# Washington HISTORY

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*Cover:* Jay F. Coleman's portrait of public housing advocate Kimi Gray hangs in the Residences at Kenilworth Park, an assisted living community on Kenilworth Ave. NE. Gray led residents of the Kenilworth Courts and Parkside housing projects to manage and revitalize their home complexes. She became a nationally recognized expert on housing policy reform, often in partnership with Republican politicians. The tribute to "Miss Kimi" incorporates fallen flora from Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. Joe Lapp's recollection of Kimi Gray, "'I Want to Own the Plantations': Kimi Gray and Tenant Empowerment in Kenilworth Courts," begins on page 4. *Courtesy, Jay F. Coleman*

*Opposite:* A man tends bar at Hall's Restaurant on the southeast corner of Seventh and K Sts. SW, 1960. Virginian Franklin Pierce Hall founded the business in 1885 for the waterfront neighborhood's rough-and-tumble male patrons. But as DC's drinking culture evolved, so did Hall's. Like similar establishments it added an open-air beer garden in the early 1900s, popular with Washington's German immigrant families, and survived Prohibition by selling mildly alcoholic "near beer." After Garnet W. Jex took this photo, redevelopment forced the restaurant to move in 1964. Its new location by Fort McNair proved unsuccessful, and Hall's closed in 1971. "Beer, Branding, and Citizenship in Late-19th-Century Washington, DC," by Nikki Grigg, begins on page 48. *Photograph by Garnet W. Jex, DC History Center*


Jay F. Coleman
'23

# "I Want to Own the Plantations"

## *Kimi Gray and Tenant Empowerment in Kenilworth Courts*

BY JOE LAPP

Kimi Gray was boss in Kenilworth. I knew it, growing up there in the 1980s. My Amish-Mennonite preacher father, who had a church in Kenilworth, knew it. Marion Barry supporters inhabiting public housing across Chocolate City knew it. Even Ronald Reagan acknowledged it.

Because, once you met her, you never forgot Kimi Gray. "Miss Kimi," as the residents of Kenilworth Courts called her, was a force of nature, rooting her natural-born grit and political prowess right there in what some—even some who lived there—thought one of the worst parts of town.

The Kenilworth neighborhood that I know is a two-block-square community in the small corner of Northeast DC that is east of the Anacostia River. The Kenilworth name first appears in the area on a turn-of-the-20th-century, White streetcar suburb centered along Kenilworth Avenue. A Black community of single-family homes grew alongside it on quiet Douglas Street, gateway to an aquatic farm that would become the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens.

The Kenilworth Courts public housing complex, built toward the end of the post-World War II federal housing boom, dominated the community of my childhood. Though my family always lived in single-family homes on Douglas Street, my White parents found their most fruitful church work in the adjacent projects.

Kenilworth Courts opened in 1959 as a place of promise. Its 422 low-rise units were a dramatic expansion from the short-lived, early 1940s Lily Ponds Houses for White war workers. The Courts was one of the first explicitly multi-racial public complexes in the city.

White flight had already hit the Kenilworth suburb, fueled by an expansion of Kenilworth Avenue into a commuter artery that demolished dozens of homes. Though early residents of Kenilworth Courts remember having White neighbors, by the mid-1960s the complex largely reflected the racial composition of historically Black Deanwood to the east and the newer middle-income Black community of Eastland Gardens to the south.

Walter McDowney's family were some of the early residents in the Courts, part of the city's relocation of Black families out of Southwest during its urban renewal. "Moving into Kenilworth was like moving into a palace," McDowney remembered in a 2004 interview. "Where we lived in Southwest, we didn't have the toilet inside. So when we moved out here, it was like we were moving up."[1]

But Kenilworth Courts did not remain a place of promise. "We didn't know that everybody who moved out here was just as poor as we," McDowney said, "and they were going to tear

Jay F. Coleman's portrait of public housing advocate Kimi Gray hangs in the Residences at Kenilworth Park, an assisted living community on Kenilworth Ave. NE. In the 1980s Gray led Kenilworth Courts and Parkside housing projects residents to manage and revitalize their home complexes. With the support of DC politicians and national conservatives, she became a local and national leader in efforts to reform public housing policy—and a legendary figure for the author. *Courtesy, Jay F. Coleman*

the place up." Despite having a 1960s-era drum and bugle corps so good they played for First Lady Lady Bird Johnson at one of her DC beautification events in 1965, by the early 1970s Kenilworth's bad reputation had gone citywide.

A 1971 *Washington Post* article waxed nostalgic about how Walter Washington, the first elected mayor under the return of home rule in the 20th century, got his start as a public housing manager. But in a sidebar from "the mayor's housing chief," things got dark. "One project, Kenilworth Courts, 'is hell on earth,'" blurted James Banks at a meeting in Southeast.[2]

Then, into the fray stepped Kimi Gray.

If you looked at Gray's life in 1966, the year she moved into Kenilworth Courts, you could be excused for thinking she would contribute to Kenilworth's problems, not confront them.

Kimi Odesser Houston was born on New Year's Day, 1945, to Herman Williams and Mae Bell Houston. Her family lived in Northwest DC before moving to the Frederick Douglass housing project in Southeast when she was five. Her father died when she was seven, and she was raised by her mother and grandmother.

Kimi showed promise early on: at 11 years old, she was elected citywide chairman of a junior police auxiliary club. Then, something shifted. At 14, she had her first child. Married by her 16th year, at 19 she separated from her husband. Now effectively a single mother of five, she relied on public assistance for her family's livelihood. Then, after she was allocated an apartment in Kenilworth Courts at age 21, Gray the organizer re-emerged. The transformation began slowly as she went back to school, eventually earning an associate's degree at Federal City College. By the early 1970s, she was president of the community's resident council, a public housing tenant governance committee.[3]

By then, day-to-day life in this low-income, Black community was run by a network of mothers. The orange-brick complex was largely a collection of two-story townhouses organized in a series of "courts," where clusters of front doors opened onto yards along a shared sidewalk. As the years churned, each court evolved its own culture and power structure. Gray rose to the top.

In the mid-2000s I had returned to Douglas Street from college to write the story of my family's cross-racial experiences in DC. Though my parents were living a semi-retired life back in Amish country, Pennsylvania, many in Kenilworth remembered them with fondness and helped me as I dug into area history. At a front-porch bull session with a few neighborhood old-timers, I learned the precise moment that Kimi Gray became "Miss Kimi," queen of Kenilworth's public housing.

A Courts mother named Vernita Wimbush, the porch sitters recalled, had been the recognized community leader for the young complex. As resident council president in the late 1960s, she even got a small bit of fame from protests over problems at Kenilworth Elementary School. But by the early 1970s, Wimbush had started to

Walter McDowney, second from right and then a park ranger at Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, shows a snake to Junior Rangers from Kenilworth, ca. 1980. He became the first Black person to receive the National Park Service's highest award for park rangers. *Photograph by William Clark, courtesy, National Park Service*


Kenilworth Courts' drum and bugle corps poses in front of the complex's office in 1963. *Courtesy, National Capital Housing Authority*

wield her influence a little too haughtily within Kenilworth's tightly wound micro-cultures. One day, the old-timers alleged, a set of brand-new appliances ended up in her kitchen, when she had not been slated to receive them. Gray got mad and stepped in. "I'm going to get your ass up out of there," she reportedly said.[4]

And that was that, my storytellers cackled, hooting at Gray's brazenness. At the next resident council vote, Gray was elected president, and Wimbush was indeed "out of there." The leader who would advise successive presidential administrations on housing policy was born.

In the 1970s, when Gray started serious activism, Kenilworth Courts needed all the help it could get. Perhaps the trouble started when established families treated public housing as it was envisioned: a place to get on your feet and then move on. Perhaps it came from the increasingly troubled households that moved in. Perhaps it was the chaos after the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968, when the uprising spilled over into Kenilworth, and the local Safeway was looted, never to reopen.

However it happened, by the mid-1970s the place was falling apart. Complaints about crime, trash, and poor maintenance had dominated news about Kenilworth Courts for a decade.

In 1971 the *Washington Post* reported that of 22 members of a 1967 Kenilworth youth football team, "at least nine are in jail." The writer listened to a group of young, Black, male Vietnam veterans who were "bitter over a shortage of jobs." One complaint became the article's headline: "This place is just like a reservation." Poverty, drugs, too many people crammed into a tight space, lack of recreation, racism: these were all given as reasons why Kenilworth had gone downhill.[5]

Seven years later, the *Post* featured Kenilworth again through the work of Lewis M. Simons. In the 1980s Simons would become a Pulitzer

Kenilworth Courts in 1961, two years after it opened. *Courtesy, National Capital Housing Authority*

Prize-winning international correspondent, covering the Marcos regime in the Philippines. But in 1978 he penned a series about public housing in the nation's capital. Fresh off covering poverty and politics in South and Southeast Asia, his writing compared Kenilworth, not so subtly, to developing-country slums. All five articles quoted Gray, giving her a dose of publicity that introduced her name to official Washington.

For Simons, like for so many of the White DC-apparatus males Gray later encountered, she was unforgettable. "After spending some days in several DC housing projects, I settled on Kenilworth Courts because a young man I met there offered to introduce me to Miss Kimi," Simons wrote to me recently. "She blew me away immediately. She knew everyone and everyone knew her. From that day on, I returned to Miss Kimi's apartment time and again."[6]

And why not, when a reporter could talk to Gray in "her yellow, plastic-covered armchair" where "she keeps her finger on the pulses of the project and its 3,000 or so people" and get gold-standard quotes like this one: "I call it the 'mushroom principle' of welfare. They keep us in the dark, feed us s--- and then sit back and see how much we grow. And how much can you grow living in the dark, eating s---?"[7]

Simons's last article focused on Gray's foundational initiative, College Here We Come. In December 1974, he wrote, three teenagers came to Gray for help. They wanted to go to college but had no idea how. Gray started scraping resources together. Three students became 25. Gray went to her city service and nonprofit contacts for support, and the Department of Housing and Community Development approved grant money. By 1978, 112 high school graduates were taking college classes, from a neighborhood that Simons described as "pretty much like any other Washington project—graffi-

ti-sprayed walls, littered grounds, dust-blanketed abandoned cars" and "a seemingly endless supply of children of all ages."[8]

Such self-led improvement was possible because, despite the negative views of visiting journalists, many residents still held pride in their neighborhood. Ask Kenilworth Courts alumni what it was like "back in the day," and they are likely to get deeply nostalgic about tackle football in the streets or Double Dutch in the concrete laundry areas or catching frogs down in the aquatic gardens. You had to be home when the streetlights came on, they'll note, as a mom-led community network looked out for you.

It was this home-grown neighborliness that led Gray and her helpers to try to show Kenilworth's young people the world outside the neighborhood through College Here We Come. Eventual architect Michael Price remembered Gray renting an RV to take him and other teens on a college tour. "She'd throw me the keys, and I'm driving this big RV." Then they'd visit some HBCUs that Kenilworth young adults were already attending.[9]

But getting kids to college wasn't the end goal. No, *getting them to come back* was Gray's most brilliant idea. When the complex received rehabilitation funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in the 1980s, for instance, Price had come home and was there to direct the renovations. A $1,200 "scholarship"—dollars cobbled together by Gray—allowed Wayne "Bumpsey" Ward to train at Monique's Beauty Academy. Then he opened a nonprofit salon in a Courts basement and started training others.

His family was typical: Ward was the last of five kids and the first to graduate high school. His father had left the household years before. And now, Ward was gaining a skill, getting a job, and paying it forward.[10]

So this is how a Kimi-led Kenilworth renaissance began: A mutiny in Kenilworth's matriarchal culture that saw Gray become resident council president. College students who came home and helped others. And a *Washington Post* series about low-income Black DC that put the name "Kimi Gray" in lights for the first time.

Fast forward to April 1989. ABC TV has produced a major news special titled "D.C.—Divided City," examining crime and race in the nation's capital. Ted Koppel spent days interviewing people across the city for an hour-long taped segment, then hosts a live post-show town hall discussion at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church on the bluffs overlooking the Anacostia River in Southeast. Notable audience members include Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Pol-


ABC News publicizes "D.C.—Divided City" in this Apr. 1989 press release. For the program, anchor Ted Koppel interviewed people across Washington and facilitated a town hall, where Gray was a featured guest along with Mayor Marion Barry and other DC notables. *DC History Center*

icy William J. Bennett, DC Police Chief Maurice T. Turner, Jr., Mayor Marion Barry, and iconic Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson.[11]

And there, two seats over from Barry, sits Kimi Gray, answering a question from Koppel about young Black men and the economic appeal of the drug trade. How did her star rise this far, to go from a scraping-by young mother on welfare to a mature leader representing Kenilworth and other DC public housing communities on national TV?

Her relationship with Mayor Barry is at least part of the answer. I don't know how Gray and Barry met, but by September 1980 Barry had appointed Gray president of the city's Public Housing Advisory Council. She was also a roving leader with the D.C. Department of Recreation, making $12,000 a year helping keep the peace in challenged neighborhoods.[12]

Kenilworth Courts alumnus Michael Price saw the roving leader job as the foundation of Gray's local political connections. Her network-building in public housing outside Kenilworth began to translate into a recognizable constituent base of residents. "She'd go around to all the public housing neighborhoods and get them riled up," Price said. Gray might talk about the lack of maintenance, then encourage residents to fight for themselves. "Be in control of your own destiny," Price remembers her saying. After a while, when Gray spoke up about public housing neglect to the mayor or city council, she spoke for thousands of residents.[13]

Because of Kenilworth's proximity to the seat of the U.S. government, by the early 1980s Gray was interacting with national political operatives too—men who saw federal control of the District as an opportunity to test ideas of how to rescue failing urban communities nationally.

First Gray met Stuart Butler, an economist from England who had taught at Hillsdale College in Michigan and co-founded the London-based Adam Smith Institute. In 1979 he started work as a policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank. Someone there had heard about Kimi Gray—thank you, Lewis Simons? So Stuart booked himself at a Kenilworth Courts resident council meeting. He wanted to talk about how the concept of urban enterprise zones—economically challenged areas eligible for government incentives to spur investment—might help a neighborhood like Kenilworth.

I confess the cultural contradictions make me laugh, this White and self-identified "reserved" Englishman showing up at a meeting of Black public housing moms in his "best suit and clipped accent." But he found an audience, because, he recalled, there was Kimi Gray "in about the fourth row, asking very smart, streetwise questions about how these ideas would translate in practice."[14]

Butler and Gray struck up a friendship. Soon their circle included Robert Woodson, a conservative Black civil rights activist and neighborhood empowerment expert who would found the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise and become a stalwart Gray backer. Butler and Woodson began to help Gray move from access to Mayor Barry to access to Congress.

Gray parlayed her rising connections into something big when, in the early 1980s, her band of Kenilworth zealots won the right to manage their own complex. It was the students, Woodson told me recently, who provided the catalyst. They came back and told Gray they were embarrassed to bring college friends around Kenilworth.[15]

The move toward tenant management was also driven by physical problems in the complex, Price remembered, especially a lack of heat and hot water when the central boiler broke down — which seemed often. Price remembered having to boil water on the stove for "bird baths" and regularly seeing water bubbling out of the ground from broken hot water pipes.[16]

In the 1970s Kenilworth Courts was operated by a private management company under a DC government contract. Residents hoped the private firm would improve the neighborhood by paying more attention to upkeep. But improvements were not forthcoming.

Gray's group of upstart mothers and motivated college students decided to convince the city they could do better. As their campaign to take over accelerated, Mayor Barry was on their side. And now Gray had a nice chunk of Congress in her corner, too, because Representatives like Jack Kemp (R-New York) had started to seriously court Gray. Kemp and others saw her as a key ally in their efforts to prove the effectiveness of Reagan-era, self-help economic empowerment policies, and they advanced tenant management as part of small-government solutions to urban blight.[17]

But even with powerful new backers, and as the idea for tenant management in public housing caught on nationally, the nation's laws remained an obstacle. When Gray's new benefactors wanted to help facilitate tenant management experiments by suspending some parts of the Davis-Bacon Act, for instance, Butler remembered that they provoked "a knock-down, drag-out battle over that in Congress." Davis-Bacon mandated that construc-

tion workers on federally funded sites effectively had to be union workers, paid at a high rate, while tenant managers wanted to hire willing non-union residents at lower rates.

"Kimi was heavily involved in bringing potential tenant managers into the Congress to be up in the gallery to jeer and catcall" when lawmakers questioned the abilities of low-income tenants to run their own properties. "Kimi and Co.," as Butler called them, "at times would be escorted out by the sergeant-at-arms. But it had its effect of causing opponents to cower," and the changes to Davis-Bacon went through.[18]

"They put all kinds of barriers in Kimi's way," Woodson remembered of Gray's quest to change government bureaucracy and modify regulations, such as the Davis-Bacon Act, to allow Kenilworth's tenant management efforts to succeed. But she was an analyst so astute that even top bureaucrats would defer to her. "She came up with a compromise that was brilliant" for modifying Davis-Bacon, Woodson said—suggesting that residents could work part time for the Davis-Bacon wage then volunteer an equal amount of time, basically cutting the wage in half—and no one realized how effectively she had bent the law to her will.[19]

Finally Gray and a small band of Kenilworth Courts residents formed the Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation. KPRMC represented not only Kenilworth Courts but also the smaller complex of Parkside, about a mile away near the 1940s-era Mayfair Mansions community. Gray was appointed chair of the board.

On March 1, 1982, KPRMC signed a contract to manage Kenilworth Courts. But then they had to get to work, and it wasn't easy in a neighborhood beset by infrastructure woes, poverty and marginalization, and crime. Gladys Roy, who reared nine children in Kenilworth Courts, joined Kimi's band as a credentialed public housing manager in the housing office at 4500 Quarles Street NE.

"We asked the government would they let us run the property," Roy remembered in 2004, "because we knew how things needed to be done because we lived there. We sat up a lot of mornings, a lot of nights all night because we didn't have no heat, and we had to find people to work for us.

"We started fixing up the broken-down units and moving people in. [KPRMC] started a GED class where residents could finish their education. People got jobs. Mothers got off welfare. Men in the houses, they got jobs. I seen people make a change in their lives, and that makes me feel good."[20]

Not everyone came willingly on board in Kenilworth's sometimes-quarrelling courts. And Gray's style of self-help wasn't always comfortable. Once, a resident complained about the $13 fine KPRMC instituted for breaking windows. "Mrs. Gray," the resident said, "poor people can't afford to pay for broken windows." "You got it wrong," Miss Kimi replied. "Poor people can't afford to break windows."[21]

Stuart Butler, photographed in 2011, supported Gray while a policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation. *Courtesy, Gage Skidmore/Wikimedia Commons*

But Kimi and Co. were undoubtedly proving that the right blend of outside resources and self-led effort could remake a troubled neighborhood. In 1980 Gray traveled to St. Louis and New Orleans to learn from tenant managers there. By 1985 leaders from Chicago's notorious Cabrini Green projects were visiting Kenilworth to learn from Gray.[22]

In 1983 HUD earmarked $13.2 million for much-needed Kenilworth Courts renovations. At an October celebration, Gray accepted a huge cardboard check, cheered on by Mayor Barry and representatives from HUD and the White House. "It's like a reward for us," she crowed.[23]

But while good things were happening in Kenilworth, all was not well in the downtown bureaucracy that KPRMC's success depended on. Tension between federal and city government offices and dysfunction within the 1980s D.C. Housing Authority—so bad a blue-ribbon commission was formed in 1987 to investigate—slowed Kenilworth's renovation progress.

By May 1985, the HUD funds promised in 1983 were still unreleased pending a vague "series of meetings that need to happen before decisions can be made"—bureaucrat-speak *for no one wants to touch this.* Former HUD undersecretary Phil Abrams

The Washington Post METRO Federal Diary/Obituaries/Classified B1

# NE Project To Be Run By Tenants

## City Hopes Takeover Will Serve as Model

By Lewis M. Simons
Washington Post Staff Writer

Tenants at one of Washington's bleakest public housing projects are taking over the property's management in an unprecedented self-help effort that top city officials hope will inspire similar takeovers by more of the city's 70,000 public housing residents.

Beginning this week, residents of Kenilworth Courts are performing all the same services, and facing all the same complaints and problems, as the private management firm that was on contract to the city. They will be operating the 464-unit project on a budget of $250,000, netted from rents and a government subsidy.

"You've got to remember that most of us are people who never had to make a real decision before in our lives," said Kimi Gray, the sparkplug behind the tenant takeover of the project in far Northeast D.C. "In the past, all we had to do was call up and complain to the office. Now, we are the office."

Tenant staff members will be collecting rents, sending out notices to those who are late, fielding persistent calls about on-again, off-again heat and hot water, inspecting apartments and hallways for damage and abuse, smoothing frayed relations between neighbors and trying to convince some 3,200 poor people that they can and should spend

See TENANTS, B4, Col. 1

Tenants by Craig Herndon; Kenilworth Courts by James M. Thresher—The Washington Post

*Kimi Gray, center foreground, above, with tenant staff at Kenilworth Courts; below, part of the complex.*

News of the takeover of Kenilworth Courts led the *Washington Post*'s Metro Section on Jan. 11, 1982. Gray fronts the upper photo. The complex's run-down condition is seen in the lower one. *Courtesy,* ©Washington Post

told the *Post* that the D.C. Housing Authority felt "somewhat threatened by the success of tenant management," implying the city authority might not be fully behind KPRMC. He also revealed that the fiscal 1983 housing authority request for federal money omitted Kenilworth. Unimpressed, HUD ignored DC's priorities and allocated money for the Courts anyway.[24]

Through this bureaucratic wrangling, Gray and KPRMC remained optimistic. They had a lot to shout about. Crime was down. College attendance was up. Welfare dependency was down, as the management corporation hired some residents and started job training and access programs that helped others. Rent collection and water pressure were up. A 1985 *Christian Science Monitor* reporter claimed that "before the residents took over management, 85 percent of the project's residents were on welfare. . . . Now 35 percent are. For the first time in the project's history, the amount of money collected for rent covers the cost of operation."[25]

Gray's personal star was still rising. In June 1986 the Reagan administration gave her a National Volunteer Award. More significant, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1987 removed obstacles for tenant management nationwide, with Gray at the White House signing. In 1988 she co-founded the National Association of Resident Management Corporations. She would travel nationally and internationally in support of public housing tenants.

Described later in the *New York Times* as "variously sophisticated, blunt, bellicose, shrewd, articulate and sometimes coarse," Gray the national housing guru still had to use all her wits as Miss Kimi at home. Managing Kenilworth's

renovations would take all of her political powers, in the neighborhood and downtown.[26]

An architectural firm's presentation of renovation plans in 1986 was unpleasant. The firm, hired by the city, had not consulted with tenants, so the "pretty colored drawings"—as a sympathetic journalist called them—didn't address such root issues as the need for a new heating plant. Michael Price had an architectural degree from Howard University by then and "got quite angry" taking apart the plans.

Finally Gray stepped in. "No hard feelings against you all," she said to the team of architects, "but your supervisors sent you down here to get your asses kicked." Which she proceeded to do, then sent the architects packing.

Later she persuaded HUD officials—who were funding the overall project—not to reimburse the city for the $500,000 the housing authority had already paid to the architectural firm. Gray argued that the architects had broken their contract by not consulting the residents, and HUD agreed. Gray didn't care whose toes got stepped on at the housing authority, she was making sure money for Kenilworth was well spent on resident priorities.[27]

Her determination led to a defining moment in 1988. That October a bipartisan ceremony celebrated a preliminary agreement for KPRMC to purchase the 464-unit combined Kenilworth Courts and Parkside complexes for $1, provided renovations would be completed in 1990, now at a budget of $23 million.[28]

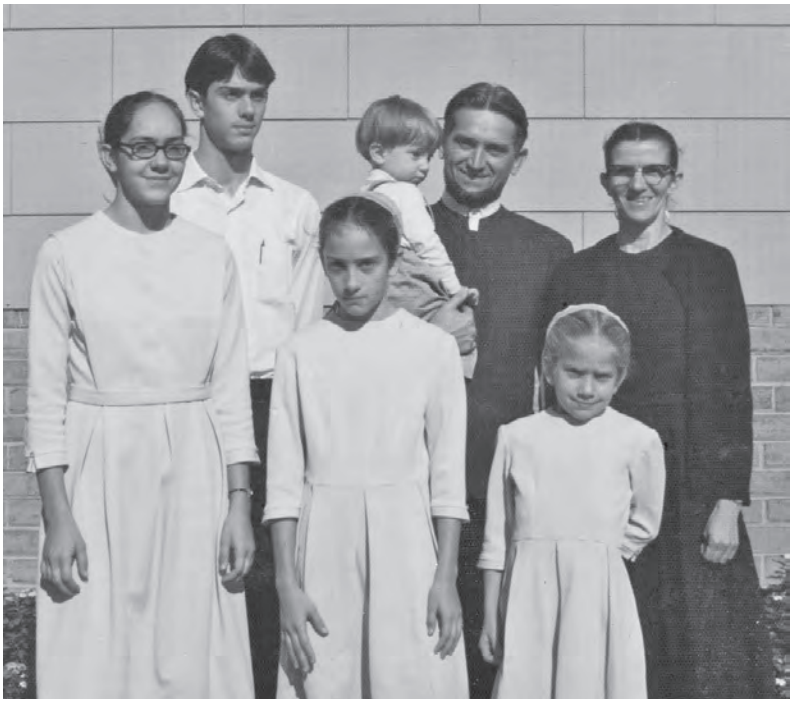
This event occasioned what I think of as the iconic photo of Kimi Gray. On the front page of the *Washington Post* Metro section, she stands on a stage, in the middle of the complex she lives in and loves, clasping raised hands in victory with Marion Barry.[29]

Less than a year later, in July 1989, a lavish *Washington Post Magazine* cover story marked the apogee of her moment as a media darling. Writer David Osborne charted Gray's rise from public housing nobody to "irresistible force." Gray is dreaming big, he wrote, with plans for businesses and buildings and better futures. "Folk want freedom," Gray told Osborne one day as she climbed into her then-iconic blue van. "Folk want power. The door is open—they can't stop us now." (Osborne's 1993 *New York Times* bestseller *Reinventing Government* featured Gray in its second chapter.)[30]

Yet, as with most things that rise, gravity would intervene.

Attendees listen intently as Kimi Gray speaks to President Reagan (back to camera) at a special meeting of housing experts at the White House, 1986. *Courtesy, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*

Kimi Gray and Marion Barry celebrate a preliminary agreement for the Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation to purchase the 464-unit combined Kenilworth Courts and Parkside complexes, Oct. 1988. *Courtesy,* ©Washington Post

The author's family poses in front of a church-owned house at 4330 Douglas St. NE in 1975. Front row from left: Lois, Eunice, and Lydia Lapp. Back row: Timothy, Joseph, Elmer, and Fannie. *Courtesy, Lydia L. Martin*

After earning a degree in English at a college in Michigan in 2001, I moved back to Kenilworth in 2003 to write. All my other family members had moved away from DC, but a small band of Amish-Mennonite volunteers and community converts maintained Fellowship Haven, the church my parents had started in the late 1960s. I settled into the basement of one of the Douglas Street houses that the church still owned and started looking for stories, from my family and the neighborhood's past, that I could put in a memoir.

As I dug into Kenilworth history, I came across article after article about Kimi Gray and the promise of Kenilworth. "Wow," I thought, "I didn't know she was this famous *outside* Kenilworth." By this time, though, the neighborhood had none of the thriving, suburban-community aura forecast in David Osborne's 1989 feature. Instead it felt leaderless and fragmented, and it was plagued by a new crime fad: juvenile auto theft and joyriding. I soon learned that Kimi Gray had died in March 2000.

A visit to the Kenilworth Courts housing office on Quarles Street revealed that the D.C. Housing Authority had recently taken back from KPRMC management of at least part of the complex. And the building was nothing like the open-door community center I remembered. According to Osborne, back in 1989 Gray's desk sat "where a receptionist would normally be, right by the front door, so the residents can always find her." But in 2003 the door was locked, and the staffer who answered my knock didn't even open it.[31]

As I reviewed the media record, I began to realize that something had happened to Gray's popularity. While her name peppered housing coverage throughout the 1980s, by the mid-1990s almost none mentioned her. I found myself asking, what happened to Miss Kimi's cachet in official Washington? What happened to her dreams of self-determination for the complex?

Now, I think I know the answer: politics and power. Proximity to power, combined with fortuitous political connections, helped Gray rise. Yet reliance on finite, politically driven agendas would also be her undoing.

At the heart of the political conflict that came to surround Kimi and Kenilworth was a tussle between national Democrats and Republicans over who owned the Black, urban vote. Democrats thought they had neighborhoods like Kenilworth Courts, and other similar communities across the country, in their pocket. Reagan-era Republicans wanted in. Representative Jack Kemp epitomized

the progressive Republicans of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Kemp and Gray were so close that she sat with his family during his 1989 HUD secretary confirmation hearings.

Kenilworth's Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner Herman Greene took the Republican relationship with my home neighborhood head on. "There were times when Jack Kemp came into Kenilworth almost as often as I came home. Everybody will tell you that the Republicans at that time—that Bush—felt sorry for Blacks and wanted them to be part of the Republican Party to show that he's not prejudiced. So they sent Kemp out here."[32]

Gray's dalliance with the party of Reagan and Bush had Democrats simmering. People started accusing her of being a Republican—which isn't exactly what you want when you're a Black leader in Chocolate City. This happened so often that Kimi evolved a standard deflection. "No," she'd say, "I'm a dollar bill. And on each bill there's a different President. My family was poor when we had Roosevelt for the White House. We had Kennedy, Nixon, Ford and Carter and we're not richer now."[33]

In a column titled "The Republican Approach," *Washington Post* columnist Courtland Milloy noted that in Kenilworth, "the Republican philosophy of self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship and bureaucratic deregulation has borne a mighty sweet fruit." Though, he offered, "most black people will not like to hear this."[34]

In October 1988 the connections to power that had aided Gray so much exploded on her in a way she couldn't deflect anymore. On the very day of the celebration that yielded the iconic Gray-Barry photo, prominent Black Democrat Jesse Jackson and DC Congressional Delegate Walter Fauntroy held a counter event. Jackson alleged that "the administration was trying to exploit the success of Kenilworth-Parkside before the election" and blamed them "for major cuts in housing subsidies and the sharp increase in the number of homeless." Dueling opinions ensued in the *Post.* Democrats attacked; Republicans defended. Gray felt betrayed. The national battle, for which Kimi was simply a proxy, brought more and more scrutiny to Kenilworth.[35]

Reporters started poking around for evidence of backroom deals that might have fueled the complex's success. Even the conservative *Washington*

Robert Woodson, Sr., left, Kimi Gray, third from left, Rep. Jack Kemp, second from right, and Councilmember Frank Smith, right, celebrate the 1987 Housing and Community Development Act, which supported tenant management. *Courtesy, Woodson Center*

*Times* piled on, pointing out that it was a conflict of interest for Gray to work for DC as a roving leader while also chairing the KPRMC board, which received city funding.[36]

Republicans had recently expanded their urban agenda from tenant management to a more complex idea: allow qualified public housing residents to buy their own units. A purchase option fit just fine with Gray's vision. "I want to own the plantations," she told a *Post* reporter in 1980. "Yes, the plantations. That's what public-housing communities are, aren't they?"[37]

But this idea, pushed hard by Kemp through the early 1990s, faced opposition. "Public housing is for poor people, we can't sell it!" Democrats hollered. Not everyone in the Bush White House liked it either. The divisiveness of ownership, and questions about the large federal subsidies that a 1989 Government Accounting Office report said would be required, started to distract from very real tenant empowerment gains. Charges that federal support for tenants was ineffective and a misuse of taxpayer money became a damningly effective critique.

If national politics was increasingly squashing Gray's dreams in the early 1990s, the local scene wasn't much better. Marion Barry's rise had fueled Gray's. But now her local hero was in trouble. After his arrest on drug charges in a DC hotel in January 1990, Mayor Barry would be convicted and sent to prison in 1991. (He would later make a political comeback, again serving as city council member and mayor.)

What's more, renovations at Kenilworth Courts were not going well. Bureaucratic heel-dragging in the District's housing authority caused delays. Empty units became crack houses—I saw this happen as a teenager. Construction costs ballooned.

In September 1990 Kemp, Barry, Gray, and others held another celebration in Kenilworth, signing papers officially marking the sale of the complex to KPRMC. The management corporation, however, eventually received title only to the 132 units that had been renovated on time, per conditions in the 1988 preliminary agreement, not even one-third of Kenilworth-Parkside's total. The entity continued to manage, though not own, the remaining units.[38]

In September 1995 a *Washington City Paper* reporter sniffed around in Kenilworth to see what had become of the Republican housing revolution. She found that 123 units were still boarded up, and the promise of individual home ownership had essentially been abandoned. "Thanks to a goof at HUD," there was also no money to renovate the 123 units. Apparently "the winning contracting firm bid to renovate only three-quarters of the apartments, but was paid the money budgeted to complete all 464 units." No one wanted to explain how this happened.

Gray declined to talk with the reporter. Residents who did talk complained that Gray "runs the project like her own fiefdom." Most of them spoke anonymously, because "they're scared they're going to get a 30-day notice to move off the property."[39]

Clinton's 1993 ascendancy to the White House didn't help Kenilworth. Gray went from being a personal favorite of President Reagan to the favorite of a HUD secretary during the Bush years. She had supporters in the Clinton administration, but didn't get much play there. Housing policy had moved on to the traditional razing and replacing.

Thus it was that, as the health of the Kenilworth-Parkside experiment in tenant empowerment slid, so did Gray's. She died on March 1, 2000, still chairman of the board, but presiding over a kingdom much smaller than her grand ambitions had envisioned in the 1989 *Post Magazine* cover story.

Local and national politics had indeed, as Gray had already complained a decade earlier in the *New York Times*, "rained on our parade."[40]

Kimi Gray had a robust physical presence and a commensurate ability to command an audience. Almost 6 feet tall, around 270 pounds, with a booming voice, she once said, "Whenever I walk into a room all attention is immediately focused on me because I'm so big." Another quote captures the ironic self-regard that charmed reporters and politicians alike: "There's a Kimi Gray in every public housing development in America. Let's just hope she's not as obese as I am."[41]

Perhaps it became part of the reason Kimi Gray fell out of favor, this penchant for saying exactly what she thought. There's a C-SPAN interview, full of the unique brand of pull-no-bull uplift that made her famous, which also includes a diatribe against recent "liberal group" legislation benefiting the homeless. Gray didn't like it because it took money away from public housing.[42]

Kimi Gray made Kenilworth Courts her lodestar, whether it made her popular or not. All her complexities boiled down to one thing: helping her neighborhood. "Public housing is my home," she said. "It's where my people are. All I want is for everybody here to live in a decent, safe and sanitary community, not in misery."[43]

So there she remained, propping up one of DC's most unruly neighborhoods, when she could have cashed in on her fame and moved out.

As I write this article, Kenilworth Courts is being redeveloped. While KPRMC continues to quietly manage its share, a chunk of the units owned by the city have already been torn down, with new buildings forecast to open in 2024. This new era in my birth neighborhood feels bittersweet. For decades residents have called for change, because no matter how much effort Gray and others put in, the same problems arose over and over. Yet it's hard to see a large part of your community, that you know held so much *literal* blood, sweat, and tears, be wiped away. Like nothing ever happened.

But things *did* happen, *crazy* things. Like this one: In a bizarre coda to the 1983 ceremony celebrating KPRMC's $13 million in HUD funding, a dead body was discovered *that day* in Kenilworth Courts. Michael Price says there was a bad odor coming from an apartment. He got keys and went in, finding a boy's body wrapped in a sheet. They got the VIPs out of there quick as they could, then called the police. The boy had been killed by his mother.[44]

Another crazy thing: Miss Kimi snitched on people. In a neighborhood like Kenilworth, this can get you hurt. But she loved her neighborhood so much she built relationships with police and went for the drug culture head on. When a dealer slashed her tires in retaliation, she cussed him out to his face *and* in the *Post*—"You went a tad too goddam far!"[45]

Not even presidents escaped Gray's directness. Every February, for Black History Month, Chelivia Gray-Hall posts photos of her mother on Facebook. One of my favorites is a picture of Gray shaking President Reagan's hand. That wowed me, by itself, the first time I saw it. But then I scrolled down and saw a comment by another daughter. "It's the way she shook his hand," Tonya Gray wrote.

So I looked again. And there it is: not only is Gray greeting the president with a right-hand shake, the former "welfare mom" has President Reagan's wrist clamped firmly in her left hand. How audacious she was!

These are the wildly disparate worlds Gray had to navigate, balancing her status as unlikely power broker with her steadfast choice to remain in a community whose very purpose for existing was to help house the most needy members of society. "If she had been born male and White," David Osborne told me in a 2023 phone call, "she probably would have been president." But she was born Kimi Gray, and so she spent the better part of her powers in the place that mattered most to her, the place that she loved.[46]

I love Kenilworth too. Though I was born in Freedmen's (now Howard University) Hospital and came home to Douglas Street, my White skin and my parents' Amish-Mennonite faith made me a relative outsider. But the acceptance that the mothers of the community—Gray, Gladys Roy, and many others—showed to my family allowed me to feel a part of the neighborhood. Their radical openness compels me to tell Kenilworth's story, though I haven't been a DC resident for nearly two decades.

It's not uncommon, I've experienced, for people who have lived in Kenilworth to feel a strong bond with the place. One day in 2005, I ran into my neighbor Cheryl on her mother's porch. Cheryl said she had moved away from Kenilworth to become a homeowner. She was one of the res-

Kimi Gray greets President Ronald Reagan with an audacious handshake at a June 10, 1988, White House meeting with leaders in self-help and welfare reform. *Courtesy, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*

idents who thought they were buying their unit in the Courts, back when Gray was queen of DC's public housing scene and the government's plan for resident management included home ownership. Until the government changed its mind.

Cheryl seemed happy to be owning her own place. But she also seemed sad to have left. "I know it's bad out here sometimes," she said, referring to the crime and infrastructure woes that regularly plague the area. "But Kenilworth is home."

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