

MEET VIOLA



For the past 10 years Viola has lived at 345 Arguello in San Francisco—one of the public housing sites for seniors and people with disabilities. Mercy Housing recently took ownership of through the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program.

Viola has traveled the world

No Place Like Home

as a Marine. Over the course of her 20 years in service, she estimates she's sailed around the world three times. Still, she'll tell you, "Oh, there's no place like home. There's freedom at home."

Tell me about yourself

Perhaps I should write a book of testimonies before I am 70. I've seen

a lot ... being a black woman in the Marines and being an underwater welder and engineer. I like to help the homeless, pass out coats, help people. I've been there. I know what it's like to not have any clothes or food. But, I'm here today, and thank God that I am. I believe that's my calling.

What are some of the changes you are seeing here?

Well, the renovation looks like they rebuilt the building. My apartment looks completely different with new windows, kitchen, bathroom, and fresh paint. I feel so much safer here. People used to come in off the street all day long. Now, we have good lighting, someone is always here, and we have those grab bars in case you trip. And, basic things like heat and good electricity. I have rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis, my bones have to stay warm. We have events, therapy, nurses, activities, a bus to take us to WalMart, gardening, and field trips to Fisherman's Wharf. This is my home, you know, this is the place where I go to sleep.

Before Mercy Housing came, we didn't have management or basic services. I used to have to go to my sister's place in the East Bay on the weekends to take a hot shower. We had to go take the bus and go someplace to pay our rent and some of us can't walk. >>>

>>> You ought to see this place now—I can finally sleep well. It's breathtaking.

How do you think the process has changed you?

I feel settled now. I don't have anywhere to live but here. I get emotional because I understand what it means to finally live comfortably and not worry about where home is going to be. When you get to be a certain age, like me, you want to feel at home. To feel like things are going to be all right.

"... I understand what it means to finally live comfortably and not worry about where home is going to be."

I don't have to worry about how hard it was or be stressed about leaving. My psychiatrist has seen the change in my anxiety. Management will be here for whatever we are going through. I am all right ... I'm relieved. My mind is at rest. I can look forward coming home. This is real. And when you have hope, you have faith. I used to not want

to go to church, but now I'm blessed to be a blessing to others.

Why was staying here so important to you?

I am very independent. I need my own space. I take good care of my things and take pride in my home. I just feel better. I can't afford another place ... none of us can. I have a place to stay here and I can stay forever. Income is set for you, most people don't get a \$1000 a month.

You know, I have lupus, it affects all my organs—the crippling kind. When you're not living right, it affects your mental and physical health. I can't keep going in and out of the hospital. When I have no heat and no ventilation, it's very difficult. Let me tell you, we had so many ambulances come here and break people's doors down. We had so many sick people here. You have to have a decent place.

The people who live here, they're grateful. They might not say it all the time, but they'll tell me, "We got a lot of change here, huh, Ms. Viola?" I tell them, "But, baby, when we get though... look what a blessing it is." ♦



"There is a common misperception that homelessness is a permanent or semi-permanent trait that affects individuals throughout their lives and defines who they are. The reality is that homelessness is an experience — a state, and not a trait. In our study of homeless seniors in Alameda County, we found that 44% of the seniors became homeless for the first time after the age of 50. Most of these older adults became homeless due to changes in circumstance like an eviction, loss of job, or health crisis. When we stop imagining that the homeless crisis is due primarily to personal failings and allow ourselves to see the structural conditions that allow homelessness to happen, we can begin to see new solutions to the crisis."

— Dr. Margot Kushel,
Professor of Medicine at the
Zuckerberg San Francisco
General Hospital and Trauma
Center, and core faculty member
in University California San
Francisco's (UCSF) Center for
Vulnerable Population