
City Life/Vida Urbana celebrates accomplishments at "We Shall Not Be Moved" exhibition

Posted by Cara Bayles

February 20, 2011 11:43 AM

By Cara Bayles, Town Correspondent

Local activists and politicians filled the Great Hall of the Codman Square Health Center last night for the opening reception of "We Shall Not Be Moved," a documentary project by local photographer Kelly Creedon that documents the city's foreclosure crisis and the activism of City Life/Vida Urbana, the Bank Tenants Association and other advocates who help Bostonians keep their homes.

The project, which includes slideshows and audio testimony, documents 10 families (many of the stories can be found on the project's website) in Mattapan, Dorchester, Roxbury, East Boston and Hyde Park.

Dorrett Martin and Sandra Douglas are landlord and tenant who have lived in the same Dorchester home for 25 years, and now stand to lose it thanks to a subprime loan from when Martin refinanced in 2006. Ken Tildon was a successful entrepreneur, who owned Pluto, a store with locations in Jamaica Plain and Davis Square, and Zon's restaurant, but closed them down when his partner Frank got sick with colon cancer. Tildon soon faced foreclosure on his Roxbury home.

"I wanted to show the range of situations, and people at different places in the process," Creedon said at the opening reception on Saturday evening. "The majority of people are obviously low income, but not all of them are. I wanted to show a range of outcomes, but a lot of these cases are still unresolved years later."

(Read Creedon's Q and A with the Globe's Sam Allis.)

In 2010, there were 12,233 foreclosures in Massachusetts, up nearly 32 percent from 9,269 in 2009. Yet, many urban areas have seen a significant drop over the past year. In Roxbury, the rate dropped by 24.7 percent, from 85 foreclosures in 2009 to 64 last year, and in East Boston, they fell from 74 in 2009 to 63 in 2010.

City Life has a range of strategies to help the 950 families in its network stay in their homes, according to organizer Steve Meacham, including window signs, public letters of support, and eviction blockades. They are also working with Harvard's Legal Aid program to fight evictions in court, and with Boston Community Capital, which negotiates with banks and helps families buy back their homes at the current market value.

David Grossman, clinical professor at Harvard's legal aid bureau, said in Massachusetts, banks can pursue foreclosure without the approval of judge, and lawyers can only fight eviction cases. He added that legislation attempting to change that had been refilled this session.

Still, he added that his team had seen progress in the courts over the past four years, and that Boston Community Capital, which has helped about 100 families keep their homes in its year of existence, was "doing something no one else has done."

"Other cities around the country do not have the kind of fight we experience here in Boston," Grossman said. "But they are looking to what's going on here as a beacon to try to spread this movement, not only around the country, but around the world." He added that earlier that week, he and Meacham took a conference call with organizations in 20 different states that were modeling their anti-foreclosure work after Boston's model.

Creedon, who has been frequenting City Life's weekly Tuesday meetings since she started her project in 2008, said she checked in periodically with her subjects in the group setting, which Tildon described as "a family."

"Five years ago, I would have said, 'City what?'" Tildon said, describing his first City Life meeting. "What they gave me was a fight."

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