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Angela Christy believes everything
starts with affordable housing



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There's something to be said for tangible results. From Faegre & Benson's 32nd floor conference room in downtown Minneapolis, Angela Christy points out the North Star Lofts along the Mississippi River, the East Village apartments in Elliot Park, and Riverside Plaza, with its definitive multicolored panels, near the University of Minnesota's West Bank. She's had a hand in all of them. When she looks at these buildings, she doesn't just see bricks and mortar. She sees multiple rounds of financing, hard-won tax credits, tedious sign-offs from public officials and corporate investors, and more.

"It's the purchase agreements, the easements, the land use, architect contract, construction contract, financing," says Christy, who leads Faegre's housing and community development practice. "What drives most of my deals are tax credits or some kind of governmental financing."

She calls herself a technician; her clients and collaborators are the visionaries. Take the North Star Lofts, a project initiated in the mid-1990s. "[Former Minneapolis mayor] Sharon Sayles Belton called my client and said, 'I think somebody ought to do something with this building,'" she says. "If we hadn't done North Star, I don't think you would have ended up with the Guthrie or MacPhail. Somebody needed to take the leap, make the commitment in the neighborhood. That started the stabilization of the whole riverfront."

She also helped transform Elliot Park. "East Village was a fun one because they said we were crazy to do mixed income," she says of the undertaking, which won the "Most Innovative Housing Project" award by the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program in 2001. "It was a combination of low-income and market-rate housing—the first market-rate housing done in the Elliot Park neighborhood in 50 years. Grant Park came not long after. So you soon had million-dollar condos."

It's a niche that has earned Christy national acclaim, though she never planned for it. "I wish I could say I had this vision," she says, "but sometimes I think, 'If you know where you're going, you're missing where you should be.'"

SHE ATTENDED North Dakota State University on a chemistry scholarship. That, combined with a double major in political science, gave her the idea to pursue patent law after graduating in 1978.

"Then for some bizarre reason," she says, "I took every tax course they had at the University of Minnesota Law School. I ended up practicing with a small firm called Harstad and Rainbow, formerly Mondale & McLaughlin, as in Fritz Mondale and Harry McLaughlin. Within a year the guy who did all of the corporate and real estate left to join another firm. So there was a corner office and a real estate corporate practice."

Soon after she was handed what would be the most important portfolio item in her career: Riverside Plaza, then Cedar Square West, designed by renowned Minneapolis architect Ralph Rapson. "I started working on that, and then was getting a little nervous about doing a \$40 million deal without anybody to talk to," she says. "At the same time, somebody from Leonard Street and Deinard called and made me an offer."

She made the move and finalized the transaction with her new colleagues. It solidified her relationship with Sherman Associates, one of the partners which acquired Riverside soon after the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit was created in 1986. "Many of my clients started in development in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the low-income credit evolved," she says.

One of those clients is Aeon, a nonprofit affordable housing development organization that emerged in 1986. Christy has been involved with nearly all of its housing projects, including Ripley Gardens, a historic preservation of the Martha Ripley Maternity Hospital near International Market Square, and the St. Barnabas Apartments for homeless youth, located just off Seventh Street near the Metrodome. The apartments are in a refurbished addition to the St. Barnabas Hospital—the birthplace of Minneapolis' current mayor, R.T. Rybak, who, she says, was a fan of the project. "Originally when I heard people were going to be doing projects for homeless youth, I scratched my head and said, 'Should kids be living on their own at 16?' But then I started hearing stories about

Affordable housing attorney Angela Christy opens doors for the underprivileged

by AIMÉE GROTH photography by LARRY MARCUS

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Christy stands in front of Ripley Gardens, a historic Minneapolis property redeveloped by Aeon.

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the abuse, deported parents, parents in prison, kids living in boxes. It was quite clear that we have a tremendous problem in the Twin Cities in terms of homeless youth."

Alan Arthur, president/CEO of Aeon, gives an example of Christy's dedication. "We were a week away from closing [the Elliot Park IV] project when I called Angela's office and her secretary told me she was in labor," he says. "A few moments later I get a phone call from her cell phone. She said, 'I'm between contractions.'"

An officer of the Community Housing Development Corp. (CHDC), Rich Brustad, was also working on the Elliot Park project—and was able to reach her that day, too. "She takes a lot of pride in her work," he says. "Over the years she has developed this tremendous respect and high regard of attorneys in the field."

Christy has collaborated with CHDC on Evergreen Residence, housing for homeless adults, and Glenwood Residence, housing for chronic alcoholics, among many others. It's not always easy to get such projects off the ground.

"When you do the kind of work that I do, you don't have a lot of leverage," she says. "I can't come in and make demands. I have to convince people that our position is right. But you have to do it with logic, compassion, as opposed to, 'If you don't do that, then...'—because I don't have a 'then.'"

SHE AND HER HUSBAND and two daughters have lived in the Twin Cities for almost 30 years and have no plans to move. This contrasts sharply from her childhood. "My father died when I was young, we were living in Pittsburgh, it was the '60s, and there were some issues, so we moved and just didn't stop moving," she says, noting that she attended 10 schools in 10 years. "I was forced to be adaptable."

Even so, she developed a sense of place with each new environment, and formed opinions on what a city should offer its residents. "I don't think that you can succeed in life without decent, safe, affordable housing," she says. "Take the single mom who rents a place for two weeks because that's all she can afford, then goes to the shelter for two weeks with the kids. How can those kids get a decent education when you don't have a fixed location? How does the mom get employment when she doesn't have a phone number for people to call? When you build the foundations of a successful person, at the bottom of that foundation is housing."

This belief has fueled her passion for creating affordable housing on Native American land—she handles 90 percent of such deals in the country. "The state of housing on Indian reservations is far worse than anything in any of our cities," she says. "Many people think of Indians as getting millions of dollars from casinos. Remote tribes don't have the ability to generate revenue from economic development. The level of poverty is very, very high."

To help lower the poverty levels, Christy has worked to free funds from the federal Native American Housing and Self-Determination Act. "With these tax credits, all of a sudden we

can turn \$2 million into \$5 million; instead of building 20 houses we can build 50," she says.

That's the nature of Christy's work, pulling in funding from all different sources—including the 2009 stimulus funds, which she used to close a deal in southern Minnesota this spring. She also navigates state and federal laws that govern nonprofit housing projects. "I may have to go and meet with [the Minnesota Department of] Revenue tomorrow," she says of her efforts to streamline a certain sales tax exemption.

On the other end of the spectrum, Christy takes on the occasional commercial development, such as the Chambers and Westin hotels in downtown Minneapolis. These are much easier projects to handle, she says, "because they don't have as many layers of financing."

Midtown Exchange, the renovated 1928 Sears and Roebuck building on Lake Street, came to life with nearly \$9 million in historic tax credits, which are awarded to buildings designated as certified historic structures by the National Park Service. Christy played a key role in structuring the housing part of the deal.

"Midtown was a huge team effort," says Susan Fauver of Sherman Associates, which developed the Midtown apartments and condos. "We had a group of people who cared about saving that building and changing the neighborhood—from Faegre, U.S. Bank, the city of Minneapolis—coming together under very difficult circumstances. The number of people at those meetings was just incredible. Under such stress, people get angry, and Christy was able to diffuse the tension and get people back on track."

Tempering emotions is part of her daily work. "With affordable housing projects, you do sometimes run across NIMBYs—'not in my backyard'—people who perceive that they don't want low-income people living around them," she says, noting that mediation helps resolve such conflicts. "Once the project is built, people tend to look past the labels. When it's bricks and mortar you have visions of who's going to be living there, and there's a more negative reaction."

One of the city's most controversial housing developments is Riverside Plaza. It was built in 1973 as part of a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development initiative to expand mixed-income housing. Today approximately half of the 1,303 units are subsidized Section 8 housing, with a majority of its tenants East African and Somali immigrants.

At press time, Christy was working to secure historic tax credits to support its \$100 million acquisition and renovation this fall. "Riverside is interesting both architecturally and in terms of being a groundbreaking project," she says. "It was originally supposed to be a part of a much larger, 12,500-unit project known as 'New Town in Town.' Although the larger project was never built, I have heard that there is a model of it in the Smithsonian."

Peering out the glass windows above Marquette Avenue and Eighth Street, Christy takes a moment to reflect. "I've often said I have the world's best practice. It's intellectually challenging, it's complicated, and I work with wonderful people," she says. "And I get paid for it." ◀