

# Private homes get public praise

Cisneros lauds city's support of homeownership

RICK SHEFCHIK STAFF WRITER

**F**ormer public housing resident Judy Kennedy was asked Sunday what owning her own home has meant to her.

"It means if you don't want to cut your grass today, you don't have to," the St. Paul resident said to hearty laughter at a press conference for HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros at the Mt. Airy community Center in St. Paul.

Her neighbors needn't worry, however. Kennedy's stucco home on Marshall Avenue is beautifully landscaped and maintained. She was merely making the point that she, her mother, her brother and her sister now have the freedom to do their household chores on their schedule, not the housing inspector's.

## VOICES

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HENRY CISNEROS  
HUD SECRETARY

The Kennedys and two other families were invited to appear with Cisneros to dramatize the benefits of moving people from public housing and into their own homes. Cisneros later toured the Kennedy home before leaving the Twin Cities.

Cisneros praised the St. Paul Public Housing Agency for helping 117 families move from public rental units to private home ownership over the past seven years. Cisneros said it was an important strategy of the Clinton administration to push the national percentage of home owners to an all-time high of 67 percent, or two-thirds of American households, by the year 2000.

"This is a goal worth fighting for," Cisneros said. "Home ownership is much more than just a shelter strategy. It is also the basic American savings and wealth strategy. In fact, for most Americans, the sum total of their net worth is the equity they have in their home. And that equity represents real wealth, because it is the ability to take a second mortgage and invest in children's education, or the start of a new business, or retraining for a second career.

"Home ownership is also a community strategy, in that families who own their homes, frankly, make the best citizens," Cisneros said. "They plant roots in the community. Their own accumulation of wealth is related to how well the community is doing. It's a win-win strategy all across the board."

That would describe the experience enjoyed by Estell Kennedy, her daughters Judy and Brenda and her son Darrell, who lived in a publicly-owned rental unit on Hague Avenue since 1969 until finally moving into their own house two years ago.

When their rent surpassed \$800 a month, they decided it was time to find a place of their own. Their public housing inspector suggested they were good candidates, since the three children were all working full-time and they had taken good care of their rental home.

They wanted to buy the home they lived in, but they were told by the St. Paul Public Housing Agency that the home could not be sold. Instead, they were connected to the HOME program (Home

Ownership Made Easy), a joint effort by the Public Housing Agency and the Family Housing Fund to help families move from public housing to home ownership.

They found a two-story home that had been divided into a duplex. Susan Didier of Thompson Associates, a loan counseling firm contracted by HOME, helped them secure a loan to convert the house back into a single family unit, and to cover more than half of their \$2000 down payment and all of the closing costs.

In addition to the 116 other St. Paul families who have already made use of the HOME program, another 568 are in some stage of the loan process.

"When I moved here, it felt like I'd already been living here," Estell Kennedy said after Cisneros and congressman Bruce Vento D-St. Paul admired the work her family put into the house.

"When you own something, your eyes get wider, like, 'Hey, I can do all kinds of things here,'" Judy Kennedy said. "Public housing did us a favor, but it got to the point where it was time to go."



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Estell Kennedy stands in front of her house at 1268 Marshall Ave. in St. Paul, which the St. Paul Public Housing Agency helped her and her children get two years ago. She has done all the planting around the yard.

Cisneros said he'd been looking for something like St. Paul's HOME program to use as a model to share with the rest of the country. He said HUD ranks St. Paul as the highest-performing public housing authority in America.

St. Paul funded the HOME program 7 years ago when it sold off \$1.2 million worth of housing from a phased-out HUD program. The agency set aside \$400,000 for another public housing venture, and that was matched by the Family Housing Fund, a local foundation, to create a pool for down payment assistance.

Missy Thompson, owner of Thompson Associates, the firm that does loan counseling for the program, says HOME's loan default rate is only 3 percent, lower than the statewide FHA default rate.