

## Cora McCorvey: Intent, purpose & grace

Written by Maya Beecham  
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While deeply entrenched in public service, Cora McCorvey developed a desire to write a book about her life.

In fact she started an outline and the memories began to flow. In a quick read of the pages one might learn that McCorvey was born in Illinois, lived in Indiana in her formative years, graduated high school one year early, is a mother of four children, grandmother of 12 and has successfully served as the first executive director/CEO of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) since 1991. At that time, MPHA separated from the community development arm of Minneapolis and was established as an independent agency.

However, without turning a page of the planned memoir, an observer can watch McCorvey walk into the employee entrance at 1001 Washington Ave., north Minneapolis, with a gait of intention, purpose and grace. When she speaks with various members of community including her staff, former fellow board members, travel companions to Ghana and even her children's childhood friends; one notices a common denominator. When people say her name their words are overcome with a deep respect and admiration for her character.

It is this same character that placed her on a trajectory of success beginning in 1977 at MPHA as she moved from entry level positions to numerous promotions for her exemplary work in property management in the agency's Family and High-Rise Housing programs that eventually led to her current executive leadership role. And true to form she does not rest on her laurels, but considers her journey a service that has to be met.

"This position is a position of honor because I have been entrusted with the huge responsibility of making sure people have dignity in housing. I see it as a high honor. I am in the business of providing housing to our community's most vulnerable," said McCorvey.

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McCorvey governs the largest public housing agency and provider of quality, affordable housing for lower-income families in the state of Minnesota. She oversees the management of more than 6,000 affordable housing units owned and operated by MPHA and the administration of 5,000 Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers for families who use this assistance to live in privately-owned rental properties. McCorvey promotes a culture of excellence that has garnered national recognition for MPHA as a standard bearer in the public housing industry. In 1998 Housing and Urban Development (HUD) named MPHA one of the nation's top five large housing authorities in the country based on the agency's overall performance including its capital and financial indicators. In 2007 MPHA's Housing Choice Voucher Program earned the High Performer designation, and continues to maintain this status to date. MPHA has engaged in an unprecedented renewal of its public housing stock through securing and investing over \$282 million in physical and management improvements. As one of the defendants in the *Holiman v. Cisneros* housing discrimination lawsuit, MPHA was responsible for leading the implementation of the \$117 million settlement that significantly impacted affordable housing development in Minneapolis and the surrounding communities. In addition, MPHA secured \$50 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds.

"She is a visionary and a leader who has a great deal of flexibility," said Bob Boyd, MPHA director of policy and special initiatives, who has worked with McCorvey for 20 years. He recalled after Congress passed ARRA, working with McCorvey to use ARRA funds they received from a national HUD competition to create the senior campus in Heritage Park.

"We had vacant land in north Minneapolis that because of the housing crisis had been largely undeveloped," said Boyd. "(McCorvey) believed, and was committed to finding some way to put an anchor on the site that would set the stage for future development. Cora's vision was to do something that extensively looked at the needs of elders. We had developed a 102 unit senior development in 2006 but she wanted to do something more comprehensive. Cora got a vision – and this was well over 20 years ago – that somehow the public housing agency had to respond to the needs of older residents who were experiencing dementia. This was something public housing authorities across the nation hadn't really dealt with. And when funding became available Cora called me in and sat me down and we came up with the idea of creating a memory care development that would focus on people with acute assisted living needs with a high emphasis on those who needed memory care."

Most recently the agency received five prestigious National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) Awards of Merit for its community revitalization work and resident service initiatives. An example of the projects of recognition include MPHA's Thomas T. Feeney Manor, a 48-unit assisted living and memory care "green" facility, that provides affordable housing and services for an increasing population of seniors, including those who are low income, or suffering from Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. It is the first-in-the-nation assisted living/memory care public housing development.

In the midst of all the success, challenges have arisen in the form of a closed MPHA Section 8 HCV waiting list, budget cuts, staff layoffs, or championing programs or services in an uphill battle.

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“You are here to solve problems and to make things work better,” said McCorvey. “You have to have courage to step up and solve problems even when they are not politically popular. You have to have courage to do the right thing rather than the status quo. When you’ve gone through an intellectual process and narrowed down decisions to what you believe to be the best for the agency, you may still agonize over the ramifications of these decisions, but you have to trust your instincts and be confident in yourself. Be respectful, care about people, and work hard at everything from the big to the small things.”

Cheryl Borden, managing director of the Housing Choice Voucher Program was appointed to McCorvey’s team in December of 2000 and witnesses McCorvey’s care on a daily basis.

“Cora’s got this quiet way of letting you know you are doing a good job,” said Borden. “She never fails to let you know. It’s a subtle way that she does it but it makes you feel on top of the world, because you know that she recognizes what you have accomplished.”

“Cora is this dynamic woman who melds her compassion with her responsibilities and the things she does so much better than most people I know,” said Boyd. “She doesn’t let responsibility get in the way of her compassion, but she does not let compassion stop her from what she needs to do to keep MPHA fiscally solvent.”