

LP REEL NEWS

A Newsletter of Lamont Productions, Inc.

BOSTON'S FIRST PUBLIC HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

THE MARY ELLEN McCORMACK



Old Harbor Village in 1941. Old Harbor was renamed the Mary Ellen McCormack in 1961 (photo courtesy of the Boston Housing Authority)

Growing Up In Public Housing

Charlene Moulaison's father returned from World War II and had great difficulty finding a decent job and suitable housing. According to Charlene's mother, in 1952, her husband finally paid a visit to a local politician in the predominately Irish South Boston (Congressman John McCormack's District). Charlene's mother said her father was able to secure a spot in the Old Harbor Village, where the family would stay for many years. Charlene was four years old when she and her two brothers moved into the Project. Their first apartment had one bedroom. They stayed there for about a year, until a row house became available. Charlene moved out of public housing in the 1960s, but her mother, who also had grown up in public housing (Mission Hill, in Roxbury) stayed until 1975, when she moved in with Charlene.

Tell someone you're from a public housing "project," right away they conjure up images of crammed tenement houses surrounded by dirt yards – what urban planner Chester Hartman describes as "islands of poverty, segregation, deprivation, and despair," as he was quoted by Lawrence Vale in *From the Puritans to the Projects, Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

But that's not the only face of public housing in America. In fact, New England's first "project" was a showplace for what public housing can be.

Lamont Productions is now engaged in researching and filming the first major documentary tracing the history of public housing in the United States from its origins in the Great Depression to today. The documentary will explore the many faces of public housing programs that have affected the lives of so many Americans and the policies that shaped public housing so profoundly. The themes woven throughout the origins and history of public housing raise important contemporary questions and offer powerful insights to a nation still grappling with issues of poverty, race and ethnicity, and public responsibility.

Exhibit A: the first public housing ever built in Boston, the Mary Ellen McCormack. The federal Public Works Administration began

building the project, then known as Old Harbor Village, in 1938 when the New Deal was in full swing and America was digging its way out of the Great Depression. By the time construction was completed, Boston had its own local housing authority, intent on making this a model project. Even today it is a community of well-kept garden apartments in South Boston.

Old Harbor Village had a prime waterfront location, excellent architecture, and yards with well-placed bushes and shrubs. It included both single-family row housing and multiple family dwellings. The development had 12 softball teams, an eight-team bowling league, two Girl Scout and three Boy Scout troops, 12 indoor children's playrooms and numerous other clubs and recreational facilities.

Public housing was built to serve the working poor. Boston's developments were built in most of the city's wards and served those neighborhoods. Applicants were carefully screened and two-parent families were preferred. Old Harbor Village was mostly Irish, predominantly occupied by people from U.S. Rep. John McCormack's congressional district, in the McCormack family's home neighborhood. It became a flagship project.

In the 1940s, Boston was overwhelmingly white, and so was Old Harbor Village. But times and demography were changing. The federal 1949 Housing Act gave priority of access to the neediest families, and during the next two decades demand for public housing shifted toward poorer families and non-whites. Despite this, the Village, renamed Mary Ellen McCormack in 1961 in honor of the Congressman's mother, remained largely white into the 1990s, even though by then the Boston Housing Authority's waiting list had become overwhelmingly black. Boston's public housing was highly segregated, and placement was often considered a plum of political patronage to be doled out to friends and supporters. McCormack, by then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, often dictated in large measure who did and didn't find a home in the community named after his mother.

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Lamont Productions, Inc., incorporated in 1983 in Washington, DC, is a tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) organization. We are dedicated to the production of educational films and videos that promote social awareness and positive change.

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Further, public housing was falling into disrepair and disrepute. Funding to construct and maintain projects declined. Residents were increasingly marginalized, stereotyped, and stigmatized. Throughout the early 1960s, the Boston Housing Authority continued to reject families who had children born outside marriage or placed them in less-favored projects, such as Columbia Point, the largest in New England, built next to a sewage pumping station and an incinerator and isolated from other facilities, including retail shops. By 1964, 20 percent of households at Columbia Point were receiving Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), four or five times the rate at McCormack, which still had no non-white residents at that time. Columbia Point even had its own welfare office.

To learn the story of the Mary Ellen McCormack project, Lamont Productions interviewed someone who grew up there. We sat down with Charlene Moulaison in her Dorchester home, where she now lives with her partner and children. Although she has not lived in public housing for almost 40 years, Charlene says her self-identity will always be that of “a public housing kid.” ?

Interview with Charlene

“Any kid who comes from the project knows themselves as a public housing kid. It is a stigma, something that would do the public well to understand. People still say ‘Don’t park your car near the projects,’ or ‘She’s a project girl,’ and when I hear that, I still ‘ouch’ from it. Because it brings you back to your original identity, and you think, ‘Oh yes, that’s who I really am.’ Let’s not kid ourselves. It’s a culture. That’s where you learn how to dress, talk, etc. Your whole world is different, and when you leave it, you know you’re different. It doesn’t matter how educated you become. People perceive you differently, negatively. And the way you feel better is by going back into the projects where you’ve got your support group—your friends, your family, telling you you’re okay.”

Charlene grew up in single-family row housing. (McCormack included more than 150 row houses.) Other Boston housing projects, including the massive, 1,504-unit Columbia Point project, were much more densely populated. She came to understand this made a huge difference in her life. “In South Boston everyone belonged to a gang. You had to survive. One night when I was a teenager I went over to Columbia Point for a fight. The units in the Columbia Point project were multiples, 10 floors high. It was a hot, hot night and the people I was with were probably on maybe the 6th floor. I looked out the window and there was this whole circle of people, and in this circle, this woman was being killed. I watched the people and I watched the lack of police response.



Charlene with her mother and brothers in front of their apartment at the Old Harbor Village

“It was this early that I realized that Columbia Point had too many people, too many people with problems in one location. Everyone is stuffed in together and there isn’t any support for anybody. You go upstairs, downstairs, next door – it’s too many problems everywhere. Nobody was going to protect this woman. And no one did. By the time the ambulance came, she was dead and everyone was gone. I walked away with questions in my mind, What is wrong with this situation? What just happened? Why didn’t people call for help and why are people so afraid? I didn’t experience that fear in the single row housing where I grew up.”

Charlene recognized that too many people crowded together with too many problems promoted the crowd mentality that she had witnessed that night. To this day, she believes that the Old Harbor model of public housing, which provides both space and community, does work.

South Boston had a very child-oriented culture when she was growing up. She remembers, “They couldn’t focus on material things, such as houses, backyards and green grass. They focused on raising the young. It is not surprising that I have eight kids today.”

Charlene believes that her love for children “saved” her. In Charlene’s first year of high school, a nun came to a house where she was minding some children and invited her to a classroom for young children run by the nuns. Charlene says she immediately connected with the setting. “I got my first glance at educated people, at a way out. They could have been astronauts at the first landing on the moon, that’s how different they were to me. And they definitely were ‘those’ people. I would sort of stand quietly and listen to them talk.”

Charlene says if it wasn't for the Laboure Center, she may never have discovered this "other" world, because project life is so all-consuming. Her separation from project life began then. This made her "different." She never told her nighttime friends that she was working at the nuns' school during the day. She led a dual life, and felt she was defying some unwritten code. And because of her interest in teaching children, she transferred from South Boston High to the Boston School of Pediatsts for her senior year. This was a huge change. She was going her own way, choosing not to fulfill the traditional role of marrying, having children, and staying in South Boston.

"I was so nervous I vomited on the way over because of the fear. I was a mismatch the whole year. I never was in sync, but I couldn't figure out what made me different." The following year she figured it out—poverty made her different. After graduating, Charlene volunteered to work in the Appalachian Mountains with three other graduates of the Boston School of Pediatsts. Charlene was the only one of the four who stayed more than three weeks. She was also the only one who had grown up poor. None of the others could tolerate the level of poverty they found in the mountains. Charlene could. She knew it intimately. Because, she discovered, poverty is the same everywhere.

"I found it so similar to South Boston. It was uncanny to me that the people who lived there were the same. They spoke differently and they had different issues, but they were for sure the same. And the day I identified that, I was so at home it was unbelievable. I remember picking up this kid by his ears and telling him if he ever broke a rabbit's ears again I would break his. I can remember it was the same fury that I'd had in the city. It matched completely. He had done something wrong. A rabbit doesn't cause any harm. But I couldn't have done that if I'd been a middle class kid. I had to be who I was to understand who he was and not be afraid of his poverty.

"I can remember another time that someone said to me that 'Bobby ate the guts out of the corn bread.' I didn't understand what that meant and told her so. She took the cornbread from the stove and showed it to me. Bobby had eaten out the whole middle. And it was then I understood with clarity again that although the words were different, the meaning was the same: hunger is hunger, whether it's the people down the street knocking at our door because they didn't have any food, or Bobby eating the guts out of the cornbread. I just looked at her and thought 'we are the same.' Poverty is an amazing thing. It unites you in its own way."

Something else momentous happened to her while she was in Appalachia. She received a letter from her mother, telling her that she was dead to her. By leaving South Boston, Charlene had lost her mother. She was on her own.

She asked the head of one of the Appalachian clans if she could do something with his grandchild, and he responded that if she said so, then it could be done. She realized then that if her word was important to the head of the Flannery clan, education must be important. She needed to return to the city to get an education. She decided to come back to the mountains after she got an education.

She returned to Boston and applied to Boston State College but was told that her years at South Boston High were "worthless." So Charlene worked as a waitress during the day and went to school at night. She asked a former teacher who lived in the projects (he was paralyzed during the polio epidemic of the 1950s) to teach her basic math, and although she had to take Algebra I twice, she learned it.

During this period she also tried to get into the University of Massachusetts in Boston through special admissions and discovered that to many, all white people are "born with silver spoons in their mouths." Charlene knew differently. She also knew that growing up in the projects would mark her for the rest of her life. She got her education, and although Charlene now has a Masters degree (and has worked in professional jobs since graduation from college), she'll always be a "project kid," all too aware that the experience of poverty transcends race and ethnicity. ?

Introducing Dolores Smith

Dolores is one of the founding members of Lamont Productions and has directed and produced all of its films and videos. She is the heart and soul of the organization.

LP: How did you become interested in film? When I was in my late 20s, I worked for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in the communications department. Over time, I became their film liaison, and handled the logistics for the Institute's films on highway safety. The Institute produced a film called *Booby Trap*. Richard Hébert, who was Senior Writer at the time, and I went location shooting on this film together. We looked for the most egregious, visually interesting roadside hazards, and ended up on location in Baltimore, on I-695. Richard ended up co-writing the film and I was the production coordinator. (*Booby Trap* won a number of awards, including the international Golden Eagle CINE Award for non-theatrical events.) I found that whole experience very enjoyable.

I left the Institute in 1973 and wandered around for a couple of years. I ended up in San Francisco and was bouncing off the walls trying to figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life. All of a sudden out of the blue it came to me, "Dolores, you can do film." This was my film epiphany; I was about 35 at the time and I made a personal choice to devote myself to film. I was relieved and began to focus on how to make it happen. I always wanted to make some kind of meaningful contribution. I think to some degree we all feel the need to contribute something worthwhile. Film gives you that opportunity, the ability to reach people and, in some small way, make a difference.

Another important aspect of film for me is the artistic aspect. It allowed me to be an artist, and in using my imagination, possibly touch other people's imaginations. Maybe the biggest factor is I really love film. To me, there is nothing better than to be lost in a movie. But I don't really know why I picked film. I didn't analyze it. I guess you could say film picked me.



Dolores operates camera on a fellow student's film, 1978.

LP: How did you become a filmmaker? I was not interested in exploring the academic aspects of film, I just wanted to learn how to make them and get on with it. The first film production course I took was at Montgomery College. Our first assignment was to do shoot an exercise using still photographs. I decided that I would shoot my own stills and develop them, then put together a little film. I knew of a group of women who delivered produce to anti-profit food cooperatives and I followed them around for several nights, shooting like mad. This exercise was one of several we were supposed to accomplish in this class. I devoted the whole semester to this one project. By semester's end I was able to finish, but I ended up learning more about still photography than moving pictures.

I then was able to get into a film program at the University of Maryland. At the time Maryland had an excellent film program. There were three courses: in the first, you learned the camera, in the second, you concentrated on sound, and in the last class, each student directed his or her own film, and worked camera, sound, and production manager on the others' films. Each student had to play all the roles. It was tough, really tough, but we all learned how to make a film from beginning to end. Technically, film is very

complicated and the learning requires a lot of focus and attention. It's hard work and far from glamorous. The glamour, for the Hollywood types, comes after the filming has been done; it's certainly not in the making. Whether Hollywood or an Independent film production, the days are long and hard.

My film was a psychological mood piece, called *The Warehouse*. It's a ten-minute, mini-drama. The script grew out of a personal experience I'd had while working in a warehouse. A woman is working in a warehouse, alone. She is supposed to lock up when she leaves that evening, but a friend accidentally took

her keys. She can't lock up and she can't lock the doors from the inside, either. The woman can't reach her friend and it's getting late. There's a lot of expensive equipment inside the place. She begins to imagine someone coming in and stealing the equipment and who knows what else. She starts to freak out. How is she going to protect herself? She ends up backing up the forklift to the door to block the entrance. She grabs a fire extinguisher off the wall, and sticks a screwdriver in her belt. Feeling prepared, she begins to let her guard down and starts to feel a little silly. The film ends with three men laughing in the dark, the sound of a bottle crashing, and a truck driving away. You don't know what is going to happen next, even whether the truck is coming or leaving. After I finished this piece, I thought, okay world, I'm ready. But the reality of making film is quite different and much more difficult than I ever imagined. The class taught me how to make film, but it would be a few years before I would be able to start a film and many more before I returned to drama.

LP: How did your first Lamont Productions film, *SWR*, come about? I lived in Mt. Pleasant (Washington, DC), which was becoming gentrified, and I started thinking about the different neighborhoods in DC and how they'd changed over the years. I saw a flyer for a play about Southwest Washington, DC, called *Ghost Story*. It was a play about the urban renewal in the area, which began in the 1950s. The community had been torn down and rebuilt. The DC Humanities Council was the funding source for *Ghost Story*, and I thought they might be interested in a film project about DC neighborhoods. We submitted a proposal to the Council for a film that looked at four neighborhoods in Washington, DC. That didn't fly. So we whittled it down to a history piece focusing on the urban renewal of this quadrant. It was funded with a small planning grant, probably \$1,500. That's how *Southwest Remembered (SWR)* got started.

LP: What's the experience of making a film like? Most of the work of filmmaking involves preparation, pre-production work, and raising money. The actual shooting time is very small. Filmmaking does not always follow a straight line. *SWR* was done in pieces. We would get a grant, go as far as we could with the money, try to get another one, maybe get rejected, and then, of course, go through the hurt of rejection. Some rejections are harder than others, but you have to go through them, pick yourself up, and try again.

Funding is key to filmmaking and for me the most difficult part of the process. And film is very expensive. You have to pay for film stock, equipment, and technical people. And that does not take into account research, pre-production preparation, or paying the director. Plus the ratio of film shot versus used in a documentary is probably 10 or 20 to one. Because a shooting day is so costly, you have to be as efficient as possible. You set up for as many things as you can accomplish in one location. You have to pay your crew, whether they are shooting film or sitting around waiting for you to figure out what you want them to do next. So it is very important that you have all your pre-production work and logistics figured out. You have to know who and what you're going to shoot, where you're going to shoot, rent or arrange for whatever equipment you need, and figure out how you're going to get your crew and heavy equipment to and into the locations. You have to have signed release forms, permission to use public spaces, and insurance. You must figure out parking, and arrange for coffee, snacks, lunch, maybe dinner, and where to put and access the food.

Post-production also is very expensive. I happened to be walking down the hall at WJLA-TV one day and saw an editing machine sitting in the hall. Film was on its way out of TV news then. I asked, "What are you doing with this?" and was told it was going to be sold. The price was \$2,500. At first I said, 'Forget it. I can't afford it.' But later I decided I would be a fool not to buy it. I've edited both *SWR* and *Sara* on that Steenbeck. It has paid for itself several times over.

LP: What did you like best about making *SWR*? Editing it, the actual putting together of the piece. Film is wonderful, it appeals to a lot of your senses. You can see it, you can touch it, you can hear it. Seeing the story emerge through the editing of the footage, through the stories of the people involved, was exciting, and probably the part I liked most about making this film.

LP: How did *Clean, Sober, and Positive (CSP)* start? AIDS was (and still is, unfortunately) devastating, not only in our society, but throughout the world. Alcohol and drug addictions also are devastating. Both are extremely important issues and they have touched many, many people. A friend, Joe Stewart, raised the initial seed money and made the connections with the people featured in the video. The experience of

making *CSP* was very different from *SWR*. *SWR* was funded mostly through humanities grants. *CSP* was funded almost entirely through individual donations. It had no foundation support. The making of *CSP* was much easier, on one level, since the story is much simpler, but harder on another level. It was much more emotional. All of the people featured in the film wanted to contribute and help people who are living with HIV and addictions. Most of them were dead by the time the film was finished. They were never able to see the finished product or the good it has done. Very sad.

LP: What led you to your film on public housing? *Southwest Remembered*. Many of the residents displaced by urban renewal ended up in public housing. I also got to know people in public housing while filming *SWR*, and started thinking about the differences between how the public perceives the people who live in public housing and the reality. We objectify public housing residents. The reality is that they are just like the rest of us, trying to get along the best they can. Some people are warm and wonderful and smart and some are bastards. This led me to thinking about a history piece about public housing. We first got funding for the film in the early '80s, and have quite a bit of footage, although much more needs to be done. Public housing is an extremely complex subject, and I have had to focus on figuring out how to convey the story artfully, without getting lost in the details. My recent trip to Boston has made me more determined than ever to finish the film. This could be a very important film.

LP: Tell us about Lamont's drama, Sara. A friend and I decided to do a little creative piece together. The story line involved a mid-life lesbian, a blocked artist, who put an ad in the "personals." She was going to have everyone who responded to her ad meet in an art gallery and then videotape them. There was a scene in the initial script where the heroine undergoes an acupuncture treatment, which freed her artistically. This is exactly what happened to me. My friend and I had decided we couldn't work together. During an acupuncture treatment, I started thinking about the main character and the plot and came up with a new story line. Life imitated art. Over the next few weeks, I fleshed out a first draft of a script. I really enjoyed the process. In fact, I had a blast.

Initially this was not a Lamont project. Gigi (Elizabeth Lytle) and I were looking at establishing another production company, to be called Two Difficult Women. I consulted with a lawyer (through the Washington Area Lawyers Project for the Arts) who questioned why this wasn't a Lamont project. We came to realize that in fact all of our projects are about community, as is *Sara*, and it was appropriate

for Lamont to sponsor the film. As always, fundraising has been difficult. *Sara* has been privately funded, totally. The community has supported the film, donating artwork, locations, money, and talent. We're very close to completion and I look forward to it and to getting on with *A Story of Public Housing* ?



Dolores with former Director of DC Public Housing
Ray Price (Photo by Marj Curran)

**Lamont has a new website in progress – check it out at
www.lamontproductions.com or www.lamontproductions.org
Our web and it's designer, Willa Heider, will be featured in our next
LP Reel News.**

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