Of Urban Plantations and the Rural Amish: Ms. Kimi Gray and Mr. Elmer Lapp in Kenilworth

text of a talk given by Joe Lapp at the April 3, 2005 meeting of the NE DC Historical Society, held at Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens

This afternoon I'd like to tell you about two heroes of recent Kenilworth neighborhood history: Ms. Kimi Gray and Mr. Elmer Lapp. One came from the South and saw Kenilworth as a plantation ripe for the sharecroppers to own. The other came from the North, from the farms of Amish country, Pennsylvania, and saw Kenilworth as a field ripe unto harvest for God. Though working separately, they both formed communities that brought positive life to the isolated, deteriorating public housing complex of Kenilworth Courts.

Ms. Kimi Gray "passed on" in March of 2000 and, since I knew of her but did not know her personally, information on her life comes mainly from newspaper articles that I have collected. Mr. Elmer Lapp is my father, so my sources for his life are personal recollection as well as stories and data provided by himself, by my family, and by others who know him. Accordingly, I will give a broad characterization of Elmer Lapp's life, while more narrowly focusing on Kimi Gray's public life as a leader in the Kenilworth Courts complex.

Kenilworth Courts opened in 1959, toward the end of the national public housing building-craze. Built on the site of the Lily Ponds Houses, which was a temporary housing complex for white World War II workers that was torn down in the early fifties, Kenilworth's barracks-like rows of orange brick town homes and apartments was open to both whites and blacks who needed a place to "get on their feet." Originally a neighborhood of promise for poor families pushed out of the Southwest slums, it quickly became a majority-black neighborhood with a deteriorating physical structure and a bad reputation. By the early seventies a mayoral aide was calling it "hell on earth." Thus the stage is set for the entrance of Ms. Kimi and Mr. Lapp.

Elmer Lapp was born on August 30, 1936, to Daniel and Lydia Lapp, a carpenter and homemaker respectively. His boyhood home was in the tiny rural village of Hatville in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a few miles from the larger town of Intercourse, in the heart of Amish country farm land. Though his parents were born Amish, at the time of his birth they belonged to a conservative Mennonite group known as the Beachy church. While the Beachy church retained the traditional styles of dress and simple rural

lifestyle of the Amish, they were allowed to drive cars and had electricity and telephones in their houses.

When he was six, Elmer's family moved to a farm a few miles away. As the oldest of six children on a dairy farm, Elmer's childhood and teenage years revolved around farm work, school, church attendance, and, at sixteen, the activities of the church youth group. Elmer began to date a young woman named Fannie who also attended the rural Beachy church of Weavertown, and in 1957 they were married.

At seventeen Elmer experienced a spiritual conversion; he dedicated his life to serving God. He began to support church mission work, such mission outreach being, in the 1950's, a fairly new enterprise for his isolated and rural Beachy community. Along with his young wife, he traveled to nearby cities to help with outreach in poor urban areas. While he supported his young family driving a milk truck and working as a lumberjack for a local sawmill, such opportunities to share the love of Jesus with others became his passion. In the early 1960's both he and his wife read a notice in a Beachy newsletter, the *Herold der Wahrheit*, or Herald of Truth, about an urban mission being started by the Beachy church in Washington D.C. Separately, they both felt called to go. When they realized their mutual call, they applied to the mission board and were selected to become the first Beachy missionaries to an urban area within the United States.

In August of 1965, Elmer and Fannie moved, along with the first three of their eventual five children, from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to Kenilworth, Washington D.C., to found the Beachy mission that became known as Fellowship Haven. Elmer was twenty-eight years old. His father-in-law, a vegetable farmer, drove their belongings in the back of his pickup truck to a small brick house that the Beachy mission board had purchased at 4441 Douglas Street NE, a quiet street of single family homes adjacent to the Kenilworth Courts complex. Children curious about this white family moving onto their street soon surrounded them, and their neighbors on Douglas Street quietly welcomed them to the community. That September Elmer and Fannie sent their two oldest children, Timothy and Lois, to Kenilworth Elementary, the local public school. Soon Fannie was baby sitting for the Hill family across the street, the young, black Hill children David and Jeffrey playing with the white Lapp sisters Lois, Eunice, and Lydia in a scene fulfilling Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech only several years and several miles removed from its first delivery.

Elmer became known in the community through the PTA at Kenilworth School and simply through his visibility as a white man in an almost exclusively black area. He saw particular opportunities to reach out to the numerous children of the area who, as he

saw it, had few of the recreational or moral benefits of his rural, church-based upbringing. His first children's meeting happened only a few weeks after he moved into the neighborhood when he invited a small group of boys into the shade of some back yard trees and read them a story about the life of a Christian football player. The children wanted more, so weekly Bible classes began. To address the lack of recreational opportunities for area youth, Elmer and others that came to help at Fellowship Haven built a playground in the back yards of two more house lots that the mission board purchased on Douglas Street.

By this time volunteers from various Pennsylvania and Midwestern Beachy communities, several of whom came to DC to do alternative service under the Vietnam draft, had come to join the Lapps, expanding the mission's potential for outreach to the community. Bible classes continued, as did craft classes, summer Bible school and two weeks of summer camp in Pennsylvania.

Fellowship Haven had its first organized church service in a house basement in the beginning of the year 1967. It was not unusual for seventy-five or more Kenilworth children, along with a few of their mothers, to pack the basement for Sunday School and a "children's sermon." In 1969 Elmer was ordained as a Beachy minister and became the official pastor of Fellowship Haven Church. In 1975 Fellowship Haven built a church building at 4459 Douglas Street.

Two years later, in 1977, Elmer and his family moved back to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to give their children opportunities to experience the rural Amish-Mennonite culture of their ancestry, and because his wife Fannie's mother was not well. Except for a year and a half in 1981 and '82 when Elmer came back to Douglas Street to lead the church while Oren Yoder, a volunteer from Kansas who had been ordained in Elmer's absence, took a sabbatical, the family stayed in Pennsylvania until the church called them back to Kenilworth in 1985. During this seven years in Pennsylvania Elmer stayed connected with the church in DC, even commuting regularly on weekends to help with preaching and other pastoral duties. He supported his family by working as a carpenter, as a driver for Amish market stand holders, and as a hired hand on the family farm, now owned by his sister and brother in law.

Shortly after the Lapps moved back to DC in 1985, tensions arose between Elmer and the mission board that had sent him to Kenilworth. Elmer wanted to allow converts from the Kenilworth neighborhood to join the church under a somewhat relaxed set of the rules that governed traditional Beachy styles of dress. For instance, he wished to lift the ban on the necktie for young men (ties seen as a frivolous ornamentation in Beachy

tradition), and wanted young women to keep the principle of modesty without having to wear the cape dress (a traditional Beachy pattern that is a dress plus a cape or vest over the bodice). The mission board, however, was unwilling to relax these rules, leading to a split between the church and the mission board in the summer of 1987. The church became fully self supporting. Elmer began to work a series of part time jobs, such as selling Amish-made storage sheds and gazebos at an Amish market in Burtonsville, Maryland, while still keeping up his duties as a pastor to the church and a reverend to the Kenilworth neighborhood.

In the 1990's the church began to decline as neighborhood youth who were active in the church chose to attend elsewhere. Kenilworth Courts also emptied out for several years of major renovations, and this absence of residents meant there were fewer children to come to the summer Bible schools and other programs the church offered. Ministry continued, however, especially to the children, nieces, and nephews of the youth, now grown up, who had flocked to the church in the sixties and seventies.

During the late nineties Elmer and his wife began to think about retiring back to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Unable to find a pastor to replace him, he and Fannie finally moved back to Amish country for good in December of 2001, thirty-six years after first moving to Douglas Street. He was sixty-five. In his 'retirement' he works for an Amish man who owns a paint store and is active at a local church, though he is not a lead pastor there.

Over the thirty-six years in Kenilworth, Elmer became near legendary in the community. It's not every day that a white, nonviolent, beard-growing, conservative Mennonite preacher from the farms of Amish country turns up in a black, urban housing 'project' and makes a successful go of it. The community saw his openness, his sincerity, his integrity, and his love for people and for God and responded positively to him. Known for his boldness and forthrightness, residents turned to him when in trouble. Thus the story of the pregnant young girl who jumped out a second story window to escape her abusive mother while Elmer tried to calm the mother down, and the story about the man who gave Elmer a handgun in a paper bag to get rid of it so his wife would accept him back into the house, and the story of Mrs. Roy's seven male children who, through a combination of their mother's and Mr. Lapp's tough love, rebounded from lives on the street to become solid, church-going men.

There's humorous stories, too, particularly from the young men of Kenilworth who seemed to find endless inside-joke laughter at the strange ways of these white Mennonites whom they nonetheless learned to love. Like the oft-repeated story of the

peanut butter apple snack after a Bible class, and one of the kids saying they didn't want the peanut butter, and Elmer swiping the peanut butter out with a finger, licking it off, and handing the apple back to the child.

Everyone respected him, though, especially after he tackled a teen on the playground who was giving him particular trouble. But the singular incident that made his reputation was the one and only time someone dared to hit Mr. Lapp. Chasing some teens away from the swings late one night in the early years of the playground, a young man punched Elmer in the stomach while passing him on the sidewalk. Later that night, the teen who hit Elmer was shot and killed. To a neighborhood whose culture already held up the figures of preacher-men in an almost superstitious way, this was a sign from God. Word got around, "Don't mess with the preacher. God's got his back."

And so it was that "Lapp" became the label for every covering-wearing, acapella-singing, no-TV-watching Mennonite this side of the Anacostia River, so much so that if you were, or even are, a white person walking through Kenilworth you might be asked, "You a Lapp?" by some curious passer-by. Though Mr. Lapp no longer lives here, folks remember him, and his reputation still covers and protects me to some extent as I walk the streets of Kenilworth, streets that some would term "dangerous." "That's Mr. Lapp's son," people often tell others in my hearing, which is followed by queries about how my parents are and what my brothers and sisters are doing. Fellowship Haven Church still meets at 4459 Douglas Street, and, though small, is still racially and culturally mixed between white, Beachy folk who first came to Kenilworth as church workers and black people from the neighborhood who became part of the church as youth and still attend there.

And now on to my second Kenilworth hero, Ms. Kimi Gray. Where Mr. Lapp sought to save the souls of people with the love of God, Ms. Kimi aimed to save the neighborhood through empowerment of its residents. "I want to own the plantations," she said. "Yes, the plantation. That's what public housing communities are, aren't they?" ("Kimi Gray's Dream Project," September 25, 1980 Washington Post article by Edward D. Sargent, pg. DC1)

By December of 1966, when she moved to Kenilworth Courts, Ms. Kimi was, as the newspaper articles like to remind us, a twenty-one year old divorced mother of five subsisting on welfare checks in an increasingly run-down public housing complex.

Kimi's first foray into substantive community organizing seems to be the formation of the College Here We Come group in December of 1974, which was started,

as she tells it, when three Kenilworth teenagers asked her to help them get into college. These first three students became, over the years, hundreds of teenagers who College Here We Come "sent" to college. In response to one reporters question about what she meant by 'sending' kids to college, Kimi said, "I mean there are some good kids out here whose parents can't afford to send them to college. So we get them to take the correct classes in high school, we check on their behavior, we go to their graduations, we help them pay for the caps and gowns if necessary, we help them apply for entry, we help them line up summer jobs, we pack their trunks and we put them on the bus and once they get there we help them get scholarships. If that ain't 'sending' them, I don't know what is." ("Parents Fearful of Damage to Children," April 18, 1978 Washington Post article by Lewis M. Simons, pg. A1)

But Kimi didn't just let it go at that; she asked the college students to come back and help in the community. And they did. Young adults home on college breaks met with high school students to help them envision their own college future. Kimi helped pay for Wayne "Bumpsey" Ward's training at Monique's Beauty Academy, and he came back to open up Total Expressions, a non profit hair salon in the storage basement of a Kenilworth Courts apartment building. Michael Price went away and studied architecture, then came back to help design and implement major renovations to the rows and rows of deteriorating buildings in Kenilworth Courts.

In 1972 Kimi Gray had been elected president of the Kenilworth Courts resident council. Kimi was an effective leader, and so she kept getting reelected. Perhaps as a result of the success of College Here We Come, Kimi and her loyal band of followers began to dream big. There were many problems to confront in the neighborhood, including crime, unemployment, lack of recreational opportunities for children, and a poorly-maintained physical plant that at one point left many Kenilworth Courts residents with little or no heat and hot water for over a year. Inspired by hearing of successful tenant management programs in other cities, Kimi convinced DC's housing leaders to let Kenilworth give tenant management a try. Accordingly, residents were trained for management and maintenance positions, and Kimi was made chairperson of the board of the new Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation (KPRMC), a board that consisted of, according to Kimi, "three college students between the ages of 22 and 25, two mothers on welfare, two working mothers and one housewife with a working husband." ("NE Project To Be Run By Tenants," January 11, 1982 Washington Post article by Lewis M. Simons, pg. B1)

The new management was a big success. Residents needed jobs, so Kimi hired them to repair and maintain the buildings and physical plant. Mothers needed child care,

so Kimi set up a daycare, again staffed with residents. Youth needed organized recreation, so Kenilworth residents and friends coached baseball and football teams, and the basement of the management office at 4500 Quarles Street was opened as a community center with games and supervised activities. Teens needed summer jobs, so Kimi created her own jobs for some and made sure others filed their applications early. A health center opened on-site and College Here We Come helped set up a GED program. Residents were required to take a six week course in personal finance and home repair. Crime went down. Rent collection went up, not only because Kimi knew everyone and cajoled them into prompt payment, but because the new jobs that residents received meant their income went up and they could pay more. Kenilworth Courts actually began taking in more rent money than needed to run the place and returned a profit to the housing authority.

And it was Kimi who presided over all of this, first from, as one article puts it, "her yellow, plastic-covered armchair… [where], with a call from her chair-side phone or a throaty bellow out the window of her cramped, overheated living room, Gray can summon almost anyone in Kenilworth Courts to her side," then from her office at 4500 Quarles Street. ("A Poverty-Scarred World of Anger and Frustration," March 31, 1978 Washington Post article by Lewis M. Simons, pg. A1) Kimi was a large woman, a profound physical presence who commanded the attention of 'her' residents and of national level politicians and planners, for the success of her management approach grabbed the attention of mayors, intellectuals, congressmen and presidents, and catapulted her to national prominence as an expert on tenant management and public housing reform. It is said that, in meetings, top government officials often deferred to her knowledge of public housing law.

From the beginning Gray's approach had the support of prominent politicians at the city and national level. It's said that Kimi stumped hard for Barry in Kenilworth, and he rewarded her with grant money and appointments to city committees. More importantly, the Reagan administration saw the tenant management movement fitting into their pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps philosophy, and tenant management and even tenant ownership of public housing became the cornerstone of Reagan's public housing policy. But Kimi found her ultimate political ally in Congressman turned HUD head Jack Kemp. Kemp supported Kenilworth's tenant management with money for operations and renovations, and forged ahead with a plan for the Resident Management Corporation to actually buy and own the whole of Kenilworth Courts, allowing residents who desired to own their own individual homes. In October of 1988 an agreement was signed to turn ownership of Kenilworth Courts over to KPRMC when the $23 million HUD-financed renovations were complete.

Already by the late eighties, though, politics and changing times were catching up with Kimi and beginning to chip away at her dream to "own the plantation." Charges of favoritism and misappropriation of money began to surface. Through mismanagement and other problems not necessarily attributable to Kimi or KPRMC, the Kenilworth renovation project went drastically over-time and over-budget. Government reports began to show that the economics of having the residents own the complex *might* work, but barely.

In September of 1990 KPRMC became official owner of the first round of renovated units, 132 out of the 450 plus that make up Kenilworth Courts. Residents began to move back in. A few years later the rest of the renovations were finished, and Kenilworth turned to maintaining and building on its successes.

On March 1, 2000, Kimi Gray died of "heart ailments." She was fifty-five. Her dreams, though not dead, dwindled without her strong managerial presence and personal political connections. It appears that the ownership of the rest of Kenilworth Courts was never turned over to KPRMC, and shortly before or after her death, the DC Housing Authority took back over the management of all the property except the 132 units that belonged to KPRMC outright. This disintegration of the deal between KPRMC and the city and federal government is something I am still trying to untangle. It's understandably a sore spot for residents who were close to the events and is a complicated subject that few want to address.

What I can say with certainty, however, is that Kimi's spirit lives on, and that her life and character are well worth remembering and honoring. Kimi was remarkable for her courage, as exemplified by her campaign to remove drug dealers from the property. Speaking of a meeting she called with the drug dealers, she said, "We did our homework: I read off from a list—'We have your street name, your real name, your girlfriend, your address, your license number. Now, we don't think your business is to our advantage. So, get off the property or we'll take this information to the police.' Tripped me out; they said, 'Ms. Kimi, you're right.' And they're gone." ("NE Project to be Run by Tenants," January 11, 1982 Washington Post article by Lewis M. Simons, pg. B1) Kimi was also remarkable for her dedication to "her people," the poor of Kenilworth and of public housing complexes around the world. In the midst of her own success, she never moved away from Kenilworth or backed off from her fight for self sufficiency and pride for those who lived in poverty. "Poor people are allowed the same dreams as everyone else," Ms. Kimi said, and she meant it.

How much did Ms. Kimi, manager of the plantation, and Mr. Lapp, Amish country preacher in the city, participate in each others work in Kenilworth? Not much, it appears, though my father clearly respected Ms. Kimi as a community leader, and Ms. Kimi respected Mr. Lapp as well. I've heard reports that she used to say "the Lapps" were the only white church folk she'd let work in 'her' neighborhood, and this during a time when she really did think of Kenilworth Courts as hers and kept a close watch on those who passed in and out. Mr. Lapp was primarily concerned, however, with saving people by saving their soul, while Ms. Kimi was primarily concerned with saving people by giving them a decent place to live and a good job. While complementary, these two approaches did not necessitate collaboration. Space was also a barrier between them. Mr. Lapp's house and church was on one end of the neighborhood, on Douglas Street, while Ms. Kimi's office and home was on Quarles Street, and though these are only two blocks apart, in the micro-environments of 'the projects', two blocks can be another world altogether.

One thing is sure, however, that their work helped to improve the lives of people who lived in Kenilworth. One resident told me recently, "Well, Ms. Kimi, she had one end of the neighborhood and your father had the other, and between the two of them we came out ok." And though neither is active in the community any longer, they are still remembered and revered for the roles they played in helping Kenilworth and its residents to have the best personal and neighborhood life possible.