

KEEPING THE PROMISE  
OF PUBLIC HOUSING  
CHAIRMAN JOHN B. RHEA

*Justice Sotomayor, Mayor Bloomberg, Senator Schumer, elected leaders, residents, friends of public housing, ladies and gentleman, good afternoon. It is my sincere honor to stand before you. Today, we observe not the simple renaming of a development, but the recommitment to a civic purpose and a common good. Today, we are seeing in our City and our nation a renewal of what Winston Churchill famously called the ‘simple things’—“All the great things are simple,” Churchill said, “And many can be expressed in a single word: Freedom; Justice; Honor; Duty; Mercy; Hope.”*

These are the values that have kept us, and our parents before us; they have preserved our nation and, indeed, our world; and they are the virtues that have stood like sentinels in the distinguished life and career of the woman we honor this afternoon—United States Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

Some of our friends in the press have made much of the fact that we rechristen this development in honor of not only a public servant who is still living, but also one who is young with so much of her life and service still to come. Today's ceremony is a further testament to Justice Sotomayor's character, to her love for the families of this community, and to her deep desire to be a beacon for those who will follow in her footsteps and, later, blaze bright new trails of their own.

I know Justice Sotomayor will agree with me when I say we have gathered this afternoon to do more than honor her continuing service and social contribution. Today we mark a milestone achieved last August when Justice Sotomayor took the high court's oath that is also a return to our nation's first principles—opportunity for all. We honor the promise of public housing, and the promise of a community and a nation, which says “we can do more together than alone.” And, hopefully, we kindle a fire in a young girl or boy who will now work a little harder, study a little longer, and be lifted a little higher in the hope that with dreams, opportunity and a strong foundation, no fortune is too far, no path is too narrow, and no destination is beyond their reach.

Public housing was that strong foundation in Justice Sotomayor's life and New York City is as committed today as at any time in our history to ensure that public housing remains a bedrock for the generations to come.

We can only accomplish this together. In the year since Mayor Bloomberg appointed me to serve as the Authority's 21<sup>st</sup> Chairman, we have rededicated ourselves to the spirit of collaboration, to harnessing the power of partnerships and to the belief that great breakthroughs are possible when people work together. Indeed, perhaps that is the only way they are possible. As Frederick Douglass once said, "We differ as the waves, but are one as the sea."

We recently saw the power of the sea in the process to rename this development the “Justice Sonia Sotomayor Houses.” Residents, NYCHA employees, public advocates and local elected officials came together—they knocked on doors and talked to their neighbors; they posted flyers and signed petitions—and they began the march to commend this development not simply in Justice Sotomayor’s honor, but also in their families’ honor and for their children’s future.

NYCHA knows the power of a community that comes together. Today, we are taking our message to potential partners in the public, non-profit and private sectors and making the case that NYCHA’s story is their story. We are joining hands and, along

lines of common purpose, we are developing the strategies to preserve, strengthen and secure the public and affordable housing of tomorrow—to build not simply houses, but homes; not just developments, but communities.

We cannot do it alone. In a time of increasing pressure on our governments, the need to look beyond traditional alliances is even more acute. Today, I am excited to share with you that the Authority will inaugurate a new initiative right here, at the Justice Sonia Sotomayor Houses. In the coming months, NYCHA will launch a partnership campaign, titled “Clean, Green and Secure,” with organizations who share our commitment to sustain the Justice Sotomayor Houses and all other NYCHA

developments citywide. We will seek their help to sustain our buildings, apartments and grounds in a partnership that encourages community volunteerism, resident engagement and corporate social responsibility.

It truly takes a village to raise a child. Justice Sotomayor is a daughter of the Bronx and Puerto Rican communities that nurtured her; Cardinal Spellman High School, which challenged her; and the close-knit family that lifted her up and sent her boldly on her way. Unfortunately, we cannot give every child the strong family and courageous mother that so blessed Justice Sotomayor's life. But together we can support all parents and help build the secure communities that will be a safe haven, a first step, and

a fair start from which our young can and will build the world of tomorrow that is their dream.

This is our pledge—to stand firm together, renewing the promise of public housing and meeting the challenges ahead with clarity of purpose and a shared vision, with energy and creativity, and with resolve to ensure that this sacred responsibility, this noble task, this public good not merely endures: but that it thrives. Public housing has been one of America’s pillars—helping our nation endure and prevail.

I truly look forward to working together with all of you to ensure that it remains.

Thank you.