

# *The Miami Herald*

## *“House of Lies”*

*by Debbie Cenziper*

*2007 Excellence in Urban Journalism Winner*

“House of Lies” started with an empty lot on a desolate corner of town and a determined woman named Ozie Porter.

On a cafeteria cook’s salary, Porter saved \$5,000 to buy a house. Armed with a down payment, the longtime public housing resident turned to the Miami-Dade Housing Agency, a lifeline for thousands of families searching for a decent place to live in the least affordable city in the nation.

But instead of sheltering the poor, The Miami Herald’s Debbie Cenziper found, the Housing Agency enriched a cadre of favored developers, who raked in millions of dollars from Miami’s coveted affordable housing fund but never delivered the houses they promised. For months, Cenziper delved into the workings of the massive bureaucracy, exposing for the first time a series of failed projects, pet programs and ill-fated deals at a local agency that became an unchecked cash machine for builders and consultants.

As the 2006 series unfolded with more than 30 stories -- revealing dozens of delayed building projects and the loss of millions of dollars to deadbeat developers -- hundreds of people stormed county meetings and marched in Miami’s poorest neighborhoods, even pitching tents for an overnight protest on the steps of County Hall. Lawmakers in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. demanded investigations. Hundreds of readers contacted the newspaper and the State Attorney.

The stories led to the dismissal of 10 housing officials, local and federal investigations, the return of public money and land, a federal takeover of the Housing Agency and the arrest of three of the developers at the center of the scandal, including one who used Housing Agency money to buy himself a \$150,000 sculpture of a watermelon slice.

To report the stories, Cenziper took on an agency that had never bothered to accurately track its spending, even while controlling tens of millions of tax dollars.

The Housing Agency’s computer files were incomplete, paper records destroyed, project-tracking reports inconsistent. The county had not ordered an audit of the construction program in years, and reports produced by the agency -- at a cost of \$475,000 over three years -- said little about the delays and dead projects.

Cenziper examined hundreds of original contracts, invoices, budgets and construction correspondence dating back a decade to provide for the first time an accurate accounting of the Housing Agency’s spending on dozens of projects. She also built a database of business, professional and personal affiliations for more than 300 people to establish the nexus of connections and self-dealing.

Throughout the reporting, Cenziper never lost sight of the people most affected: the working poor. She spent evenings with families in rat-infested houses. She talked to children in homeless shelters. She tracked down investors who bought houses meant for the poor, including Clifton Trapp, who reaped \$175,000 in 14 months by flipping houses. “It was a good investment,” said Trapp, who pleaded guilty earlier this year to attempted cocaine trafficking.

One of the greatest payoffs from the series came two months after publication, when local agencies pooled resources to help Ozie Porter finally buy a house. For years, she had refused to give up despite waiting lists and developers who backed out without building. On a bright day in September, Porter accepted the keys to a new three-bedroom.

Again and again, she said, “This is my home.”