

# Urban Uplift

Agency Helps Provide Housing, Services

By Robin Roenker  
Photos by Matt Goins

For nearly four decades the Urban League of Lexington-Fayette County has helped thousands find jobs, find homes, and find happiness.

"We've always been an agency that prided itself on advocacy," said P.G. Peoples, who's been at the organization's helm as president and CEO since 1971.

"What's interesting," he said, looking back to the Urban League's beginnings to today, "is that the basic urban core needs — educational attainment, safe and affordable housing, and equity in education and economic opportunity — are still the same."

Since its founding in 1968, the Urban League of Lexington-Fayette County has worked to address those needs by offering programs and advocacy services to Lexington's minority and low-income residents.

Three main programs form the foundation of the Urban League's work locally: the Fayette County Local Development Corporation (FCLDC), a program that builds affordable housing for low-income, first-time homebuyers; the Senior Community Service Employment/Training Program; and the Urban League Technology Center.

Teran Sundy, left, helps student Chelsea Sanford, 12, identify computer parts at Tubby's Clubhouse on DeWeese Street.



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### Making Home Ownership a Reality

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"You could call our housing initiative our signature initiative," Peeples said with pride, noting that Lexington's Urban League has one of the largest housing efforts of any other Urban League in the country.

Since the Urban League began building affordable homes and rental properties through its housing entity, the FCLDC, in 1984, it has provided homes to 144 low-income, first-time homebuyers and safe rental residences to roughly 70 families.

"At closings, we hear people say things like, 'I never envisioned I would be buying a home. We always thought that was for other people.' But once you sit them down and explain to them how to become homeowners that fear goes away," Peeples said. "It's about providing education on the home ownership process."

Closing days are some of the agency's most memorable, with tears often flowing freely as clients are handed the keys to their first homes.

"We don't measure the value of our housing in market-value dollars; we measure it in hugs and tears, and 'Thank you, Lords,' " said Norman Franklin, the Urban League's vice president of internal operations, who oversees the agency's housing efforts.

Next spring the agency will break ground on its renovation of the empty Russell Elementary School building at



P. G. Peeples, the Urban League's longtime president and CEO, outside Tubby Smith's Clubhouse and the Lexington Urban League's Technology Center on DeWeese Street

Fifth and Upper streets — historically once the city's oldest black school — into 27 housing units for elderly, low-income residents. The renovation also will include a community center featuring a Head Start program and other services.

When it came time to determine what services would be housed on the first floor of the projected Russell School Community Center — which will be a joint effort with the Community Action Council — Peeples and the Urban League knew what to do: They held a forum and simply asked nearby residents what they wanted there. In addition to the Head Start program, ideas ranged from a health clinic and resource center to meeting rooms and exhibition spaces.

Such close connection to the community it serves has been the key to the Urban League's success, Peeples said. "It's absolutely vital that you engage people in determining what's best for them, as opposed to designing and im-

posing something on them. Then you've got the buy-in. It's all about ownership."

Keeneland president and CEO Nick Nicholson, who has served on the Urban League's board of directors for the past five years, said the organization is well run and provides visible results.

"You can drive through the neighborhoods in downtown Lexington and almost pick out the streets that have been touched by the Urban League's revitalization efforts," he said. "It's one of the agencies that is changing Lexington for the better, and I'm proud to be associated with it."

### New Skills, New Futures

These days Sandra Gumm finds herself working an office job, and she can hardly contain her amazement. "I'm a secretary. Can you believe it?" she asked, as if still trying to convince herself as much as those around her.

Since March the 56-year-old has been working as the secretary for Meals on

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Wheels of Lexington after years as a supervisor at the University of Kentucky's Food Services Department. That may not sound like an overwhelming career shift. But it is.

Gumm had never worked behind a desk. She'd never typed in her life and knew nothing about computers. Wanting a change of pace, Gumm enrolled in the Urban League's Senior Community Service Employment/Training Program 18 months ago. After 13 months of training and shadowing with the program's director, Gladys Hayes-Moore, Gumm had newfound clerical skills and "the opportunity and the courage to start a new career," she said.

"I don't know what I would have done with myself without this program. Probably sitting around feeling sorry for myself and wishing I was old enough to retire," Gumm said with a laugh. Retirement plans are now on the back burner as Gumm is enjoying her new job so much that she plans, she said, to work as long as she can.

Every year nearly 100 older, lower-income workers learn new job skills through the Urban League's Senior Community Service Employment/Training Program, which offers one-on-one career counseling and places participants for on-site training — doing everything from clerical work to deliveries to construction, depending on their talents — at one of 53 host agencies across six area counties.

Hundreds more learn keyboarding, email, and basic computer skills through weekly computer classes at the Urban League's Technology Center on DeWeese Street, which also serves as one site of the Tubby's Clubhouse program — an initiative launched by former UK basketball coach Tubby Smith that offers middle school students computer skills and their own computers and printers upon completion of the program.

"People who are 55 and older are actually scared of the comput-



These new homes on Elm Tree Lane are among the Urban League's initiatives to provide affordable inner-city housing.

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er. We start out with keyboarding just to get them typing," said Elaine Mason, the Technology Center's director. "It's just about getting people to realize that it's not as bad as they thought it was."

Often, Mason said, older participants who began the classes intimidated even by the computer keyboard end up asking her where they can acquire their own computers to stay connected with email and the Internet.

"That really makes my day," she said.

Through both programs, countless seniors have found new job skills and a chance at second careers and brighter futures. Another added benefit: Businesses that hire the programs' graduates are learning the value of older employees.

"You know, (older workers) are loyal.

We show up, and we work until the job's done. Sometimes we're a little slower. It may take us a few minutes longer," said Hayes-Moore. "But we don't stop until it's done."

### Volunteer Strength

With 27 community leaders from all walks of Lexington's civic and corporate landscape, the Urban League's board of directors is intentionally diverse. ("We preach diversity, so we have to live it also," Peeples said.) But the board is not the group's only volunteer cadre. With some 75 members the Lexington Urban League Young Professionals group offers civic-minded young adults, ages 21 to 49, an outlet to network and do community service.

Launched in 2002, the group focuses its volunteer efforts on a five-point agenda outlined by the National Urban League: education and youth empowerment, economic empowerment, health and quality of life empowerment, civic engagement and empowerment, and civil rights and racial justice empowerment. In the local community that translates to activities ranging from free tax assistance for low-income residents to youth conferences emphasizing education to workshops on financial literacy, according to Young Professionals president Rodney Jackson.

The Urban League's long-term success in its work to assist clients with finding decent housing, good jobs, and a sense of equity, Peeples said, has been no accident.

"As an organization over the years, we've been consistent in our programming and not chased after every idea that came down the pike," he said. "We've had a focus on the core programs that we wanted to do, and we focused on growing them and making sure that we're providing good, solid services to people." 🐾

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