A Piece of Happiness

Keisha Chatman is familiar with homeownership. At 19 years of age – and to help out a friend – Keisha purchased a home on Knox Avenue in North Minneapolis. It didn’t take long for Keisha to realize she did not want to own a home at that time, so she returned to renting. Fast forward 11 years and Keisha again owns a home on Knox Avenue in North Minneapolis, but this time the experience is different. “I was tired of moving and I wanted to do better for my son...to be settled and raise my children” Keisha’s children include Amina, the 14 year-old daughter of a friend, and Kureim, Keisha’s 7-year old son who loves their house as much, if not more, than Keisha. “Kureim loves the house, loves coming home. He’s always ready to come home.”

Keisha and her family moved to the Twin Cities Metro area from Chicago in the mid 90’s and moved between rentals throughout Minneapolis. However, Keisha felt the most comfortable in North Minneapolis. “I lived in South Minneapolis for six months and then I moved back to North Minneapolis. North Minneapolis is a small community compared to South Minneapolis. There are not a lot of crowds here, and the size of this house and the neighborhood are manageable.”

Originally on a path to purchase a home through the Project: Reclaim contract for deed program, Keisha was notified that her credit score was enough that she could qualify for a conventional mortgage. (“That was a nice surprise!”). Keisha didn’t need a lot of time to find the perfect house. The first house she looked at was also the last. “I saw the potential even while it was being worked on.”

(continued...)
In 2014, CLCLT homeowner, Molly Van Avery was awarded a $10,000 Activities Grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council (MRAC) to fund her project “This House is Not for Sale (THINFS)*,” a collaboration between Molly’s grass-roots organization “Poetry for People,” visual artist, Witt Siasoco (recipient of the Forecast Public Art Jerome Project Grant for $8,000); and the CLCLT. THINFS grapples with questions of how to benefit in the wake of someone else’s loss.

In partnership with seven other poets, Molly and Witt met with eight CLCLT homeowners that purchased foreclosed properties. Everyone shared a meal and stories about their homes, including the state of their homes at time of purchase, the transformation the homes have undergone, and how their lives have been impacted by owning their homes. Out of the story exchanges have come an original poem and image that will be put onto handmade “realty” signs and placed in the homeowners’ front lawns. The culmination of the project will result in a series of “front yard openings” throughout the months of June and July where the poets and Witt will share their work with the public.

THINFS is part of Poetry for People, a group assembled by Molly Van Avery that creates poetry-based public art projects that infuse poetry into people’s daily lives to cultivate surprise, intimacy, curiosity, and interest in the world and the people who live in it. Molly, a CLCLT homeowner, and Witt, a public artist who is interested in front yards as a venue for curating visual art projects, came together to envision this project.

Molly says, “I am so grateful to have the chance to work with the wonderful homeowners and CLCLT staff to manifest this project. Witt, the poets and I have had interesting conversations and been inspired by the meaningful reflections that come from reflecting on where [the home- owners] live and how [they] both shape and are shaped by what surrounds and grounds [them].”

For more information about Poetry for People, Molly’s Poetry Mobile, or the artists involved with the “This House is Not for Sale” project visit http://poetryforpeople.tumblr.com.

---

When Keisha saw the home, the only rooms completed were the kitchen and bath, but that was enough. “I fell in love [and] I went into planning for future parties: Kureim’s birthday party, my birthday party…” The home is also conveniently located between Keisha’s three places of employment.

Given her recent transition into homeownership, some might think Keisha would slow down. If anything it has motivated her to continue her volunteer work at local homeless shelters as well as completing an Associate Degree in Criminal Justice. After she graduates in the spring of 2016, Keisha plans to pursue a career as a Youth Probation Officer for children ages 13 – 18 years. “I’ve worked with toddlers for 9 years, so I’m ready for a change, and I’m passionate about my community. This seems like a good fit.” Now when she is asked what it means to be a homeowner, Keisha confidently responds, “Stability, accomplishment, and a piece of happiness.”

---

*This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.