



The Day

Inside: Night & Day highlights things to do for returning college students

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HOUSING
SOLUTIONS LAB



Thames River Apartments through the generations

Pride and prejudice

Story by JOHANNA VAZQUEZ
Photographs by SARAH GORDON
The Day



Fred Cleveland, above, shows off his tattoo of the Thames River Apartment towers as demolition on the three nine-story buildings began Feb. 9. "This was home," said Cleveland, who spent about five years living in C building growing up in the 1980s.

Sisters Samarie and Tayana Delgado, top, stop by the Thames River Apartments to check out demolition Feb. 13. They lived in the complex as babies.

the Winthrop Apartments, later renamed the Thames River Apartments. For five decades, it was a federally subsidized public housing complex on the edge of the city for qualifying low-income families. The housing authority determined who qualified and calculated rent, most often 30% of a resident's adjusted annual income.

The outside perceptions of the buildings, high-rises made of brick and concrete, began to change and blur, stigmatizing the people who lived there — people who couldn't afford to live elsewhere.

The complex, over the decades, faced issues of crime, security and poor aging conditions as the revenue from rents and federal funding struggled to keep up with increased maintenance costs. The New London Housing Authority also had a history of mismanagement and being overwhelmed by its various properties.

In the early 2000s local lawyer Robert I. Reardon Jr. brought a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the residents at Thames River and pushed for redevelopment of the housing units or the relocation of the tenants.

But ultimately, in 2017, the city's housing authority, alongside the city

SEE TOWERS PAGE A4

Biden acts on student loan debt

He erases \$10,000 for many, \$20,000 for some

By COLLIN BINKLEY, SEUNG MIN KIM and CHRIS MEGERIAN
Associated Press

Washington — More than 40 million Americans could see their student loan debt reduced — and in many cases eliminated — under the long-awaited forgiveness plan President Joe Biden announced Wednesday, a historic but politically divisive move in the run-up to the midterm elections.

Fulfilling a campaign promise, Biden is erasing \$10,000 in federal student loan debt for those with incomes below \$125,000 a year, or households that earn less than \$250,000. He's canceling an additional \$10,000 for those who received federal Pell Grants to attend college.

It's seen as an unprecedented attempt to stem the tide of America's rapidly rising student debt, but it doesn't address the broader issue — the high cost of college.

Republicans quickly denounced the plan as an insult to Americans who have repaid their debt and to those who didn't attend college. Critics across the political spectrum also

SEE LOAN PAGE A3

Waterford Country School fighting to keep providing foster care

Loses contract from state for Windham County, reapplying in New London

By KEVIN ARNOLD
Day Staff Writer

Waterford — After providing foster care to southeastern Connecticut for the last 40 years, Waterford Country School learned earlier this year it was not awarded a contract to continue providing service to Windham County families.

The school applied to the state Department of Children and Families for the contracts to continue operating foster care in both New London and Windham counties.

The school was not awarded either contract, but no provider has yet been given the New London County contract. A new provider will offer foster care in Windham County.

The Windham County contract covered one third of the roughly 80 foster homes the school oversees. In order to continue providing care to the remaining homes it oversees

SEE WATERFORD PAGE A3

New London
ELEANOR MAGALIS-HEMPSTEAD's family was among the first to move into the C Building of the Thames River Apartments when she was 11.

"It was beautiful when it was new," Magalis-Hempstead said of what was then known as the Winthrop Apartments.

HOUSING LAB Family Histories

Her seventh-floor bedroom overlooked the basketball court where she would play with her friends and smoke a cigarette.

Before the new apartments were built in 1967, Magalis-Hempstead said she lived in a two-bedroom home on Pierce Street next to a half-dozen other single-family homes. That home and road, as she described it, "disappeared off the face of the earth."

Pierce Street was within walking distance of the Old Town Mill, on the northern end of Winthrop Cove, an area designated for demolition in the mid-1960s to make way for redevelopment of the city during a national era of urban renewal.

To provide homes for some of the families displaced, the city built

WEATHER

Today, mostly sunny, moderately humid. High 83. Friday, partly sunny, shower possible. High 83. A8

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CONNECTICUT BY THE NUMBERS

947,066 (3,955)

Confirmed cases of COVID-19

11,195 (15)

Cases that have resulted in death

358 (7)

Number of patients hospitalized

65,609 (369)

New London County cases

Numbers in parentheses show 7-day change

GETTING A BREAK ON YOUR STUDENT LOANS? WE'D LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU

Are you one of the estimated 43 million people who will get a break on your student loans under a program announced Wednesday by President Joe Biden?

Have you recently finished paying off your student loans, only to learn that current student loan recipients will receive a break, but not you?

The Day would like to speak with people who have student loans or have recently repaid them for an upcoming story.

If you are willing to speak on the record with a reporter, please email your name, phone number and brief comments to cityeditor@theday.com.

Making a splash



DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS VIA AP
Max Muir, 12, plunges into the water Wednesday after jumping off a pier at Crescent Beach in Surrey, British Columbia.

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Chris Silva and Ray Johnson laugh as they talk about growing up together at the Thames River Apartments in New London while taking a break from work at TSS Printshop in Taftville on May 10.

Towers built for displaced Winthrop Cove families

FROM A1

and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, would apply to demolish the complex. Residents would receive Section 8 vouchers so they could move into the private housing market.

The lot on which the apartment complex once stood is

HOUSING LAB

Family Histories

vacant and awaits its future as a commercial site. The area was rezoned after the housing authority closed the apartments in 2018.

This spring, as the high-rise apartments were demolished, The Day investigated the complex history of the apartments and met with the people who knew it best, and who recalled what it was like to be a part of the community, and spoke with them about their lives after the Thames River Apartments.

1960s-'70s: Urban renewal

Six decades ago, the city had a dwindling tax base, a drained downtown retail center and a promise to the public to end blight.

The New London County Historical Society and Connecticut College students, led by professor Anna Vallye, examined this chapter of history in a book titled "Urban Renewal and Highway Construction in New London 1941-1975" that was published in 2021.

The book indicates that in 1960, the state claimed entire sections of the city through eminent domain to make room for Interstate 95. As a result, the city's taxable properties list, responsible for 70% of its revenue, grew smaller. Two colleges, Connecticut College

and Mitchell College, and a hospital, Lawrence + Memorial, were already on tax-exempt land.

The highway dispersed some members of the middle-class and some commerce, pushing the city to consider urban renewal, a federal program of land redevelopment prevalent across cities in the 1950s and '60s.

In an effort to remain the retail hub of the region, New London leaders saw urban renewal as an opportunity for progress even if it meant razing entire neighborhoods.

Magalis-Hempstead and a diverse community of Eastern and Southern European immigrants and African Americans lived in aging homes in the Winthrop Cove neighborhoods just south of the highway construction.

Outsiders saw it as a slum, but families had made it their home.

Magalis-Hempstead's grandparents emigrated from Ireland and Finland. Her family owned a home on Pierce Street, which was off Main Street — now known as Eugene O'Neill Drive. The L-shaped road with homes belonged predominantly to white Catholics, she said. Her home was old-fashioned: The exterior looked like brick but was made of stucco, and the roof yellow.

She remembers playing with other kids in the neighborhood and going for Sunday rides in her step-father's new Buick LeSabre convertible.

The proposed federally-funded, large-scale demolition project aimed to renew the area and the face of the city, promising luxury high-rise apartments, hotels, parking and a shopping center.

According to the Con-

nnecticut College research, in a high turnout referendum, about 80% of New Londoners approved the Winthrop Urban Renewal Project in 1962. The city, to receive federal funding, had to ensure "safe, decent and sanitary housing" to all displaced families.

The 'solution'

About 125 of the more than 450 Winthrop Cove families did not have housing accommodations, leading to the construction of three high-rise buildings on Crystal Avenue. The nine-story buildings were unlike any other residential development in the city at the time.

The apartments were also the first racially integrated subsidized development in the city. Of the first residents, about 65% were white families, a percentage which would have been higher had it not been for the involvement of New London's NAACP. The NAACP "extracted a pledge from the redevelopment agency that no segregated housing would be built under the Winthrop project," according to the research.

Magalis-Hempstead said it wasn't long after they moved into Thames River that pests started to move in as well. She also remembers times when her family would be stuck in the elevators, looking back and laughing at it now. Her family moved out within a month or two as her mother's parents purchased a home for them in Waterford.

Urban renewal officially came to a close in 1975, leaving behind a complicated legacy. As quickly as the wrecking ball came to demolish the Winthrop Cove area, so vanished the ambitious ideas as the project went through different

planners and changes.

1970s-1980s

As a kid, Chris Silva remembers walking outside in the mornings to see maintenance workers Jesse, Russ and Ms. Lenora raise the American flag on the flagpole, then move onto other tasks.

Silva moved into the apartments in 1976, at the age of 3, with his mother and grandmother. He lived in the A and B buildings during his time there.

The grass was mowed and when urine showed up in the elevator it was cleaned up. Security guards came through and police patrolled. The buildings had an incinerator or a dumpster. The garbage truck came by twice a week. Dogs were not allowed. There were mice, but they were not as common as they would become later.

Silva made many friends, some of whom he is still "tight with to this day." His friends lived on his floor, and they would play games in the hallway, baseball in the field or go to the Community Resource Commission's center in the C Building where they could play four-square or Foosball.

Their mothers became good friends, and would play cards on Fridays and Saturdays. All but one of his friends there was raised by single mothers.

"Crystal was a village. Everybody looked out for everybody," Silva said.

One of his friends from the apartments is Ray Johnson, who was also known as "DJ Free" or "City Ray" for his role as DJ during the many summer block parties. The weekend parties were in the lot adjacent to the buildings where Fulton Park is now, and Johnson would play music

under a cement pavilion.

"Hip-hop was fresh and new," Johnson said. "People came from out of town. It was a good time for everyone to get together."

Silva and his friends knew they didn't live as privileged a life as the students their school bus would pick up on Ocean Avenue.

"They're jealous," they would say, proud to be from Crystal Avenue.

Silva also knew about the preconceived notions outsiders had about people living at "the high-rises," or the "towers" as they were called.

"If you lived at Crystal you were the 'slum,' from back then all the way to the building's end," Silva said.

That image didn't improve when the crack epidemic became widespread across the United States during the early '80s, disproportionately affecting impoverished communities. Silva said when drug sales were shut down by police on Tilley Street, the Thames River Apartments became "prime real estate" for the drug trade. He was 14 when he was pulled into selling the drug.

"It was a quick and easy way to make money at that time," Silva said. "At that age, you're rebellious. You didn't want to see your parents struggle. My mom worked 50 to 60 hours a week and would still end up broke. I would go outside for four hours and come back with \$1,000."

Customers came from all over the city and elsewhere, he said.

Two years later, Silva said he straightened up and got a job when he started to see friends go to jail. He couldn't see himself going, especially as his mother started getting

sick with AIDS. By this time, Silva's mother had married and her husband, who used drugs, had given her the disease.

He left home at 17 to live with his girlfriend, who is now his wife. By the time he was 19, Silva's mother had passed away and he took custody of his two younger brothers. He had two kids of his own, and his household of four became six overnight. Silva worked to support them and his girlfriend played a big role as a mother figure.

1990s-2000s

Maribel Gray pulled a photo from an old album of her two daughters laying on a mattress with their father asleep next to them.

"This is when we first moved in. We just had a mattress on the floor," Gray said, during an interview in July at Jake's Diner on State Street. "As you can see, the mattress was nasty but we were happy to move in and (be) out of our parents' home."

Gray lived at the Thames River Apartments at two different stages of her life — as a child and a young mother. Born on the island of Puerto Rico, Gray moved to the apartments in the early 1990s with her mother, step-father — who she considered her only father — a brother and three sisters. They lived on the eighth floor of the A Building.

Gray's perception of her childhood there has changed as she's matured. As a young child, she did not know her beloved father was into using and selling drugs. Gray said her mother tried her best, but was not emotionally there for her children.

"I just thought it was always

SEE FOR SOME PAGE A5

New London's Thames River Apartments: An annotated history

1962

Amid the national urban renewal movement, New London residents vote to demolish homes in the Winthrop Cove area, displacing 450 families.



The intersection of Winthrop and Harrison streets in an undated photo

1967

Some of the displaced residents move into three newly constructed nine-story federally subsidized towers on Crystal Avenue, then known as Winthrop Apartments.

1975

Urban renewal ends without significant redevelopment of the Winthrop Cove area.

1980s

The nation's crack cocaine epidemic arrives in New London.



New London police patrol in a stairwell at the high-rise in 1980

1990s

City Council attempts to close the complex now known as Thames River Apartments, citing an increase in crime and what some call "squalor."



A scene from the apartments in October 1990



Eleanor Magalis-Hempstead talks with family members, not pictured, at her home in Waterford on June 30. Magalis-Hempstead has lived in subsidized housing at various points in her life, and her family was one of the first to move into the Thames River Apartments.

For some, loss of the high-rises is bittersweet

FROM A4

warm until I grew up and put two and two together," Gray said.

Most of her good memories from the apartments involve the time she spent with the Leadership, Education, and Athletics in Partnership (L.E.A.P.) program when it was active in the community room of the C Building. The staff would help out with homework. They raised money by selling candy to visit places like Washington, D.C., and Chicago.

HOUSING LAB Next in the Series

Friday

■ Checking in with former residents of Thames River Apartments

■ Why New London lost control of its housing vouchers

Saturday

■ The high-rises are gone, but the need for affordable housing remains

Sunday

■ Thames River residents gather for annual reunion

■ Rejected plans to replace Thames River Apartments



Fred Cleveland carries a fallen brick as demolition starts at the Thames River Apartments Feb. 9. Cleveland lived in the buildings as a child. He's now a homeowner in the city and runs a cleaning business under his name.

family moved in with her recently.

Magalis-Hempstead is looking for a home she can afford, and is already on the waiting list for a couple of 65+ properties such as the Mohican and Poquonock Village.

In the early 2010s, Gray left the Thames River Apartments and graduated from Stone Academy in East Hartford as a medical assistant. She co-owns Desmond Auto Detailing alongside her husband.

Gray and her two daughters visited the high-rise apartments in February as snow fell on the partly demolished complex. Gray said seeing the apartments come down was sad and bittersweet.

She prays the site will be replaced with something beneficial to the community. She said the high-rises were something more than "a project" to a lot of the residents.

"We were a family, a community within itself, and for myself, a stepping stone to a better me."

The historical reflections and statistics in this article are from news stories in The Day archive, interviews and an in-depth digital and print collaborative project among Connecticut College faculty, staff and students in 2020 and 2021 on the urban renewal era in New London.

To learn more about New London's urban renewal era, visit Connecticut College's digital portal.

The high-rise complex on Crystal Avenue was home to countless families

2003	2014	2017/2018	2018	2018/2019	2022
					
Robert I. Reardon Jr.					
Resident Nicole Mallette slips and falls in a puddle of urine on a stairway; seeks legal counsel from Robert I. Reardon Jr. Reardon decides to pursue a class action lawsuit on behalf of the residents.	Class action lawsuit is settled with an agreement on a three-year schedule to begin rehabilitation or redevelopment of the high-rise apartments.	City defaults on agreement to renovate apartments or relocate residents within three years.		The City Council, voting 4-3 in August, authorizes the purchase of the property from the housing authority for \$185,000.	
	Vouchers distributed to residents who have received notice to vacate the apartments.			The city receives \$2 million from the state for demolition and cleanup. Site is rezoned for commercial and industrial use.	
					
				The last families move out in June and July	Demolition begins in February