Executive Summary: The Dorothy Richardson Story

Abstract: Dorothy Mae Richardson was a community activist in Pittsburgh during the 1960s. Her activism to improve slum housing while resisting urban renewal efforts in her neighborhood led to the creation of the Pittsburgh Neighborhood Housing Services, or the Pittsburgh NHS. The Pittsburgh NHS inspired a national model that was made permanent through a 1978 act of Congress establishing the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, now NeighborWorks America.

Dorothy Mae Richardson was born May 20, 1922 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She had seven siblings and attended Allegheny County High School. In 1942, she married Louis Richardson, a section hand on the Pittsburgh railway. Louis would go on to serve as a sergeant in the Air Force during World War II. Together, they had two children: Timothy and Jonathan. When Louis returned from the war, they purchased a home in the Northside neighborhood in Pittsburgh where Dorothy Richardson would live for the rest of her life.

In the 1950s, a few years after moving to the Northside, Richardson saw more whites exiting her neighborhood and noticed that city neglect followed. In a 1969 interview, she commented that “the streets weren’t kept clean, and the sewers would stink.”¹ Instead of waiting for the city to turn its attention to the problem, Richardson organized several church members for block parties to clean up houses in the community. For the rest of the decade, the houses in the neighborhood would continue to decline due to landlord neglect.

By 1964, the problem of slum housing in Dorothy Richardson’s Northside community had gotten so bad that it was impossible for the city to ignore, no matter how much city officials tried. The local newspapers, the Pittsburgh Press and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, became more

attentive to the issue of the city’s slum housing and began writing about it. Despite the heightened press attention, the city refused to act. One day in late 1964, Dorothy Richardson, a group of slum dwellers, social workers, clergymen, poverty workers and others met at the Council of Churches Building and formed the organization Citizens Against Slum Housing, or CASH. Dorothy Richardson was elected president of the organization.

As president of CASH, Richardson became a spokeswoman for her community and for slum dwellers across Pittsburgh. This was a role that she took seriously and she seized every opportunity she could find to shed light on the reality of what it was to like to live in slum housing. The moment that catapulted her to fame was the Equal Opportunity Conference in 1965. The purpose of this conference, part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty program, was to discuss how urban renewal policies could be implemented responsibly. The plans for urban renewal in Pittsburgh were focused on demolishing all of the existing structures on the entire Central North Side, Richardson’s neighborhood, for so-called “replanning.” Instead of renovating the existing units, the concept was to tear the units down and start over.

Dorothy Richardson saw the conference as an opportunity to lift the voices of those living in her community and bring high-powered attention to the issue of urban renewal and slum housing. Although CASH was not invited, members pressured the conference planners and elected officials for representations; eventually CASH was allowed to have one speaker address the attendees. That speaker was Dorothy Richardson. Not only did she list demands that CASH had for changing housing conditions, but she shared compelling stories of how slum housing affects one’s sense of community. With approximately 600 attendees representing over 65 public

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and private agencies, Richardson spoke eloquently about the heartbreak of seeing her community deteriorate. She helped attendees to visualize the trials and tribulations of living in slum housing. At the meeting, Richardson demanded that the city look into the issue of slum housing and hold City Council hearings. The city complied and began the slum housing hearings in 1966.

Dorothy Richardson and CASH believed that slum housing existed on the Northside because landlords could make a profit off of neglecting the homes. Throughout the hearings, she and other CASH members were vocal about the injustice of the housing conditions in their community and called on the city officials to make systemic changes. Among their recommended changes were the implementation of a separate Housing Court to prosecute violations of housing and health codes.

The landlords’ defense was to blame tenant neglect and vandalism for the deterioration of their properties, and to recommend that the City teach residents how to better care for their homes. This stance infuriated members of CASH. Along with their attorney, Sholom Comay, they requested a subpoena to force landlords to open their books and records. Their goal was to prove landlords were deliberately ignoring requests to make repairs in order to keep profit margins high. However, the City Council decided not to subpoena the landlords, and ended the hearings in 1967.

Although the landlords were not brought to justice, Dorothy Richardson and CASH had some important achievements to point to after the hearings. The city established a separate

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Housing Court, a joint City-County code enforcement program, and a pro-tenant Rent
Withholding law, and granted more powers to the Pittsburgh Housing Authority.\(^6\)

Although these gains were substantial, Richardson pressed on, knowing her community’s
future was not yet safe. In 1967, in her role as president of CASH, Richardson delivered a list of
77 demands to the Chairman of the Pittsburgh Housing Authority, and again the City was not
responsive. In response, members of CASH staged a three hour sit-in at the Housing Authority.\(^7\)
When the Housing Authority still failed to meet with them, Richardson and 200 other members
of CASH staged a sing-in at Carnegie Lecture Hall.\(^8\) After the protests, Richardson teamed up
with members of the Citizens Committee Against the Housing Authority to force more changes.
In response, the Mayor appointed CASH attorney, Sholom Comay, to serve as magistrate to the
Housing Court and appointed Dorothy Richardson herself to the board of the Housing Authority.

While having the citizen voice at the table was a key win, Richardson continued to pursue
other avenues to ensure that her community was protected. Richardson and other CASH activists
had reached out previously to local banks to request their help in preserving their homes but had
been told by the banks that they were not “philanthropic institutions.”\(^9\) However, once she met
banker Harold Tweedy (both served on the board of the Housing Authority), she found someone
who would listen. Tweedy heard the case that Dorothy Richardson made and “he showed
[members of CASH] their mistakes…and worked with [them].”\(^10\)

Tweedy’s presence attracted two other bankers: Francis Nimick of Dollar Bank and John
Beswarick of the Pittsburgh National Bank.\(^11\) The three bankers partnered with CASH in 1968 to

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found the Pittsburgh Neighborhood Housing Service. The Pittsburgh NHS would operate as a new type of lending agency, giving home improvement loans and advice to residents whose incomes kept them from accessing conventional loans. Their work was helped as well by the participation of the Scaife Foundation, who donated $125,000 to the Pittsburgh NHS to cover the most high risk families.  

The Pittsburgh NHS evolves into NeighborWorks America

The Urban Reinvestment Task Force, headed by Bill Whiteside, was put into place in 1971 to revitalize inner city communities. Congressmen in Washington D.C. were desperate to find a solution to the controversy that had emerged from urban renewal projects, preferably one with citizen input. Whiteside travelled the country in search of a successful model of sound business, government and community relations. He thought that he’d hit a roadblock in finding such a program until he ended up at the Pittsburgh NHS. Whiteside appreciated the grassroots focus of the Pittsburgh NHS and brought in a team of consultants to work with the program and operationalize it.  

His goal was to demonstrate the approach was safe for banks, thus opening the door for programs like it to spring up across the country.

With a small team of consultants and Dorothy Richardson in tow, the model was operationalized and replicated in 82 neighborhoods in 70 cities by 1973, capturing the attention of politicians, who witnessed the impact that having such an organization could make.  

As change and national attention accelerated, Dorothy Richardson feared she would lose control over the organization that she had invested so much into. Ron Johnston, a colleague of

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12 Ibid.  
15 Ibid, 3.
Dorothy Richardson’s, commented that she was very vocal when there was a change addressed that she didn’t agree with.\textsuperscript{16} She never anticipated the spread of her model of community development across the country and never lost focus on her commitment of protecting her own neighborhood on Pittsburgh’s North Side.

In 1976, Whiteside was asked to testify before Congress to address issues related to neighborhoods and cities.\textsuperscript{17} At these hearings, Whiteside drove the point home that the establishment of the NHS was congruent with American values. After the hearings, Senator William Proxmire (D-Wis) introduced a bill that would establish the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation and it was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter in 1978.\textsuperscript{18} With Congressional support, Dorothy Richardson had achieved her goal of protecting her community and communities across the country.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 4.