PUBLIC HOUSING is not what it used to be. Pass quick judgment on a family and tell them that they live in the projects, and they'll be just as quick to point out that the term “project housing” no longer applies.

“Projects, what are you talking about? A project is something you do in school,” said Hilda Sarver, Vice Chairperson of the Housing Authority of Bowling Green (Ky.). That was Sarver’s response to her children one afternoon after they ran home and asked if, as their peers pointed out, they lived in the projects. Sarver assured them that they did not, not by stereotypical standards of project living, at least. Despite the major shift in her children’s lives after she moved to public housing in the 70s with the six of them, Sarver wouldn’t change a thing about her environment.

These sentiments were echoed at the “Many Voices of Public Housing” session during NAHRO’s 2011 Summer Conference in Boston, moderated by Edna Dorothy Carty-Daniels, a housing authority commissioner in Perth Amboy (N.J.).

“We don’t call them projects anymore,” Daniels told the crowd. “They’re communities.”

A panel of four, all of who lived in public housing, shared their back-stories to prove that no matter the cir-
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“IT'S NOT WHERE YOU COME FROM, IT'S WHERE YOU'RE GOING,” says one panelist, Leslie Nichols of Louisville, Ky.

This philosophy was what inspired Daniels to organize the session—to prove that living in public housing did not predict a bleak future. For a long time, public housing bore the brunt of a negative crime and drug-induced stigma. The cyclical environment is thought to provide little stimulation, and pulling any amount of success out of the trenches of public housing would be difficult. But it’s just a stereotype, one that Daniels, a former educator and counselor, wants to erase.

Like her panelists, Daniels lived in public housing for part of her life. Her story stems from a bad marriage and being left the sole provider of three children. Despite these hurdles, she found a home in public housing and worked towards a master’s degree while raising her family. She has since been the commissioner of the Housing Authority of the city of Perth Amboy (N.J.) for 27 years.

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beyond their original measures. She's worked with the local police department, churches and housing authorities to provide change in her neighborhood. She shared one story about a young boy named Eugene who lived in her public housing community. He wasn't the best student, she lamented, and was kept back. He faced danger of failing again once he reached sixth grade. But suddenly, he changed. Daniels explained, with much animation, that he had an "epiphany."

"I don't know if the epiphany was the back of his mama's hands on his butt or an epiphany that was the grand design," she joked. "But he started to study and turn his grades around." Six years later, Eugene graduated from high school as valedictorian. The kid from the projects, Daniels says with pride.

But, Daniels continued, "There's another part to this story that made me start this series."

Another student's GPA was just lower than Eugene's improved one. Since the student was the daughter of a Board of Education employee, drama ensued. With the parent's complaint and shock that a boy from such an environment had higher scores than her own child, Daniels said, the mother urged the school to take away Eugene's valedictorian title and bestow it on her own child. The school eventually caved in and made both students co-valedictorians, a move that Daniels viewed as disproportionately unfair, but one that Eugene handled with grace.

Eugene is now the attorney for the Supreme Court in New Jersey, Daniels said, and his story speaks wonders about what can be achieved when you live a life in public housing.

The idea that one could further their education and livelihood after living in public housing is what carried panelists like Nichols throughout their careers. Nichols was raised in a fun, thriving public housing community—one where, despite their struggles, everyone knew each other and felt safe.

The community often fluctuated in numbers, Nichols said, as many low-income families finally got on their feet and were able to afford market-rate housing in different neighborhoods.

"At one point, everyone was moving out of the projects, but my mom made us stay to make sure we had everything we needed," she said. "They were the best years of my life." Nichols' memories in her childhood community included a full circle of residents coming together for various sports activities, especially when the weather warmed up. Groups of older children would organize a neighborhood track meet, put on plays and arrange other adventures. And all these athletic activities would serve her well. After Nichols developed her basketball skills at home, a collegiate and coaching career at the University of Kentucky lay in her future. From 1982 until 1986 she played for the women's basketball team, ranking second on the all-time scoring list, as well as seventh on the all-time assists list.
One out of four sisters, all who have gone to college and are now homeowners, Nichols says that her humble beginnings forged a healthy attitude for her to carry into the future. The tough atmosphere brought out resilience in her, which she used to build success and overcome challenges at USPS, where she worked for eight years after college. The job pitted her against a male-heavy crowd, but Nichols eventually moved up the ranks into a management position, being one of the first women to do so in the organization.

Sarver married at a young age. She was the mother of six children, and lived a comfortable life until her husband left after the birth of their youngest child. Despite the change in her circumstances, she refused to become depressed, she said. She instead moved into public housing and consistently worked two jobs for several years to take care of her children. Though they were not well off financially, Sarver said she felt just as rich as anybody else.

“I had a decent home,” she said. “I might not have everything I want, but I have everything I need.”

Sarver experienced more ill fortune when her son passed away from AIDS years later; she herself now struggles with lupus. But after picking up the pieces of her life and family after the first setback, Sarver is prepared for anything, and handles adversity with poise.

The common thread throughout the panel, now in its third year, was the impetus to turn a bad situation into a lifetime of success. Like Sarver, Keneysa Rodney also used public housing as a means to get out of a bad situation and onto the road to success.

When Rodney first grew up in public housing in the early 1980s, she said there was a sense of community that enveloped her family. The children were close, walking to school and participating in events, and knew their roles in society, she said. It takes a village to raise a child, and that rule applied in Rodney's community.

Her life hit a speed bump once cocaine use began to spread, making it difficult for families to function efficiently when a member or members became hooked on the drug. Rodney's family experienced the effects first-hand when her single mother became involved in the world of addiction. But although Rodney's mother went down the wrong path, she transformed herself enough to move her family out of the projects and on to a comfortable lifestyle.

Despite these difficulties, Rodney reported living a happy life. “I never knew I was poor,” she said. “I never knew I didn’t have anything everyone else had. We had love, we had food, we had warmth.”

It wasn’t until later in life that Rodney had to struggle with the realities of being part of a disadvantaged family. Though she grew up and transitioned seamlessly into a marriage with kids, upon the disintegration of her relationship, she realized her privileged status depended on her partner’s success. She had a job, but needed a career to propel her family’s life forward. So she enrolled in a community college.
Rodney saw her kids only about four hours a day—getting them ready for school, picking them up from school, eating dinner, and bathing them before sending them to bed. Between work and school, Rodney had little availability, and after obtaining an associate’s degree, she decided that she needed to advance her education full-time, without distractions.

An inquiry about campus housing for families, which wasn’t available on her school’s campus, led Rodney to the Louisville Family Scholar House that had an educational program component. Its mission: to help low-income parents obtain a bachelor’s degree to end the cycle of poverty. Rodney has been in the program for a little over a year, attending the school of social work, and has maintained a consecutive 4.0 GPA. She said she has no shame in living in public housing. “You learn humility in housing,” she said. “I learned to be resilient, and how to bounce back.”

Past adversity, and the greater coping skills it can confer, was a common theme for the speakers. Perhaps one of the most heart wrenching stories for those watching came from the last speaker, So Pham, who shared how he used his history to move his family forward.

Pham arrived in the U.S. with two children in 1995. For the first two years, he lived a very modest life as he learned the wood working trade. He faced difficult obstacles along the way, including language barriers and learning a new skill. But after five years, his wife succumbed to cancer and the attacks on Sept. 11 caused his company to fold, forcing Pham out of work. His next step was living in a housing authority and focusing on his children’s education.

The silver lining for Pham was the housing authority’s cabinet shop. With a bevy of skills learned from past jobs, he participated in the program for two years and was subsequently hired as a full-time employee. Moving from one opportunity to another, Pham ended up enrolling in a program that helped him purchase his first home for his family, with the money acquired from his job.

Pham is now the assistant modernization coordinator at the Housing Authority of Bowling Green. He and the other panelists shared their stories partially to counteract and hopefully change some of the negative stereotypes that surround public housing. As many of these inspiring stories show, early adversity or humble beginnings do not preclude later success.

“None of us can control if we’re born with a silver spoon, a rusty spoon,” Rodney says. But, as these panelists show, hard work and perseverance can overcome even the hardest of beginnings.