE GRAHAM
World Staff Writers

Mary Harrison doesn't want people coming in to her home in the 200 block of Oklahoma Street.

When she relents, she invites the visitors with a forced half smile, "Welcome to the horror house."

Local officials say at least 6,000 substandard homes can be found in Tulsa.

Harrison's story is reflective of many others who find themselves living in a deteriorating home. But different opinions on the issue come from the perspective of renters, property owners and social service advocates.

She has lived on the block since 1955. Harrison has owned her current home since 1975 when an urban renewal project moved the house to her street.

"It was an old house and a problem from the get-go," she said.

After working her entire life at various jobs, she decided to retire about 10 years ago. Since then, she has struggled to keep up with repairs.

Now, the wood holding up the roof has rotted and the roof is caving in. Her living room is invaded by rain and sun pouring through the holes in the ceiling. Pigeons have tried to make a

home among the layers of rotten roof around those holes, but Harrison fights them off by plugging tarps in the spaces.

Decorating the 1920s-era home is impossible because of constantly having to move furniture to dodge dripping water.

Mold and mildew have taken over portions of the home because of the moisture. Her mattress and many furnishings have been ruined.

"You just can't imagine or comprehend what it is like to live in a place like this," Harrison said. "I could try and describe it, but no one could understand. It just affects everything."

Through it all, Harrison tries hard to keep a neat, tidy house with a manicured yard.

Harrison tried to get loans for repairs on a few occasions but was turned down.

"I've gotten so discouraged I wanted to abandon it," she said. "But something told me I should hold onto it."

Harrison was accepted into the Rebuilding Together Tulsa volunteer program, which replaced her roof using donated materials, labor and a \$3,000 Community Development Block Grant.

During September, volunteers took off four layers of roof, including the original cedar shingles, decking and rafters, for a new roof.

The whole project would have cost Harrison nearly \$10,000.

"It's a humbling experience," she said. "I always considered myself an independent person because I worked my whole life. In my later years, I've realized none of us are completely independent."

"I thank God for the good will of men and women who reach out to others who need a helping hand. It makes you feel like people care."

Dangerous neighborhood

Screaming from the street stirred Rose Carr from her couch.

Carr, who lived in Turley at the time, rolled off the couch to see what was going on out front.

She crawled along the floor towards the door. Peeking outside, Carr watched and listened as the two men argued over how much one owed the other. The older man drew a handgun and pointed it at the face of the other.

Carr crawled away from the doorway.

"I didn't want to be a witness to a murder," Carr recalled.

That moment in late 2003 was the final straw for Carr. It was time to look for another place to live. "I just wanted to get away from that scene," she said.

But for Carr, who is raising two grandchildren on a Section 8 housing subsidy, getting away from such an environment would prove difficult.

Driving through a neighborhood just north of downtown Tulsa, Carr found a home she liked. The home had already been rented. But the property owner was remodeling another home that would be available soon.

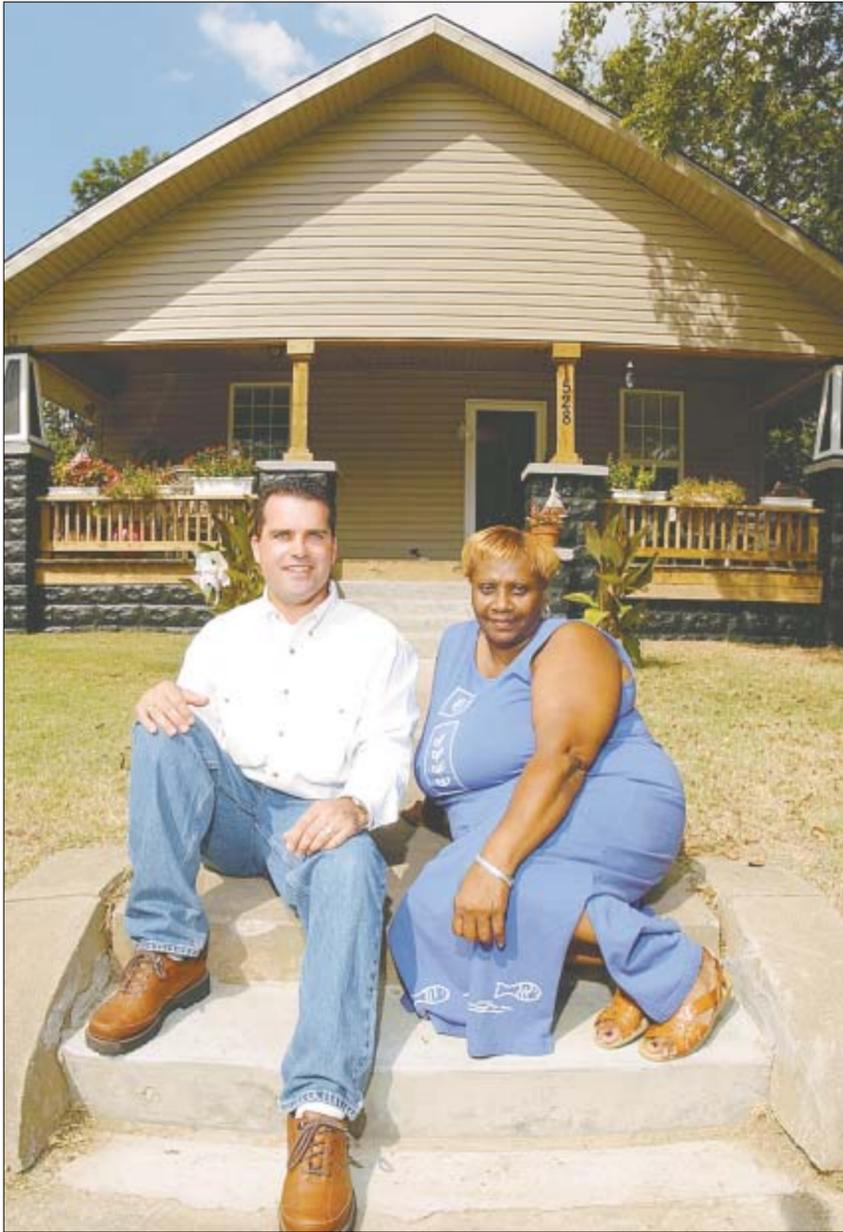
The home in the 1500 block of North Main Street is virtually new, having been renovated by a newcomer to the rental housing market.

Carr is proud to show off her new home. She shows a visitor her bedroom and adjoining bathroom, the latter feature something she has not enjoyed in many years.

Always quick to give thanks for finding her new home and neighborhood, the former school teacher has her sights set on becoming a foster parent.

The house at one time faced demolition at the hands of the city. It changed hands several times, once for \$2,000. More recently it was sold for \$4,500 to a company in which Richard Barnett had an interest, according to Tulsa County Clerk records.

Built around 1920, the bungalow had seen its



KELLY KERR / Tulsa World

Landlord Richard Barnett and tenant Rose Carr pose outside their remodeled house in the 1500 block of North Main Street. Barnett, a newcomer to the rental housing business, had big plans for the home. He owns all or part interest in 13 homes, all distressed properties when he acquired them.

better days. The Tulsa County assessor in 2002 rated the physical condition of the structure as "very poor," one step above the "unsound" or worst designation.

But Barnett, a newcomer to the rental housing business, had big plans for the home. He owns all or part interest in 13 homes, all distressed properties when he acquired them.

Once he buys the property, Barnett said, he'll sink \$40,000 to \$60,000 into remodeling the home. The work can include anything from foundation improvements to a new roof.

"My philosophy is to fix it now and not worry about it for years to come," Barnett said.

"It's a lot different model than my competitors," Barnett said, who credits his wife and the Bank of Oklahoma for helping him in his business. Since entering the rental business, Barnett said he has become aware of others who put little money into their properties.

"That's what a lot of people are doing it for is the writeoff," Barnett said.

The home on North Main Street is an example of how Barnett operates.

The residence now sports a big, new wood porch, while the interior has been entirely remodeled and looks like a new home.

"He is really making a difference in the community," tenant Rose Carr said of Barnett.

Fixing code violations

Jeff Bradford is showing a visitor where someone stole a wooden door off the back of a vacant rental house he owns in the 700 block of East

42nd Place North. A man driving a brown Chevy pickup truck was seen by neighbors driving away from the home, Bradford said.

Bradford, who owns 74 rental homes, said such events are rare for him.

Inside the home, a storm door lies on the living room floor. A notice from the city Neighborhoods Inspection department, notifying the property owner of code violations, is still attached to the door.

The carpet is pulled up, revealing a worn, original wood floor in the living room. The linoleum floor in the kitchen is dirty and peeling up at the corners. Filth covers the stove. Pantry doors have been stolen, Bradford said. The kitchen sink is in serious need of cleaning.

Bradford acknowledges the place needs a lot of work. New carpet, a ceramic tile floor in the kitchen, a new stove, and new front and back doors are planned. He said he will also install a new fence in the front yard.

In all, Bradford estimates he'll spend about \$2,000 on the property before he tries to rent or sell it, probably in a rent-to-own scenario.

Bradford is one of a handful of people who own dozens of low-valued, single-family rental homes in Tulsa County, according to County Assessor's Office records. Most of Bradford's properties range in value from \$25,000 to \$15,000, records show.

At least 38 of the single-family properties owned by Bradford or family members were deemed to be in "poor" physical condition, according to the Tulsa County assessor. A struc-



Mary Harrison's home was accepted into the Rebuilding Together Tulsa volunteer program, which replaced her roof using donated materials, labor and a \$3,000 Community Development Block Grant. During September, volunteers took off four layers of roof, including the original cedar shingles, decking and rafters, for a new roof.

ROBERT S. CROSS/
Tulsa World

MICHAEL WYKE / Tulsa World

Johnny Crawford chose to be homeless after living in two deteriorating apartment buildings. The 45-year-old said past financial problems and the timing of his disability income checks caused him and his wife to have trouble finding housing.

ture in poor condition ranks better than "very poor" and "unsound" designated properties, the bottom two categories.

Asked about Mayor Bill LaFortune's initiative to eradicate substandard housing, Bradford said he believes city government should not involve itself in such matters.

"Personally, I don't think it is the city's job," Bradford said. "It is the churches' job. The city can only do so much."

Bradford said he gives people with bad credit a chance to own a home through his rent-to-own program. If something goes wrong with the house, Bradford said it is the occupant's responsibility.

But if the resident can't afford to make the repair, Bradford said he will help purchase the item and add the cost on to the overall price of the home. He estimated about 15 people have been able to eventually purchase their home from Bradford in the 12 years he has been in the home rental business.

Otherwise, each home is inspected to ensure its heat exchangers work properly, Bradford said. A certified electrician inspects the wiring, he said.

"Because basically, I have to sleep at night," Bradford said.

Some of Bradford's homes are qualified to receive Section 8 vouchers. But Bradford said many of his properties are not eligible.

"The White House wouldn't pass Section 8 standards," Bradford said.

A Tulsa Housing Authority official said homes must pass an inspection to qualify to accept Section 8 vouchers from renters.

"Most landlords that provide decent, safe and sanitary housing" qualify for the program, said LeDeanna Anderson, THA director of assisted housing.

'A struggle every day'

Johnny Crawford chose to be homeless after living in two deteriorating apartment buildings.

The 45-year-old said past financial problems and the timing of his disability income checks caused him and his wife to have trouble finding housing.

"It's a struggle every day to find a place," Crawford said. "It's been real hard and a problem in Tulsa. If you're trying to do the right thing and put a roof over your head, why can't the landlord meet you halfway?"

The couple lived at Towerview Apartments at 214 S. Cheyenne Ave. before relocating to an apartment at 120 N. Maybelle Ave.

It was the last place that sent Crawford into homelessness.

"There were drugs in the building, prostitutes outside and the only time we saw the landlord was on rent day," Crawford said.

The structure is valued at \$18,191 and the land is worth \$4,300, according to Tulsa County Assessor's Office.

The owner, Kenneth G. Flatt Jr., could not be located for comment. A letter sent to his home address seeking comment received no response.

The efficiency unit rented for \$350 a month with bills paid.

Crawford said the water heater would be turned off to conserve energy and a cap was put on the amount of electricity used by each tenant.

The oven didn't work, roaches were common and the apartment wasn't even close to clean up on move in, he said.

"The bathroom was the size of one of those portable johns," he said. "And the wood was weak on the balcony second floor. I'm over 300 pounds and that was scary."

Crawford said he called the police at least once a week to report illegal activity, but the people were gone by the time authorities arrived.

A request to add a lock to the front entrance or hire a security officer was denied, Crawford said.

After a couple of months, Crawford and his wife went to the Day Center for the Homeless. "I just woke up one morning and said I had had enough," Crawford said. "I just started walking. I had 15 days left on my rent, but I started walking to the (homeless shelter)."

"I came here because I knew I'd be safe. If you want to get on your feet, this is a good place to be."

With the help of a case manager at the shelter, the Crawfords have located a new apartment.