

Meet the Residents of Gilbert Highlands in Takoma Park

MHP acquired 8508 and 8510 Flower Avenue in the Spring of 2007 and started assembling the partners necessary to finance a major green rehabilitation, but the downturn in the economy would delay the process for two years. In September 2010, the development reopened as Gilbert Highlands with an extensive facelift and a renewed spirit. Residents range from teachers to entrepreneurs, to hotel workers and retirees. They include single adults, young families, and divorced grandmothers. Meet four of the 21 families that call it home.

THE RESIDENT ARTIST AND TEACHER

Every parent understands that space is a premium when you have growing children. For teacher and single father Eric Ruffin, the time he's able to spend on the weekends and during summer breaks with his 12-year-old daughter is priceless. But the 1-bedroom apartment he had occupied in Takoma Park for seven years was getting smaller.

The Philadelphia native moved to Maryland after leaving the U.S. Navy, and now teaches theater at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Georgetown, and at Howard University. For an artist, living in a walkable community like Takoma Park is a dream location, and Eric didn't want to move too far. From his window, he watched the old building across the street with the large picture windows transform, and he decided to take a chance and apply.

For Eric and Julian, their newly renovated 2-bedroom unit overlooking Flower Avenue offers the space for father and daughter to spread out and be creative, do homework, or enjoy each other's company. But more than its refinished hardwood flooring and architecture, Eric says he appreciates Gilbert Highland's proximity to public transportation, scenic bike trails, and cultural pursuits.

"I'm now able to give my daughter the space she needs and live in a community, and neighborhood, that I find nourishing to the spirit... I don't have to make the difficult decisions about whether I have to buy can goods for dinner or can afford fresh vegetables once I pay the rent."



Julian and Eric Ruffin, new Gilbert Highlands Residents

THE RESIDENT GRANDMA



Alicia Sarceno, new Gilbert Highlands Resident (at left)

For the first six months of 2010, Alicia Sarceno had been consumed with worry about where she would live after losing her home in Prince Georges County after her divorce. "I've worked for 43 years, and I had never had that sense of not belonging anywhere until I lost my house. The last six months of moving place to place has not been easy," she said.

In September, she moved into her newly renovated one-bedroom apartment in the Long Branch section of Takoma Park, and her life started to get back to normal. Family means a great deal to Alicia. Her two granddaughters visit a few days each week when she's not working, and her sister comes by to help take care of them. They are anxiously awaiting the arrival of a new grandson.

Alicia admits she loves children, and says having a preschool in the basement of Gilbert Highlands makes the place come alive. Gardening is also something she takes pride in, as evidenced by the potted plants that line her window sill. Years ago when she lived in an affordable apartment in Washington, D.C., her apartment window was obstructed by a view of a brick wall. But Gilbert Highlands is very different, she said. "Nothing compares to having a large window."

"I'm new to Takoma Park. This is a beautiful building and a gift from heaven for me. I'm so glad there are affordably priced rentals in such a wonderful area...Yes, I lost my home but now I have a new one."



Florence Ballard, longest resident of Gilbert Highlands

THE RESIDENT HISTORIAN

By late 2006, the residents of 8508 and 8510 Flower Avenue had tired of the deteriorating plumbing, drafty windows and rodents that were becoming a nuisance in their buildings, which were built in 1953 and had changed owners multiple times in the past few years. As the grumbings grew louder and more tenants retreated, the remaining few reached out to MHP to consider purchasing and rehabilitating their home.

MHP acquired the property in the spring of 2007 with the help of Montgomery County and other partners. In anticipation of the major renovation that was needed to restore it, long time resident Florence Ballard moved out in late 2008 and into a newly renovated unit at another MHP property down the street, but she had mixed emotions.

Florence had moved into her ground floor apartment with her husband on Christmas Day 1977 after he lost his job at an apartment community in Prince Georges County. They picked the wall colors, and she had the same telephone number. Now a widow, Florence had become accustomed to looking out the large picture windows at the lush vegetation that surrounded the quiet community. She wanted to move back in, as long as she could get her same 1-bedroom apartment.

Her persistence and patience paid off. In September 2010, she returned to the newly renovated Gilbert Highlands with many more green features than she had anticipated. Florence, who is now fully retired, says she wouldn't live anywhere else but Takoma Park.

"I would never find another place that suits my needs. I have transportation right here at the door. I can walk to the Giant grocery store, the bank, and my doctor's office – it's great. There are churches all around. I'm too old to start chasing buses again. I hope it stays this way."

ENTREPRENEUR AND DEVOTED SINGLE FATHER

Michael Arias is a busy real estate entrepreneur and doting father trying to rebuild his business after the recession. He loves every minute he's able to spend with his 4-year-old son Lyon, but worries about his education, his play time, and his general well being.

So in September 2010 when Michael was able to trade up from a cramped, run-down 2-bedroom apartment in Takoma Park to the newly renovated Gilbert Highlands down the street, he was thrilled to provide a cleaner and safer environment for his son where there are other children his age.

"I was paying \$850 a month for a tiny apartment that was falling apart and had roaches in the building. It was not a good environment for a child," says Michael. "The owners had promised a complete makeover of my unit and renovation of the building, but did not live up to their commitments."

After living two months in that apartment on Houston Court, he saw the Now Leasing signs at Gilbert Highlands go up and the renovated building come to life. Initially, Michael thought he would never be able to qualify for affordable housing, but decided to call and inquire anyway.

His newly renovated unit is immaculate and stylish, and has plenty of space for Lyon and his toys. Plus there is an onsite community center in the basement that operates a play-and-learn preschool program.

"This is one of the nicest places I've seen. The leasing staff is professional—and they bend over backwards to help you out."



Michael Arias, new Gilbert Highlands Resident