

Home Is Where Their Hearts Are

Tapping into their own home-buying experiences and those of their neighbors, these four women fought to end predatory lending practices.

ESTHER MAYCOCK-THORNE KNOWS what it's like to be displaced. "I was 13," says the Brockton resident, recalling the day she discovered her father had gambled away her childhood home in Barbados. "No child should ever have to come home and see all of their belongings on the street, look at Mom, and say, 'Where are we going to go?' And to hear her say, 'I don't know.' If we could prevent those things from happening, it would be wonderful."

It was that experience, in part, that kept 43-year-old Maycock-Thorne, as treasurer of the board of the nonprofit Massachusetts Affordable Housing Alliance, fighting for the Legislature's recently passed Community Reinvestment Act, which protects the state's home buyers from predatory lending practices by mortgage companies. These practices — which include requiring higher interest rates, more fees, and more onerous provisions from low- and moderate- income buyers — can often lead to foreclosures and are one of the main causes of the current economic crisis.

Maycock-Thorne, a financial analyst at Massachusetts General Hospital, and the three other officers of the board — Acia Adams-Heath, 34, and Shelly Goehring, 35, both of Dorchester, are its president and clerk, respectively, and LaTanya Ramsey, 31, of Brighton is its vice president — all got involved with the housing alliance following separate first-time home buyer's classes sponsored by the group. Though they had never considered themselves activists before, over the years, each woman got increasingly involved with the organization and its Homebuyer's Union until eventually joining its dozen-member board and being elected to officer posts.

The women had seen the heartbreak caused by predatory lending practices in their own neighborhoods and wanted to prevent further disruptions. "I heard so many stories about people who got taken advantage of in their attempt to achieve the American dream," says Adams-Heath, a fiscal officer at MIT. "Some are homeless — savings gone and credit history ruined. We thought, 'How can we keep this from continuing?'"

Massachusetts is the only state in the nation to have a "mortgage CRA," as the new law is known. For years, federal regulations have prevented banks — which in 1990, the year the housing alliance started its mortgage-assistance programs, made 80 percent of the loans in Massachusetts — from using predatory lending practices. But mortgage companies, which now underwrite nearly half of the loans in the state, are not covered by existing federal laws. "There are disclosure laws in effect without any teeth to them," says Tom Callahan, the alliance's executive director. "They give data on the race, gender, and income of the people companies are lending to, but provide no penalties for bringing high-interest loans to



HOME GUARD This quartet (from left), Acia Adams-Heath, Shelly Goehring, LaTanya Ramsey, and Esther Maycock-Thorne, work to prevent foreclosures.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WIQAN ANG

predominantly African-American neighborhoods, for example." The new Community Reinvestment Act will clamp down on such practices.

"It's important to distinguish between a loan that is subprime and a borrower that is subprime," says Jim Campen, executive director of Americans for Fairness in Lending, a national organization based in Boston. "Ostensibly, subprime loans were there to meet the needs of people who couldn't get prime loans. But, in fact, often people who could qualify for prime loans are sold subprime because they're more profitable. There was just an incredible abandonment of any kind of lending standards in 2005 and '06."

It is that lack of standards, in part, that the new law seeks to address.

"No one predicted the worldwide ramifications of the subprime crisis," Callahan says. "But as members of the community, on a gut level, these women knew this lending was really bad and really unregulated and that we needed to do something to hold these companies accountable."

They knew how important it was to their peers. "I think there are a lot of people like me," says Ramsey, who's a quality-process training specialist at a Waltham-based bio/pharmaceutical services company. "You went to school, you worked hard, and now you want a house. You have children, and you want to provide for them. There will always be women like me aspiring for the same things, and they should be able to acquire them."

Goehring, who's also the executive director of Four Corners Main Street, a Dorchester-based nonprofit, has just one regret: "I feel like if this would have been passed several years ago, we could have got a jump on these companies and possibly decreased some of the negative impact today. It's a little frustrating that it took seven years to pass. It's not like the writing wasn't on the wall." ■

Elizabeth Gehrman is a freelance writer in East Boston. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.