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# GEORGIA

MAGAZINE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

September 1997

Vol. 76, No. 4

## Harlem Renaissance Woman

Karen Phillips creates  
small-town spirit  
in the big city





# Harlem Renaissance Woman

By Laura Wexler

One Sunday morning Karen Phillips was sitting in a pew in Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church when Rev. Samuel D. Proctor, addressing the largest black Protestant congregation in the country, delivered a message to the "upwardly mobile black professionals" in the house.

"He said, 'All you out there having Sunday brunch and reading *The New York Times* need to be here supporting the institutions that made you what you are,'" Phillips recalls.

At the time, Phillips (BLA '75), a trained landscape architect, real estate developer, and urban designer, was working for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, where she created reports "that just gathered dust." But after hearing the reverend's message, Phillips heeded it. She joined a group of church members committed to improving living conditions in the neighborhood surrounding Abyssinian Baptist.

Two years later, the Ocilla, Ga., native went even further, and quit her high-paying downtown job to sign on as the first paid staff member of the newly created Abyssinian Development Corporation. She moved into a shared office at the church—where a TV stand served as her desk—and began orchestrating what is today a multi-million dollar revitalization effort. And though she's no longer a church committee volunteer, but CEO of a non-profit organization that has invested \$65 million in Harlem, Phillips is still doing the same work she began in 1987. She's rebuilding a neighborhood.

Drawing on private donations and government funding, ADC constructs affordable housing, offers economic support to local businesses, sponsors educational programs—and, most importantly, encourages a sense of community in the central Harlem neighborhood bordered by 125th and 139th streets, and Fifth and St. Nicholas avenues. In short, ADC approaches revitalization holistically, striving to address a variety of community members' needs—from providing child care, to offering credit counseling, to organizing neighborhood potluck dinners.

The idea that a development corporation could be a central force in improving lives stems from the belief that *where* people live has plenty to do with *how* they live, and *who* they are. In other words, place matters.

**Karen Phillips builds a small town in a big city**



Photography by Dennis Connors



No one knew that better than the black people who hopped trains in the 1920s and '30s, heading for a place called Harlem, which became New York City's first suburb after rail service was established in the 1840s. For them, Harlem meant more than zoot suits, the Cotton Club, and that new jazz music. It symbolized opportunity, a chance to create lives less hindered by racism than the ones they'd known until then.

Ironically, one of the main factors in Harlem's rise was an error on the part of real estate developers who had overspeculated after the subway was put through in 1904. As a result, they were left with empty buildings, and a choice: rent to black people or go broke. They decided to rent to black people—though at exorbitant rates—

and soon the word got out: Harlem was *the* place. An explosion of black culture, known as the Harlem Renaissance, was happening.

Despite ongoing racism and economic inequality, during the Renaissance Harlemites "felt good about themselves because they had a positive environment. They created dance, song, and writing out of that environment," says Phillips.

In 1925, James Weldon Johnson wrote in "The Making of Harlem" that "Harlem is indeed the great Mecca for the sight-seer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious and the talented of the whole Negro world . . ." Alain Locke echoed these sentiments, writing also in 1925: "If we were to

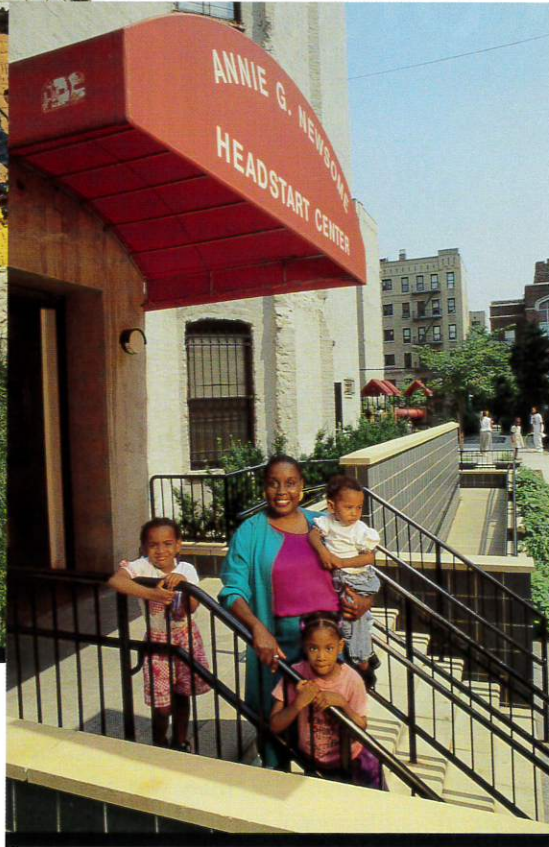
**Phillips' nonprofit corporation has invested \$65 million in Harlem's revitalization. This former theater will be renovated as part of the ongoing effort to restore Harlem's mythic grandeur.**

offer a symbol of what Harlem has come to mean in the short span of twenty years it would be another statue of liberty on the landward side of New York."

For these writers, and for Phillips, Harlem in its golden age was more than the sum of its black-owned businesses, elegant brownstones, and theaters (of which there were 10 in the immediate area alone). Harlem had that essential intangible: a strong sense of community. And sixty-odd years later, it is the sense of community that Phillips works to re-establish.



A playground mural at the headstart center reflects the optimism Phillips wants Harlem's children to have—that they can be doctors, lawyers, teachers, bankers, or anything they want to be.



"The cultural legacy that made Harlem a special place should remain," she says simply.

Beyond her appreciation of its history, Phillips has personal ties to Harlem. As a youngster of six or seven, visiting relatives Up North, Phillips ate at her first lunch counter owned by a black man. "That made a big impression on me," she says. "That was not something I could do Down South then."

And though it hasn't been a perfect circle from that lunch counter, back down to Georgia, and up again to Harlem—where housing developments she's helped to create stand a few blocks from that lunch counter—it seems Phillips' path was always leading her to the place that many call the black capital of the world.

There was her childhood in Ocilla, a time when she had to sleep with

the counselors at 4-H camp because black girls couldn't be housed with white campers. There were her relatives who, though barred from running for political office, were active in Georgia's civil rights movement. (Those relatives were also in the construction business.)

There was college at UGA in the 1970s, where her first two roommates—both white—walked out after learning Phillips was to share the room. Also at UGA, there was the opportunity for Phillips to study urban planning, architecture, ecology, and art history as part of her landscape architecture degree.

Combining childhood memories of her tightly-knit black community in south Georgia with her education in landscape architecture, real estate development, and urban design,

Phillips has carved a "small town niche" out of the big city.

"What I have really done is recreate my hometown of Ocilla around the church community," Phillips says. "One of the trends in distressed communities is that the religious institutions are the strongholds. The church was often the only thing that black people owned. I was drawn back to the church as a place where change could occur."

With its upward-reaching spires and lofty Gothic arches, Abyssinian Baptist is "like a grand cathedral," says Phillips. The church's name comes from an ancient word for Ethiopians, and since a group of freed slaves and Ethiopian merchants

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*'The revitalization of Harlem is a symbolic move. There's no place in America that would more reflect the ability of the United States to reclaim its cities and rejuvenate the links between races than Harlem.'*

— R. Baxter Miller  
UGA professor of English  
and director of the  
Institute for African  
American Studies

creating solutions that make sense not only to developers, but to people who live in central Harlem. Phillips, who lives a few blocks from the church, is one of those people. She's a local.

And, as a local, her most important job is translating what she hears from her neighbors into language that architects, planners, and developers can understand. "I have cultural links and I interact with community members in a way that acknowledges them as human beings," she says. "I go from the highest office in Wall Street to the level of talking with a homeless person in the hospital. It's that varied."

**Phillips talks to neighbor Helen Daniels at the gate of the historic Astor Row house she bought during the height of a crack epidemic, when the block was "dysfunctional." Now there are 15 owner-occupied houses on Daniels' street. And, she says, "We have children on the block."**

**K**aren's able to advocate for small businesses on their behalf, as well as secure grants and operate the budget," says Jim Capel, chief assistant to 15th District Congressman Charles Rangel, whose office collaborates with ADC on projects.

But Phillips works *with*, not *for*, believing that through hard work and collective action citizens can affect their communities. In forming 15 area block associations, ADC has created local infrastructure to not only maintain, but beautify, central Harlem. More importantly, ADC has fostered the kind of community where people say hello on the streets and look out for each others' kids. For those who live there, that's invaluable.

"The block was extremely dysfunctional when I moved here 11 years ago," says Helen Daniels, who owns a three-story brick home on 130th Street in historic Astor Row. "I bought at the height of the crack

epidemic. It wasn't just the physical condition of the houses, it was the physical condition of the community."

For years, Daniels tried to hire a contractor to refurbish her porch and fence, but none would take the job for fear their tools would be stolen. ADC helped Daniels apply for a grant, and now the flowers in her front yard are bordered by a fence befitting the elegance of her 19th century home. With the advent of the ADC, Daniels says, the number of owner-occupied houses on her block has grown from three to 15, bringing greater neighborhood stability. And though many buildings await renovation, with each new ADC project Harlem's return to grandeur becomes more feasible.

So it is with hope for the future, as well as a sense of her personal and collective past, that Phillips walks the few blocks to ADC headquarters each morning. She passes mothers pushing baby carriages, children jumping rope, local businesses opening for the day—and that symbol of strength, Abyssinian Baptist Church. She walks through her Harlem neighborhood, and it feels like home. **GM**

**Laura Wexler has joined the GM staff as assistant editor. Tariq Muhammad of Black Enterprise Magazine helped research this story.**



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