

Lenwood Johnson's Last Stand

APV is more than his home. It's his life. No wonder he can't let it go without one final struggle.

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published: December 14, 1995

It would turn out that Lenwood Johnson was just doing things the way he's always done them. But at the moment, it seemed a curious time to be missing in action. The occasion was a November 28 meeting to settle a question that, for going on three decades now, has proved near-impossible to answer: how much of Allen Parkway Village, the sprawling public housing project in the shadow of downtown Houston, would be demolished, and how much would be spared, renovated and re-opened as housing for the city's poor?

On hand to fashion a so-called "memorandum of agreement" on APV's fate were representatives from the Housing Authority of the City of Houston, or HACH, which, since 1977, has wanted to tear down every building on the 37-acre complex, and officials from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, whose failure to check HACH's longtime pattern of malfeasance and neglect has helped reduce the number of families living in the 1,000-unit project to less than two dozen.

A representative from the Texas State Historic Preservation Office also attended the meeting, along with the deputy director of the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Their presence was required because APV, situated on the edge of history-rich Freedmen's Town, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. Any decision to raze a portion of the complex would have to be examined for its impact on the cultural heritage of the city's African-American community.

By 9:30 a.m., when the meeting was scheduled to begin, a cellular phone-toting representative from Mayor Bob Lanier's office, two aides to Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, whose 18th Congressional District includes APV, and an urban planner from Boston had also taken seats at a rectangular arrangement of tables inside the local HUD office on Norfolk.

It seemed every entity that ever had an interest in whether APV lived or died was represented. Every one, that is, except the Resident Council of Allen Parkway Village, which, since 1983, has been headed by a 53-year-old African-American man who, undoubtedly, cares the most: Lenwood E. Johnson.

A former laboratory research technician, Johnson moved to Allen Parkway Village in 1980. He has since made it his life's mission to save the place he calls home. For better or worse, whether heroic or just stubbornly obstructionist, the 15-year standoff between a single black man and powerful real-estate developers -- and the government bureaucrats who, as well, long for the coveted land on which APV sits -- will likely be remembered as legendary. That it occurred in a city dominated by a white establishment that so easily eradicates the line between resistance and acquiescence -- usually with nothing more than a nod, a wink and a little money -- makes it nothing short of extraordinary.

Yet Lenwood Johnson has thwarted at least three federal applications filed by HACH to demolish Allen Parkway Village. He has done it by building consensus where there was none, by befriending politicians sympathetic to the poor and by shaming those he believes are not. But, above all, he has done it by using the law, which, as he reads it, gives a public housing resident the right to be involved in any issue having to do with public housing.

Buoyed by the Republican takeover of Congress, HACH filed another demolition application this past January. And in all likelihood, it will be the last. HUD has given the city the go-ahead, and \$36.6 million in urban redevelopment funds, for a massive overhaul of APV. While the plan won't be completed until March, the demolition of more than 800 units could begin any time now. One sign of the likely

implementation of the plan is the emergence of a group of developers that is negotiating with property owners in the Fourth Ward, with ambitious plans for redeveloping that area.

Federal and local housing officials are hell-bent on seeing an end to the APV saga, and the odds are in their favor. HACH, HUD and the city say they've done their part to end the conflict by agreeing, albeit reluctantly, that a portion of the complex can remain standing. The federal funds are there to take care of the rest, as is a master planning team led by the Boston firm of Tise, Hurwitz & Diamond Inc. As Sissy Farenthold, a housing advocate who has fought beside Johnson to save APV, observes with resignation, "All the bases have been covered."

It also has seemed that way in the past, but then Lenwood Johnson would file a lawsuit or stage a protest march or persuade some politician to join his fight, and Allen Parkway Village would still be standing. This time, however, the battleground has moved from the street, the courthouse and the corridors of power to the negotiating table. And Johnson, who remains determined to save as many -- if not all -- of APV's units as he can, is sporting some freshly inflicted wounds. For one thing, U.S Representative Henry B. Gonzales, the San Antonio Democrat who was Johnson's patron saint in Washington, has been replaced as chairman of the influential House subcommittee on housing and community development. The congressman's departure means the powerful advocate of APV's preservation will no longer be heard.

For another, Johnson's ample measure of righteous indignation appears to be suffering from diminishing returns. He goes into this, perhaps his toughest challenge yet, having alienated some of his most important allies -- most notably Gladys House, the president of the Freedmen's Town Association, and Joan Denkler, president of the Houston Housing Concern. House may be the one person who has fought the demolition of APV longer than Johnson. But these days, frustrated by Johnson's refusal to compromise, House is working alone to protect the interests of Freedmen's Town.

Denkler's largely white, suburban-based organization was instrumental in mobilizing the support of church and community groups when Johnson needed it most. Yet Denkler and Johnson have split over the latest alternative to demolition, the Allen Parkway Community Campus plan.

"I had to leave," Denkler says. "He's a remarkable man, but his political instincts failed him on this." Perhaps. But, as was apparent at the November 28 meeting, Lenwood Johnson can still raise hell, even when he doesn't show up. At about 9:45 that morning, with Johnson nowhere to be found, several of his supporters tried to enter the meeting. They were unceremoniously told to leave.

"Basically, they told us that when Lenwood arrives, he can pick four people to go in," announced Delores Elliot, a public housing resident, after emerging from the room. "And until then, we all had to stay out." Most of Johnson's supporters had been recognized as "interested parties" and were permitted to attend previous meetings. They were therefore alarmed to learn that the welcome ostensibly extended to Lenwood Johnson and company was wearing out. Deborah Morris, an architect and member of the APV's Resident Council board, saw it when she crossed paths with Charlene Vaughn, the deputy director of the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

"She was immediately snappy and agitated," Morris reported after being booted from the meeting. "She is ready for a fight."

To get it, however, she would have to wait for Johnson, whose whereabouts were of no small concern to everyone. Elliot, Morris and the others were desperate to know what was happening inside. Meanwhile, those in the meeting were in a bind as well. They knew that to arrive at a decision on how much of APV to demolish without Lenwood Johnson in the room would be a huge mistake.

It fell to George Rodriguez, a local HUD official, to placate the increasingly restless supporters. A small, nervous man, Rodriguez had already hired an armed security guard to sit in on the meeting. Later, he summoned a plainclothes policewoman, who arrived and took up a position outside the meeting room, jotting down notes on a legal pad.

Rodriguez announced that if Johnson could be tracked down by phone, he could designate four supporters to sit in on the meeting in his absence. Delores Elliot was dispatched to make the call. She returned with a bemused look on her face.

"He's on his way," Elliot said.

As it turned out, Johnson was waylaid by an equally important cause: Wessie Scyrus, APV resident, mother of 11 and secretary of the Resident Council, needed a pair of stockings to go with the new blue suit her daughter had bought her for the meeting. Anxious to look her best for a roomful of federal and local officials, Scyrus was also on the hunt for some lipstick. Their arrival was further delayed by a broken weld on the muffler of Johnson's decrepit, primer-stained Toyota Corolla, which slowed the trip across town from Allen Parkway Village.

It was 11 a.m. when Johnson, wearing a frayed brown suit and a tie two decades out of fashion, finally stepped off the elevator at the HUD offices. While Johnson's supporters surged around their leader, Rodriguez stepped up and urged him to quickly pick four supporters and get inside. The six-foot-four-inch Johnson considered the all-female entourage hovering below him like the captain of a sandlot baseball team. Rodriguez folded his arms and shook his head -- and waited some more.

A few moments later, someone from inside the meeting room called out, "We're starting."

An hour and a half late and completely at ease, Lenwood Johnson led the way, his head held high and a look of defiance on his face.

Lenwood Johnson makes no apologies -- unless you happen to be a first-time visitor to unit Number 924 at Allen Parkway Village. And even then, his folksy act of contrition lasts only as long as it takes to clear a place to sit. Johnson lives alone, but he shares his home with the ghosts of APV's past.

They lie about his tiny living room in the form of thousands and thousands of pieces of paper -- lawsuits, government studies and reports, press releases, memos, letters, meeting minutes, speeches and newspaper clippings. In 15 years, it seems not a shred of information was discarded. In one corner, the doors of a wooden cabinet are broken and open. Hundreds of file jackets spill out onto two adjacent sofas covered by sheets. Enough space remains on each for one person to sit alongside boxes of documents and shoulder-high stacks of manila folders.

If Johnson's at home, he's working -- usually all day and into the night. He sits on one of the sofas before a coffee table lined from one end to the other with files. A bare bulb burns overhead. The telephone is at his feet. An old Planters peanut can is stuffed with pens, markers and highlighters, and an ashtray overflows with Marlboro Light 100s smoked down to the filter. The only signs of life beyond his mission to save APV hang from the dismal, paint-chipped walls: three pieces of refrigerator art drawn by neighborhood kids and a poster decreeing, "If you want peace, work for justice." A yellowed sheet of paper tacked to a bulletin board behind him is dated 1992.

To his left, a fax machine sits a foot away on a file cabinet. The photocopier is in the kitchen; Johnson pays tenants' children to make copies for him, keeping track of their hours on mimeographed time sheets. Johnson's old Apple computer, on loan from a supporter, is so obsolete it's unlikely he could get it fixed should it break down.

But on a recent day, the screen shone with the green text of his comments from a press conference earlier that morning. Johnson and a few supporters gathered to protest the recent effort by U.S. Representative Tom DeLay to repeal the Frost-Leland Act, which bars the use of federal funds to demolish Allen Parkway Village. The measure's passage in 1987 was a major victory. To confront DeLay's move, which was done at the request of Mayor Bob Lanier, Johnson assembled a familiar litany of rhetorical attacks.

A woman from something called the National People's Campaign ripped into "welfare for the rich." An architectural historian argued that the half-century-old Allen Parkway Village was on the cutting edge of building design; these days, she declared, "modernism is a burning issue."

Ruthie Bell, a matronly African-American woman from Freedmen's Town, lamented the inevitable encroachment of rich whites who would overtake the historically black area if APV is demolished. "People have been raised here, have never lived anywhere else but in this area," she said. "Yet we have an attempt to move them out, simply because they want to move in and occupy this land. This is wrong." Johnson, by himself, is more than capable of carrying the chorus of arguments against the demolition of APV. Through the years, he has honed to a fine edge his attacks on politicians, particularly African-American elected officials, whom he feels have betrayed the cause of Houston's poor blacks. So it wasn't unusual that Johnson virtually ignored DeLay, a white Republican from Sugar Land, and turned his venom on U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, a black Democrat he suspects is a "closet" supporter of the Frost-Leland repeal.

"We want her to represent the low-income African-American constituents of Allen Parkway Village-Freedmen's Town and not the well-connected politicians like Mayor Lanier," Johnson said. "And since Tom DeLay is carrying the repeal without any protest from Congresswoman Lee, that we can see, we want to know what piece of legislation or issue in Sugar Land will she in turn carry for Tom DeLay." Though Lee did, in fact, criticize DeLay's effort to repeal the Frost-Leland amendment, Johnson is not impressed. The way he sees it, the congresswoman only questioned the strategic wisdom and timing of DeLay's action, not its intent. As many in positions of power have learned, Lenwood Johnson isn't about to give Sheila Jackson Lee or anyone else the benefit of the doubt when it comes to Allen Parkway Village. His distrust runs too deep.

Born and raised in farm country near Brenham, Johnson was six years old when he first discovered things aren't always what they seem. During a trip to town with his parents, he had to go to the bathroom. The least troublesome option for a black boy growing up in the late 1940s was the courthouse. It was almost five o'clock in the afternoon when Johnson entered the building. After he emerged from the bathroom, he found the doors to the outside locked. A janitor tracked down a police officer in the building, who pushed open a side door for him. But as the boy started through it, the officer drew back his leg.

"He was going to kick me," Johnson recalls. "I shot out of there, ran down the steps and found my parents. It confused me. I thought a policeman was supposed to help."

Johnson's father was a sharecropper. The family also leased a parcel of land, on which they raised cattle. When he was nine, Lenwood, third oldest of six children, began buying newborn calves from area farmers for a dollar apiece, nursing the fragile creatures by hand until they could feed themselves.

By the time he was in high school, Lenwood and his father had a herd of about 45. But then the landowner, upset at the growing herd of cattle grazing in his fields, told them to leave. They were forced to sell all but nine head before moving to a smaller piece of land owned by Lenwood's grandfather.

The proceeds from the sale of Lenwood's cattle were to be used to help pay for him to attend St. Mary's College in San Antonio. But a flood followed by a severe drought wiped out the family's savings, including Lenwood's. He instead attended all-black Prairie View A&M on a two-year scholarship, majoring in physics. Johnson managed to afford a third year, thanks to a work-study job as a lab instructor. Before his senior year, however, he discovered he had been paid a fraction of what other work-study students had earned. When he protested, he lost his job.

"I was fired because I asked why I was getting 50 cents an hour when these kids from better families -- I call them the 'black bourgeoisie'; they're worse than the whites -- were getting a few bucks," Johnson says. "I ended up taking a gardener's job at a golf course for the summer, but it didn't pay enough for me to go back to school."

Johnson witnessed another injustice while in college, one that's never far from his mind and motivates him to this day. After his grandfather died, a Brenham bank tried to foreclose on 200 acres of the family's land over a \$160 loan. Johnson's parents hired a Houston lawyer who agreed to help them fight the bank. An out-of-court settlement saved most of the land. But the bank ended up with more than 60 acres, Johnson says, which, even then, was worth a great deal more than \$160.

"I've seen land taken from my family, and I've seen my mother and daddy fight for their land," Johnson says with a surprising matter-of-factness. "My grandmother on my mother's side, or I guess her parents before that, had acquired about 5,000 acres up in Somerville, Texas. That's exactly where the Corps of Engineers decided to put a lake. They took the property through eminent domain -- property that had been in my mother's family since shortly after slavery."

Despite the struggles over land, Johnson remembers his upbringing as a positive experience. He fondly recalls hunting squirrels, rabbits and the occasional deer -- but never birds: "There's something about birds, too fragile or something, but I just never liked to hunt them." He swam in ponds, tended the cattle and worked the crops with his father and four brothers. His grandfather's land is still in the family.

When Johnson fell on hard times -- divorced, unable to work and raising his son, Len, in Allen Parkway Village -- his family helped with money to feed and clothe the boy. They even offered to pay for him and Len to move into private housing. But by then, Johnson was fighting to save APV and refused to leave. He found no quarrel on that point from his parents.

"They understood the fight for land," he says.

Johnson's mother died five years ago. His father passed away in June, five days before the family was to gather at the homestead near Brenham to celebrate his 88th birthday. When he was a young farm boy, Johnson says, people didn't know what to make of him. Now that he's a poor, jobless, public housing resident, he knows they regard his determined stand with equal parts curiosity and contempt. "All through high school, my fellow students used to ask me, 'Why you hold your head up so high? Why you so proud?' I said, 'Because I'm a human being, that's why.' But there's something about me that do make some people uneasy. I don't know what it is."

When Sissy Farenthold, a prominent community activist, former state legislator and onetime gubernatorial candidate, left Houston in 1976, Allen Parkway Village was considered the best of the city's public housing complexes. At the time, it was more than 95 percent occupied, mostly by African-Americans who favored its proximity to the Fourth Ward and Houston's central business district.

By the time Farenthold returned in 1980, however, APV's downward spiral was in full swing. HACH had stopped performing even routine maintenance, refusing to spend some \$10 million the city had received from HUD for repairs. Nearly half the complex's 1,000 units had been boarded up, and in an attempt to pave the political pitfalls to its then-secret demolition plans, HACH had filled most of the rest with Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees.

Driving past the deteriorating compound almost daily, Farenthold became convinced that a private proposal to tear it down and build a park was "a nice idea." She even tried to enlist the help of Henry B. Gonzales, a friend who chaired the House subcommittee on housing. Then, she explains, she became "conversant" with the history of APV and the Freedmen's Town area.

"I got to more and more feeling it was a real racial divide, and I think that's what really irritated me on a philosophical level," Farenthold says. "It's like, they make their plans and what crumbs are left can be for the poor. And that just infuriates me on a gut level."

Farenthold recalls that she first heard of Lenwood Johnson through an organization called the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York. They made contact, and Johnson kept in touch, hoping the veteran

social activist could help. Farenthold put Johnson in touch with her network of state and federal contacts, but didn't become "fully involved" in the effort to save Allen Parkway Village until the late 1980s, when she became a member of the Resident Council's advisory board.

"Sometimes the more you find out, the more you have to let your mind follow what you're seeing," Farenthold says. "Certainly, that came from Lenwood initially."

"I remember being over there one time. It was at twilight, and the cityscape was so beautiful with the setting sun on it. And I said, 'Oh, Lenwood, what a beautiful view.' And he said, 'That's the problem.' " Seven-year-old Len Johnson was definitely not so enchanted with the view from Allen Parkway Village. When he and his daddy moved there in March 1980, Len took one look at his new home and broke into tears.

"He asked, 'Are we going to have to live here?' " Johnson remembers. "I said, 'Yeah, Len, we're gonna have to stay here a little while because we can't do no better.' I tried to tell him we wouldn't be here forever, just a little while. I meant that. I meant to get the hell out of here."

Before the move to APV, Johnson -- who got custody of Len when his ex-wife "told me I could have him" -- had been in and out of the hospital several times. The year before, he left his job as a research technician for Upjohn because he was suffering from dysentery and catching colds and the flu repeatedly. Johnson says doctors could never identify the source of his problem, other than to tell him he was suffering from hypersensitivity to chemicals.

Johnson tried to collect worker's compensation. But his case was weak, he says, because doctors couldn't say for sure his poor health was related to his job. And he had spent so much money on doctors that he had little left for a good attorney. Johnson suspects his problem is related to his lab work with isocyanates, which are used to make foam rubber and other synthetic materials. Some of Johnson's more skeptical detractors have tried to paint the activist as a lazy black man who doesn't want to work -- a characterization he doesn't feel the need to get worked up about.

"At the time, there were people, friends, who thought I was sick mentally," Johnson says. "I lost some friends. People in my family doubted me some, too. And I was thoroughly confused. I thought they'd just give me a pill and I'd be cured."

While Johnson's laboratory career was over, the residents of Allen Parkway Village kept him busy. They soon were filling the new tenant's head with stories of harassment and poor treatment at the hands of the housing authority. Johnson says he heard tales of HACH employees going through residents' belongings, stealing food stamps and money, and charging outrageous cash fees to make minor repairs. Johnson was incredulous. When he told the residents their rights were being violated and that they should fight back, they told him they were powerless. Johnson decided they needed to organize.

"Before too long, I had some law books, public housing handbooks," Johnson says. "I'd map out strategies, explain what legal issues they needed to address. 'Cause that's what [HACH] hated. They hated us to pull regulations on them. Because they'd always say, 'HUD said to do it, or we don't get our money.' But then we'd pull out the regulations and say, 'Why that can't be, because HUD, right here in this regulation issued such-and-such a date, at such-and-such a time, says blankity-blank-blank.' Oooh, they'd get hot, they'd get hot."

Johnson's main nemesis at the time was Earl Phillips, HACH's executive director. An African-American appointed by then-mayor Kathy Whitmire, Phillips took over in 1982. Whitmire had been urged to install a new executive director by HUD, which had uncovered numerous financial irregularities and rampant mismanagement -- HACH hadn't balanced its books since 1977 -- under Phillips' predecessor, William McClellan.

Phillips' mission, however, remained consistent with McClellan's: demolish Allen Parkway Village and sell the land to private developers who would build office space and upscale condominiums on the site. An additional mandate was Whitmire's ambitious goal of revitalizing the adjacent Fourth Ward.

Esther De Ipolyi, who was HACH's spokeswoman during Phillips' tenure, said the housing authority had submitted a demolition application in 1981 and fully expected to execute it.

"Everybody was bobbing their heads and saying, 'Yes Earl, yes Earl, you can have this place demolished,' " De Ipolyi remembers. "But the stuff would not get approved, it kept getting stalled. Lenwood's very effective. He's one lone ranger who essentially stopped the process."

At the time, the city's powers-that-be, as De Ipolyi points out, weren't used to encountering resistance, and even today, Johnson's refusal to go-along-to-get-along is a Houston anomaly.

"Given the environment of Houston, yeah, he's a radical," De Ipolyi says. "He's about the only one we've got. People treasure working within the system here. Lenwood's a bright guy, and he's certainly gotten brighter over the years. And Phillips loved fighting people. He needed a Lenwood. It wouldn't have been any fun if he didn't have a Lenwood."

Johnson's first protracted battle with HACH over Allen Parkway Village was the attempted eviction of about 125 Indochinese families. He had heard that many of those new tenants, refugees who were fearful and unable to understand much of what was happening, had been victims of extortion by HACH employees. He had been talking to the Gulf Coast Legal Foundation about a possible lawsuit when HACH announced that some Vietnamese and Cambodian tenants had hopped the housing authority waiting list by paying bribes. An employee was fired, but HACH began a ferocious attempt to evict the tenants.

Johnson led the revolt, including at least one standoff between the suddenly empowered tenants and deputy constables who showed up at their doors. Meanwhile, lawyers from Gulf Coast and the ACLU, recruited by Johnson, were on the case. They fought the eviction order in court until 1986 -- by which time, ironically, all but one of the alleged family of bribers had moved.

Johnson viewed HACH's action as a blatant disregard for its constituents, the city's poor. And it infuriated him. He made contact with other housing advocates in the city and across the state. One such contact was with a group of West Dallas residents and their attorneys, who were fighting the demolition of the Washington Place public housing project.

The Dallas connection led him to join the boards of several national housing groups, including those of the Coalition for Low-Income Housing and the Commission for Severely Distressed Public Housing. The organizations paid Johnson's way to their meetings in Washington, where he made more contacts.

"We were trying to formulate a way to save the [Houston and Dallas] developments from a Washington, D.C., angle, instead of a local angle," Johnson recalls. "We found out early on that we couldn't complain to the local HUD office because HUD wouldn't even take a complaint. The regional office wasn't too much better. The only place we could get anyone to listen to us was in D.C."

Meanwhile, Johnson, who had been elected president of the APV's Resident Council in the summer of 1983, tried to keep the dwindling number of tenants inspired. Wessie Scyrus, now the council's secretary, says she initially resisted attending the meetings of tenants that Johnson convened. But after much prodding by a Vietnamese neighbor, she finally went to APV's Community Building one night, where she found a group of residents -- Asians, blacks, Hispanics and whites -- sharing a meal in celebration, and one very unique man.

"I'd never seen such a person," says Scyrus, who remembers that a HACH employee showed up at the same meeting. When the residents saw the intruder, she recalls, they formed a circle around Johnson. "There was an energy created in the room that caused that man to get up and leave."

Johnson's real strength, as Scyrus sees it, is "empowering the individual, causing people to know they are deserving of respect and autonomy, but teaching them that you're not going to be able to change without work.

"He's compelling. For the first time, for a person like myself, there is actually something I can do to have dignity. I can work for right."

A few months after Johnson was elected president of the Resident Council, the HACH board voted to tear down APV. The decision was based on a consultant's study that estimated it would cost \$36 million to rehabilitate the complex. The following March, the housing authority filed a demolition application with HUD. City Council gave its approval that August.

A \$63 million plan was proposed to raze the complex, relocate about 600 residents to scattered public housing sites around the city and, as part of the Freedmen's Town-Fourth Ward redevelopment, renovate 400 units of private housing for the elderly. The APV site would be leased to private developers to "maintain leverage" over future development in the area.

Jeff Baloutine, a bank executive and an advocate for historic preservation, was among the consultants who worked on the 1983 study. He says the recommendation to demolish was based on the fact that land values were high and more than 80 percent of the units were vacant and in bad shape.

"One of the things that we said was that taking no action was clearly taking action," Baloutine remembers. "APV and the surrounding neighborhood, the Fourth Ward, were dying by attrition and somebody needed to take action."

The resulting \$63 million plan caught the attention of Barry Klein, a real-estate broker-cum-government watchdog, who found HACH's reasoning "dishonest." He was dismayed by the city's plans to use eminent domain to "force" an urban renewal program on taxpayers.

Klein met with Johnson and together they prepared a detailed critique of the study that pointed out, among other things, that the rehabilitation estimate of \$36 million was inflated "at least 100 percent to 600 percent." That was later verified when the HACH official who prepared the estimates testified in a deposition that Phillips had forced him to inflate the costs.

Klein and others, including Baloutine, say that saving APV became Johnson's life after HACH filed the 1984 demolition application. He began a concerted effort to form a power base, and honed his administrative and legal knowledge. He also developed a more savvy public relations stance.

"Lenwood is very complex," Klein says. "He's pretty organized, always on the phone, always has calls coming in. But his biggest talent, I think, is the ability to deal with assholes and not tell them to their face that he thinks they're assholes."

Baloutine says that, despite being on opposing sides of the issue, his dealings with Johnson weren't confrontational. Indeed, he finds a lot to admire in Johnson, but wonders whether his talents aren't being squandered on a lost cause.

"I think he's shown some pretty good skills in a variety of ways that he could be putting to other uses related to affordable housing or just making a living," Baloutine says. "He's chosen to continue doing this, so I guess he's sacrificing whatever income he could be making in other ways. But I think he could be accomplishing some other things in the city for the same people he's fighting for now, which are lower-income people who don't have a lot of housing choices."

Much of the bitterness directed at Johnson by those who oppose him has less to do with his obstinacy than his stubborn ability to survive. Johnson says city officials assume that because he's been able to fight them so long, "I have a whole bunch of money."

That appears to be light-years from the truth. His refrigerator is nearly empty, except for some juice and a jar of honey, which he glops between two pieces of bread for a sandwich. When things get bad, he calls fellow APV residents, who will hustle up a potluck meal or some leftovers. Patrons who support his cause offer a donation every now and then.

Still, says Sissy Farenthold, who has helped Johnson financially in the past, "I see him more than struggling, and I've seen it first-hand for a long time."

Johnson used to keep the Resident Council going by collecting a dollar or two from each APV household, a door-to-door campaign that took three days. He could do it in an hour now, and still not be able to buy the paper he needs for press releases and correspondence. The council survives on what it can get for renting the project's Community Building. Some "white punk rockers," as Johnson calls them, hold periodic dances there, from which a portion of the cover charges goes to the council. The Impact Church of Christ ministry rents the Community Building for services and a soup kitchen.

Johnson's copier was paid for with a grant from the Center for Community Change in Washington. The fax machine is on loan from the Clark Reed Foundation. He wears secondhand clothes, passed along by friends or bought cheap from the Salvation Army. The right lapel on his gray suit is split; the pants on his brown one are partially hemmed with straight pins.

Johnson says he survives on what remains of APV's "underground economics," a system of bartering. Wessie Scyrus says all APV residents do the same, though she suspects Johnson relies on "the will of God to keep him going."

"There is something sort of funny and different about Allen Parkway Village," she says. "It's so much like living in a small town, and with the housing authority depriving us of repairs and services, we access whatever resources we can, from whatever source we can. We've become very reliant on one another for protection and safety and the ability just to exist."

Those who have worked with Johnson say he perseveres because there is little difference between what he stands for and who he is -- a poor but proud man; fair but uncompromising; determined to succeed, yet distrustful of so many of the mechanisms that might help him the most. For the last decade and a half, Lenwood Johnson kept Allen Parkway Village standing with the strength of his personality and the ability to inspire righteousness in others.

It worked in 1987, when Johnson apparently embarrassed one of Sheila Jackson Lee's predecessors in the 18th Congressional District, U.S. Representative Mickey Leland, into supporting a congressional amendment barring the use of federal funds to demolish APV. Leland "was not keen" on the legislation in the beginning. "We told him, 'If you can't represent our interests, then we're going to tell the public,'" Johnson says.

That strategy put Johnson at odds with some supporters, particularly the Houston Housing Concern. To force Leland into decisive action, Johnson recruited a young lawyer to write an op-ed piece that, as he puts it, "said that Mickey could take care of the world, but he couldn't take care of the people in the 18th Congressional District." Joan Denkler, the president of the Houston Housing Concern, acknowledges that her group hoped Leland would come around on his own and tried to convince Johnson not to have the article published.

"That was his decision," says Denkler, "and I didn't like it."

But it worked. The Frost-Leland Act was passed in 1987 and signed into law by Ronald Reagan in January 1988. Today, no other phrase out of Johnson's mouth inspires African-Americans to the APV cause more than his call to "protect Mickey Leland's legacy" -- even though the congressman wasn't quite the friend to APV he is now portrayed to have been, six years after his death in a plane crash while on an African relief mission.

"He didn't help us that much when he was alive, except for the Frost-Leland and some public statements," Johnson says slyly. "So we decided he might as well help us in death."

Johnson's willingness to attack and embarrass government officials was equally effective in killing HACH's 1984 demolition application. He led anti-demolition marches outside City Hall, while inside, white suburban supporters he had recruited paraded their opposition before City Council. Led by Klein, Denkler and the Houston Housing Concern, the white supporters gained Council's ear like a black public-housing resident never could. They presented a resolution to save APV that was signed by more than 100 church and community groups. In 1989, Council eventually voted to rescind its 1984 resolution that supported tearing down the complex. HACH withdrew its application.

"We had spent several years trying and got black and white organizations together," Johnson says. "We might have had ten by the time the Houston Housing Concern was formed in 1985. But within a year, they had maybe 50 more signed up. The white suburban group was all the difference in the world."

Six years have passed since Lenwood Johnson and his band of happy preservationists drove a stake into HACH's plan to tear down Allen Parkway Village. Today, another demolition application sits before HUD, awaiting completion of a "master plan" to redevelop what is no longer just a parcel of coveted real estate. "It's a tremendous piece of land," says Jeff Baloutine. "But in general, it's a symbol of an awful lot of things in Houston. I would imagine it represents the frustrations of people in this city not being able to get things done. I don't know that it's directed at Lenwood -- I'm sure there are people who think that way. He's the guy that's kept this going."

That, of course, makes him the guy who can end it.

On November 9, at the Allen Parkway Village Community Building, in the auditorium where, for years, APV tenants planned the defense of their home, HACH sponsored the first of four forums to discuss ideas for the "Allen Parkway Village Community Campus." This latest redevelopment plan is based on the "Stakes in the Ground," a set of nine principles hashed out in Washington in June 1994 by HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros, Lenwood Johnson and Catherine Roberts, a social activist and creator of the community campus concept.

The idea is to transform Allen Parkway Village into a self-contained community. One-third of the residents would be mentors -- police officers, nursing and medical students, teachers and social service providers -- who would work with the low-income residents who would make up the balance of the population. Roberts' campus plan calls for the preservation of all of APV's units, at least until a final plan for the 37-acre complex is complete. Even then, changes would be limited to reducing the density of the housing and accommodating the clinic and other support services.

Crucial to the concept, as far as Roberts and Johnson are concerned, is tenant involvement -- both in the planning process and later, when the campus would be run by a management group composed of residents. And if you listened to the opening comments made by housing officials at the first community forum, you might think the city, HACH, HUD and the residents are all finally on the same page.

"This is an inclusive process," declared HACH director Joy Fitzgerald. "I want to make sure to highlight that at the beginning."

Highlight it? She and HACH were bludgeoning people with it. Fitzgerald was followed by two independent contractors hired by HACH to, as one of them described it, "reach out as much as possible to all groups impacted." The other, introduced as the "quarterback of the participation process," talked about arming APV's children with disposable cameras so they could photograph troubled areas that would be eliminated. Even Merrill Diamond, of master planners Tise, Hurwitz & Diamond, bowed to the APV residents, flattering them as having "pioneered" the community campus concept.

But the rhetoric inside was soon drowned out by the shouts of about 15 protesters outside. Led by Lenwood Johnson, demonstrators -- a few elderly white women, several Asians, blacks and a couple of men with hair down to their waists -- carried signs and screamed anti-demolition slogans: "For the needy, not the greedy!" "Down with Lanier!" "Renovation, not demolition!"

The demonstration was part of Lenwood Johnson's latest plan of attack: the boycott. As far as Johnson was concerned, HACH and HUD had reneged on everything that had been promised the tenants by Cisneros, and were merely paying lip service to the notion of resident involvement in the master planning process. To participate in what he calls "this sham" would be to allow HACH to demolish APV and say the residents had acquiesced.

Johnson's biggest complaint concerns a \$300,000 planning grant that has been promised to the residents by HUD. The money is to be used to pay architects, social service workers and others who, as a team, would help the residents devise the campus plan and determine how it should be implemented.

"Developers are not qualified to create a community," says Catherine Roberts, the creator of the campus concept. "We decided that we would create it and fit it to the existing structures. We felt no need to change the buildings."

According to Roberts, Cisneros had promised the \$300,000 would come directly from HUD. Once completed, the plan put together by Roberts, her team and the residents would serve as the blueprint for the master plan and the redevelopment of APV. But apparently, that agreement fell apart almost as soon as it was struck.

Within weeks of the June 1994 "Stakes in the Ground" compact, a HUD official met with residents and the campus planning team in Houston. The official announced that the \$300,000 would have to come through HACH -- and to get it, the residents' team would have to sign off on HACH's \$36.6 million urban development grant. Trouble was, that grant was tied to a 1993 proposal that called for the demolition of 850 of APV's units.

"They were bogging us down with a lot of loops and hoops to try to get us back to where they wanted to be, which was demolition," says Roberts, who has been trying to distance herself from HACH's "diluted" version of her original concept. She has even given it a new name -- the "Learning Center for Sustainable Living at Allen Parkway Community Campus" -- to distinguish it from the "campus-like setting" of the housing authority's plan.

Johnson pulled out of all future meetings with HUD officials, demanding instead an audience with Cisneros. That meeting was set up, delayed, set up again, rescheduled. Eventually, it was clear that HACH and HUD had no intention of implementing the tenants' campus concept. Meanwhile, trouble was brewing between Johnson and Roberts' campus planning team. It began when Johnson insisted that Dana Cuff, a former Rice University faculty member and Johnson ally who now works at UCLA, be brought in as an urban planner.

"That really caused us a lot of pain," Roberts says. "We were meeting nearly every day, and there was no way we could do it by phone with someone in California."

Denkler, who had brought Roberts into the fold in the late 1980s, says Johnson became distrustful of the planning team, perhaps fearing the future of APV was ending up in the hands of others. He tried to bring in more and more of his own people. But the campus concept needed the "input of the superb team" that had sold Cisneros on the idea, she says. Johnson resisted and soon began to distance himself from the Houston Housing Concern, Roberts and her concept.

"I was angry because I had spent nine years trying to get a plan to that stage, and I thought we had something that was inches away from success," Denkler says. "But Lenwood made it very clear that he was going to run everything from then on, and he did. And the group that was assembled slowly drifted away."

Johnson says that he started having differences of opinion with Denkler and others soon after City Council voted to rescind its support for demolition in 1989. He and the residents wanted to "nail Whitmire against the wall," but, he says, the others backed away.

"They were trying to carve out niches for themselves, including Joan Denkler," Johnson says. "Sometimes, people get so involved, they try to take ownership of the situation in an effort to come up with their own solutions. They have been invaluable to this effort. If Joan Denkler hadn't come along when she did, there probably wouldn't be an Allen Parkway Village. But over the years I've developed a sense of what needs to be done."

But what's needed now, argues Catherine Roberts, is a different approach. With HUD and HACH clearly determined to move forward, that means a renewed emphasis on the original campus concept, as well as increasing public awareness of its possibilities. Johnson, she believes, is hurting that effort by boycotting the master planning deliberations.

"Lenwood has a lot of really interesting qualities," Roberts says. "He can be really brilliant, very frustrating and downright obnoxious. He's sure that there is a betrayal around every corner, and it's really difficult to have someone like that on a planning team that needs to shift into a planning mode."

"Sometimes it seems he doesn't want to win, because then what would he do? This has been his whole life. When we asked him what role he saw for himself once the community campus is finished, he couldn't really say. I don't think he knows. Maybe when you've been in the battle so long, you don't think about a future."

When Lenwood Johnson walked into the November 28 meeting at the local HUD office an hour and a half late, he was brandishing his latest manifesto: a 14-point document assailing the master planning process that he has refused to participate in.

Not surprisingly -- and it certainly came as no surprise to Johnson -- the housing officials who had wasted half their morning waiting for him were in no mood to be assailed. Within 15 minutes, Johnson walked out of the meeting, his four supporters in tow.

"We couldn't even ask them the questions we needed to ask before they started cutting us off, raising their voices in anger and talking to us like we were little children," Johnson told his supporters and a couple of reporters outside the room. "They said, 'We're not hearing that, we're going forward.'"

So Lenwood Johnson, whose crusade has remained constant since he first opened his mouth in defense of APV, finds himself on the outside looking in, while the officials he's held off for so many years go about their plans to demolish Allen Parkway Village.

Is it time to compromise? Even Gladys House, the longtime Freedmen's Town activist with whom Johnson began the fight so long ago, has succumbed to what she thinks is the inevitable -- the demolition of most of Allen Parkway Village's units. But she hopes to convince HUD and HACH to abandon its plan to scatter replacement housing around the city, and, instead, build it in the Fourth Ward as part of that neighborhood's redevelopment.

"Now that it's time for him to work with these people, he's not, and I can't make any logic out of that," House says. "I'd always told Lenwood, 'Here's my strategy, and it's guaranteed to work.' But he never would use it. I said, 'Hey, Lenwood, stop talking about housing for poor people. I'm tired of carrying folk on my back with my tax dollars.'"

"Because HUD made it clear at that meeting that they're moving on without Lenwood. They made it very clear."

Lenwood Johnson understands that, of course. But he knows no other way. After so long, compromise would be selling out on his ideals -- both his personal ones and the ones he holds for the future of Allen Parkway Village. To him, the battle to save Allen Parkway Village has been, and always will be, a "guerrilla operation."

That metaphor seemed misplaced with George Rodriguez standing nearby in a white shirt and tie, rocking back and forth on his heels while he watched Johnson and his supporters prepare to leave HUD's second-floor offices.

One by one, they drifted away. Johnson, his calm face belying the turmoil churning in his gut, seemed reluctant to leave. Finally, with no other choice, he stepped into the elevator, Wessie Scyrus at his side. "Have a nice day," said Rodriguez, as the door slid shut.