

ADRIAN WALKER

Fresh outlook at Fresh Pond



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Navneet Kaur's husband, Gurbal Singh, grew up in Rindge Towers in North Cambridge 20 years ago, back when it was a place to avoid — especially after dark.

The imposing towers near the Alewife MBTA station looked like two 20-story fortresses, betraying their origins as late-1960s subsidized housing. Security was pretty much nonexistent. The staff wasn't known for its sensitivity to residents' needs. Many of the tenants were counting the days until they could leave.

So almost 10 years ago, it was with some trepidation that Singh and Kaur moved their two young sons from Marlborough to the development their father had grown up in. But a surprise awaited them: The federally subsidized towers — which had been resurrected as the Fresh Pond Apartments — weren't a place to stay away from anymore. They had become a place where people wanted to live rather than a place they wanted to leave.

Walking through the place now, it isn't hard to understand why they and their neighbors feel so much affection for it. Bit by bit, the development has been renovated inside and out. Once-empty common areas now house busy after-school programs and community rooms. Security is beefed up, but unobtrusive. A modest community garden is growing in a former parking lot.

And along with the physical improvements has grown a sense of community. That can be elusive in a place whose 2,000 tenants speak at least a dozen languages and represent dozens of countries.

“Sometimes I miss having a yard,” Kaur said yesterday. “But when we think about buying a house, we realize we’d rather live here.”

Rindge Towers was built in 1968, under a federal program that subsidized developers in exchange for their charging below-market rents. Developers were guaranteed profits, but didn’t have much incentive to invest in maintenance. Tenants put up with subpar conditions for rents they could afford.

The turning point came about a decade ago, when the developer, Schochet Associates, reached a new agreement with the federal government. The deal raised the federal subsidy for the development in exchange for promises of greater owner investment in the property. Schochet agreed to invest \$15 million into the property, though its officials say the actual investment has exceeded that.

Richard Henken, the president of the development company, said the extra federal cash allowed the developers to make changes they had long wanted to make.

“When I would come in, I just wasn’t comfortable with the service we were providing,” he said. “People will treat their apartments about as well as you treat them.”

Henken recalled his introduction to the towers, years before he became involved in managing them. “I was a student at Tufts in the late 1970s and I had a running route near here. I would duck my head when I came by. It was rough.”

The changes at Fresh Pond apartments came at a time when the entire 1960s approach to public and subsidized housing was being rethought. Across Boston and Cambridge, there are public housing developments — Orchard Gardens, for one — that have been rebuilt, as the notion of high-rise warehouses came under fire. Almost without exception, the improved physical conditions have altered the quality of life in other ways.

At any rate, the most important changes, in the view of both the tenants and the developer, are not the cosmetic ones. They simply laid the groundwork for transforming the place from a classic troubled project into a community.

“We do so many things here — computer classes, art classes, gym night,” Kaur said. “We know the place is safe now. And I know my kids are safe.”

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