

The importance of educating yourself

you get what you put in

by Kayla Miranda

As I sat in front of my computer 18 years ago, I could feel the frustration radiating off my dad before he even came into the room. He sat on the edge of my bed, silent. I knew. He had lost his grievance. He works for the U.S. Postal Service and had just been elected union steward at his station. It was his first step B meeting. He was cocky, so sure of himself and the fact that he was in the right when he left that morning. I bought into it too; I never believed he would fail. “What happened?” I asked. He told me how he went in and sat down with his manager. The manager had smiled. In less than three minutes, my father was leaving that office, head hanging low in shame. “My boss told me not to speak until I knew what I was talking about.”

He admitted quietly. In the weeks that followed, I remember my dad pouring over the contract, memorizing each part and going through other grievances to find precedence. My father never lost another grievance. His manager unknowingly unleashed a beast.

My start in the housing world draws many parallels. I would have been perfectly happy to be left alone in my ignorance to get my life together in peace. But that wasn't what fate had in store for me. After being harassed and unjustly evicted, my landlords unleashed something in me as well. I am my father's daughter. It's something I tell the people I come in contact with. The greatest gift you can give yourself is knowledge. Know what you're talking about when you go into a situation. Research for yourself. Do not depend on what you hear from others. Be your own advocate.

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In October of this year, I organized a public comment at the regular SAHA Board of Commissioners meeting. Out of

42 speakers, 29 were part of our efforts to preserve the Alazan/Apache courts. The other 13? A few misinformed residents and several people who had something to gain from the razing of Alazan Courts. When speaking to some of these pro-demolition



We will not go quietly into the night. We will fight. We will speak. We will be heard.

residents, I learned that the vice-president of the Resident Council at the Alazans had gone in search of residents to speak prior to the meeting, just as I had. However, her recruitment efforts were fueled by the lies SAHA had fed her in order to get residents to speak on SAHA's behalf. I am unsure if she knows these are lies, or simply doesn't care. What I am sure of is that it's the same bogus claims used at properties that previously have faced demolition, with disastrous results.

Resident statements have the most impact. It's one thing to hear a story second hand, something completely different to hear a story from the source. The emotional exchange that happens is irreplaceable. In collaboration with My City is My Home, we have started a youtube series called “Exposed: SAHA for Profit”. We have broken down recorded public comments and included additional information to better explain the comments. As Benjamin Franklin said, “Being ignorant is not so much a shame, as being unwilling to learn.” You can view these videos at facebook.com/mibarrionosevende.

Dr. Christine Drennon was hired to do an impact study with the residents of Wheatley Courts when they were demolished. Her report shows that the majority of residents were negatively impacted by the move. At the November 2020 SAHA meeting, she called the demolition of Public Housing in exchange for mixed income communities a “fatally flawed ideology”. Instead, she suggested maintaining and preserving Public Housing. SAHA Commissioner Olga Kauffman also worked with Wheatley residents as a caseworker. According to an interview with the Heron, Kauffman says “Some of them ended up . . . in a lot of really bad places, like Haven For Hope or in jail and their kids dropping out of school.” Former San Juan resident Crystal Meza remembers when she received housing. “They told me not to even unpack, they were tearing down and I had to move again.” She

was relocated to nearby Cassiano Homes during the construction of Gardens at the San Juan and San Juan I&II. In early 2015, Crystal called for the hundredth time inquiring about returning to San Juan, and finally got her brand new apartment. “If I hadn’t called over and over, I wouldn’t have gotten it.” Her relief was short-lived at this brand new, bigger apartment. The neighbors were not SAHA residents. They complained about her kids, who are disabled. There was no place for them to play. Crystal’s truck was towed from a handicapped parking space even though she had a placard. She

was in danger of losing her housing because of repeated lease violations stemming from neighbor complaints. She again called the office constantly, requesting a transfer, and was fortunate enough to receive one. This time to a scattered site. A house where her kids could play and their disabilities would not bother anyone. Now, after 3 years, her home is being sold by SAHA because they claim the upkeep is too expensive. “I do most of my own maintenance. I’ve only called in a few work orders in 3 years. I am responsible for the bills and the lawncare. SAHA doesn’t pay property taxes. So what upkeep are they referring to?” Again, she finds herself looking for an appropriate home. This time on section 8. Except now, there are even fewer houses available and she is at risk of complaints + violations if she returns to a mixed-income apartment with neighbors so close.

In the days following October public comment, SAHA responded to our call with a slap in the face. They announced a virtual groundbreaking of Legacy at Alazan, an 88-unit mixed-income complex being constructed across the street from Rinconito de Esperanza. It’s 3 and 4 story levels go against the community plan for the area. When confronted by the Historic Westside Residents Association (HWRA), SAHA Commission Chair, Dr. “Cha” Guzman claimed to want the community’s input, yet she voted ‘yes’ to the construction as is a week later. To add insult to injury, SAHA announced the creation of a Dia De Los Muertos Altar to celebrate the ground breaking. A long standing tradition in the community. I worked with community members, residents, and allies to arrange a protest of this event. On November 2nd, 30 people stood at the site of Legacy in solidarity. “WHOSE STREETS?” I called. “OUR STREETS” they replied. Community leaders like Leticia Sanchez and Teri Castillo from HWRA spoke about the impact on the community and the need to preserve Public Housing. Pancho Valdez of San Antonio Tenants Union and Kimiya Factory, a Black Lives Matter activist, stood with us in support. Several news stations and reporters recorded as we showed the city that we will not go quietly into the night. We will fight. We will speak. We will be heard.

Just three days after this protest, supporters for preservation of the Alazan/Apache Courts called in by the dozens to the November 5th public comment. There were 47 commenters against



The San Antonio Housing Authority plans to demolish 501 public housing units, over multiple years, and replace them with a new mixed-income development. Photo: Ben Olivo, San Antonio Heron, Sept. 24, 2020

demolition and six commenters in support of demolition. Of those six, only two were residents. These numbers are shocking in comparison to other monthly board meetings for SAHA, but surprisingly enough, that wasn’t what had westside defenders talking for days to follow. Before the meeting started on Zoom, participants could hear Commissioner Jo-Anne Kaplan complaining, “They’re all going to say the same thing, can’t we just group them together and have only one person speak?”. SAHA attorney replied saying that this request was illegal. Chair Guzman then

decided to limit our usual 3 minute comments to just 90 seconds, “unless you really have something important to say”. Her behavior paired with this announcement is a testament to the treatment of both residents and community members by SAHA on a regular basis. Chair Guzman told commenters that they were “misinformed”. She interrupted speakers, including a Spanish speaking community

member, which forced him to pause while she and others argued about the need for translation, all as his timer steadily counted down. She paused comment to demand that speakers watch a presentation by SAHA, claiming the community had already been informed. Later Commissioner Jessica Weaver, co-chair, stated that not even the board had seen some of the information included. Following the Public Comment section, Chair Guzman called item 12 first. We watched a presentation containing false information that was given to residents. Meanwhile, Commissioners asked questions and seemed to be in doubt, staff would interrupt, attempting to prove Chair Guzman’s point. This only shows SAHA’s utter lack of respect. They have no plan. Their only objective is to destroy Public Housing in the Westside in an attempt to make a profit. The final show of contempt towards residents was when Chair Guzman muted Commissioner Ruth Rodriguez mid-sentence when she disagreed with her. Commissioner Rodriguez is one of only two resident commissioners on the board. The meeting recording is available through a freedom of information request to SAHA. We ask that readers keep an eye on the “Exposed: SAHA for Profit” series. We will have a video posted in December 2020. It’s a good thing, I feel, that facts do not cease to exist just because they are ignored or denied.

I want to challenge everyone reading this to lift up your head, see through the illusion. Do not let another person take away your rights, your culture, your hopes and dreams. Don’t fall for the sleight of hand.

Earlier this year, I was invited to a show called Paranormal Cirque. The only seats we could afford were the “economy” seats

at the very back of large U-shaped bleachers. My seat was the end seat, top row. I realized that I would be watching the backs of the performers the entire night and that I could see backstage. The “premium” high priced tickets were in front of the stage, and that was the focus of performers. I watched “magic” tricks from behind, seeing every sleight of hand, every false bottom, watching the woman remove a panel and walk across to the next booth. There were oohh’s and aahh’s from those who paid higher prices. I just kept thinking, ‘what a waste of money’. That is what happens in life. Those of us who are lower incomes can see backstage. We see the illusions that are being laid for the higher income individuals. We wonder why they are falling for the tricks. Unfortunately, this is how the majority of shady business deals get past the general public. Many people are content with what they are told, what sounds pretty. Others bow to fear tactics and live their lives head down. I want to challenge everyone reading this to lift up your head, see through the illusion. Do not let another person take away your rights, your culture, your hopes and dreams. Don’t fall for the sleight of hand.



The Historic Westside Residents Association (HWRA) protests the virtual groundbreaking of the Legacy at Alazán, an 88-unit mixed-income complex being constructed across the Rinconcito de Esperanza.

The truth is that a large majority of people in San Antonio do not know how to spot the lies wrapped up with a nice bow on top. A good rule to follow is if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. It’s not the only rule though. I like to follow the rule of—you get what you put in. When you put in the time and effort to research a subject before listening to a presentation or having

a conversation about it, there is a greater chance you can defend your perspective and detect misrepresented facts. When you arm yourself with knowledge, you’re better able to make informed decisions based on that information. When it’s something as important as where you and your children live, there is no greater need for informed decisions. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “ Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

SAHA is banking on our

community being ignorant. It’s my pleasure to educate as many people as possible.

BIO: Kayla Miranda, a housing justice advocate organizing in the Westside of San Antonio resides at the Alazan/Apache Courts.



S.T. Shimi

Beloved artist, activist and educator, S.T. Shimi died tragically on Wednesday, December 2, 2020 after being struck by an SUV on the streets of San Antonio. She was 49 years old. Shimi was often seen walking briskly in the Southtown area where she lived with her beloved, artist husband, Oscar Alvarado. News of her death spread quickly throughout the arts world of San Antonio and beyond. Shimi, whose stage name was Black Orchid, performed with San Antonio’s Stars and Garters burlesque troupe. She was skilled at dancing incorporating pole dancing, fire-eating, aerial silks



Photo: Oscar Alvarado

and hooping. Her performances were a wonder to behold! Shimi was a defender of LGBTQ rights, an environmental justice advocate, a fierce feminist and a champion of social justice. Her introduction to the San Antonio stage came by way of Jump-Start Performance Co. and she remained close to company members. Her untimely death is a blow to us all. There was so much more ahead for her that was not to be. Her memory will burn

bright in our hearts. A native of Singapore, Shimi’s given name was Thanalakshmi Subramaniam. May she rest in power! ¡S.T. Shimi, presente!