

ROBERT L. ARMSTRONG

## SOMETHING UPBEAT IS GOING ON IN OMAHA'S PUBLIC HOUSING

Some kids are doing better in school, and gardens are growing instead of litter. But critics say the director's strict rules go too far.

*By Penelope Lemov*

**B**ob Armstrong talks tough. The executive director of Omaha's Housing Authority warns a Tuesday night meeting of public housing residents that a curfew for children 18 years old and younger will be enforced by police starting on Sunday. "If your children are on [public] housing streets without you after 11 o'clock at night, they could be arrested."

A parent raises her hand. "What if I send my son to the store at midnight?"

"Don't," Armstrong answers, wasting no words. "Or go with him."

A father brings up another point. "When I was 16, I didn't want to hang out at home on Saturday night."

Armstrong's reply comes right to the point. "If any parent group wants to establish ongoing activities in the evening for young people, we'll fund it."

As he leaves the meeting, walking with the rolling gait of the college baseball and basketball player he was 35 years ago, Armstrong is not in the least defensive about the curfew, aimed at curtailing teenage gang activities, or a controversial anti-loitering measure that is also about to be enforced. The latter requires residents to show identification cards in order to be on public housing property; it's aimed at keeping drug dealers off. The Omaha Legal Aid Society is not happy about either measure or about Armstrong's tough eviction policies. These allow the housing authority to oust tenants for 14 offenses, including possession of illegal drugs, participation in other illegal activities (by themselves or their children) and failure to send their school-age children to school.

"We are not trying to be cruel or set up concentration camps where people can't live normal lives. But parents have to be responsible for their children," Armstrong says

of the high number and unusual variety of resident-approved eviction policies that underscore the harsh realities of urban public housing, circa 1990.

When he took over as Omaha's public housing chief four years ago, Armstrong inherited a situation that mirrored public housing throughout the country. Gangs and drug dealers preyed on the residents, intimidating the elderly and recruiting teenagers. Truancy, school dropout and teenage pregnancy rates were high. The housing itself, built and funded by the federal government but owned and operated by local authorities, was in disrepair, brought on in part by poor management but also by a 41 percent decrease during the 1980s (in real dollars) in federal funding for renovation and modernization of housing that was 30 and 40 years old.

At South Side Terrace in Omaha, where 750 people live, the ground cover was bare dirt littered with broken glass. Overturned trash receptacles, their contents spewed on the ground, served as children's playhouses. Gang-associated graffiti defaced the brick walls at the ends of the rows of one-story attached houses. Roofs leaked and interiors were infused with the stench of mildew. Of the 388 units, some 160 were uninhabitable. A recreation center, built in 1978, was a wreck. Hostility and suspicion marked the relationship between housing authority staff and tenants.

"It was terrible here. No one knew their neighbors or trusted the staff," says Phyllis Evans, who's lived at South Side for 10 years.

Today, four years into Armstrong's tenure, grass covers the grounds and gardens sprout in tenants' yards in the summertime. Trash is no longer an eyesore. Tenants are fined and can be evicted for not keeping their yards clean. The roofs have been repaired, the interiors modernized.

## PERSONALITY



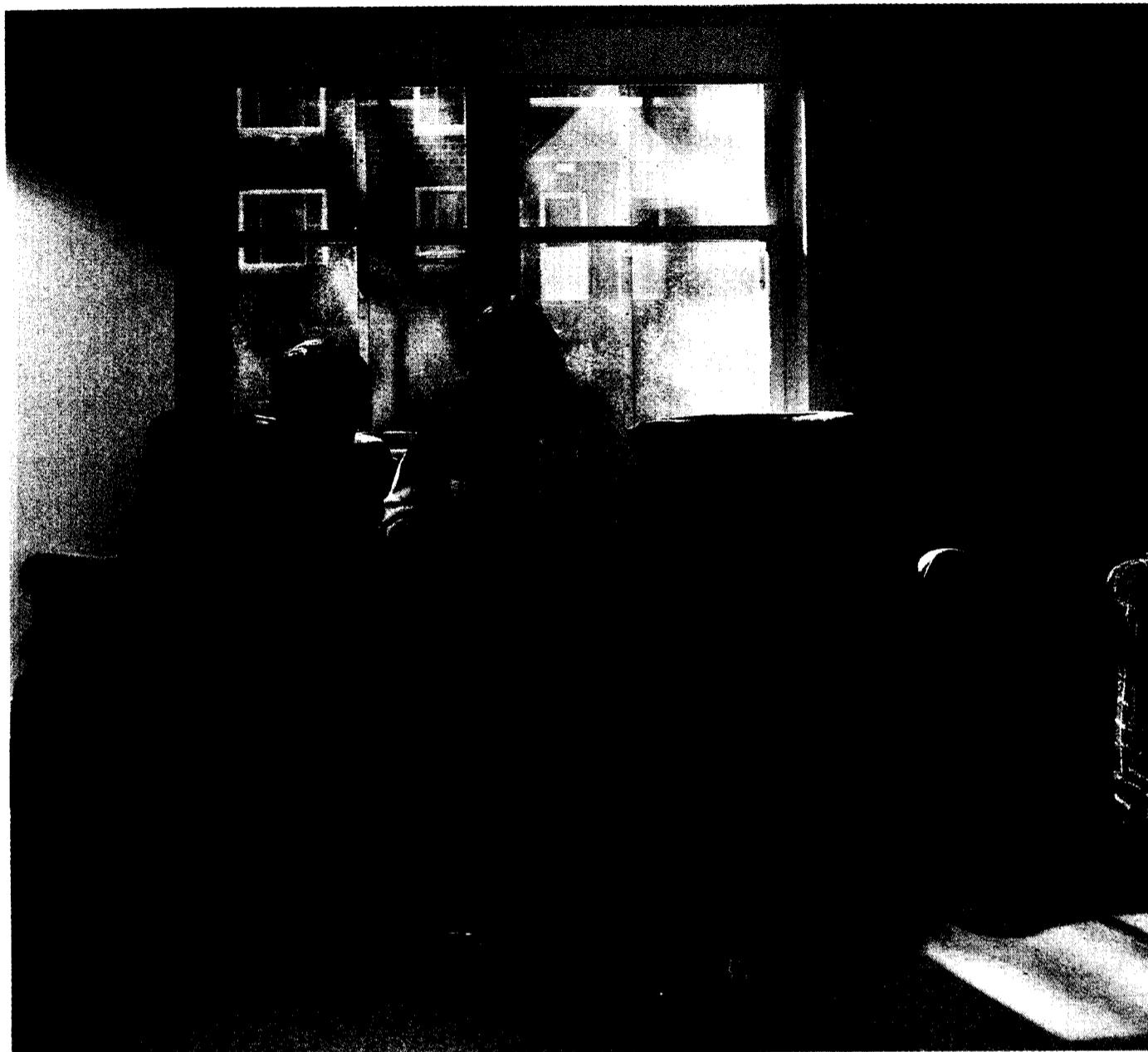
(Armstrong applied for and won a repair grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.) All the units are habitable.

South Side's recreation center, complete with full-size gym, has had a \$70,000 face-lift. (Armstrong tapped the housing authority's reserve fund for the repairs.) In one corner of the building is a study center with textbooks lent by the public school system. Wall posters tout the sayings of Martin Luther King Jr., and tables hold four personal computers donated by local businesses. The study center, replicated at other Omaha public housing projects, is open twice a week, three hours each day, and staffed by

volunteers—retired teachers, college students, businesspeople—who help students with reading, math and social skills.

Across the hall, the volunteer sports coach, riding a high from the success of the South Side Terrace track team at a state meet, is chatting it up with some teenage boys who've come to the gym to shoot hoops. Outside, a maintenance worker lets a smart-mouthed 9-year-old boy follow him around on his late afternoon repair rounds. A resident relations coordinator grabs her car keys to give a resident a ride to a job-training class.

Robert Armstrong "came here to work on behalf of the



Carlena Fierro (right) in her project living room with Juanita James, the resident relations supervisor. Fierro says Armstrong changed her life.

residents," Evans says. "He and his staff cleaned this place up."

He did more than that for Carlena Fierro, a white, 26-year-old mother of three small children who lives in the racially mixed project, where 62 percent of the residents are black. Now the president of the residents' council, she says simply, "He changed my life." When she moved into South Side in 1989, she was blowing her welfare checks on drugs and parties. Then she was confronted with tough eviction policies that demanded she keep her yard and house clean and pay her rent on time. The resident relations staff at South Side worked with her on parenting and housekeeping skills and encouraged her to show up for resident council meetings. Today she says she's off drugs and is studying for a high school equivalency diploma. "Robert Armstrong," she says, "gives a lot of us dreams we didn't have before."

This is not to say—and Armstrong is the first to raise the caveats—that nirvana has been reached. Gangs and drug dealers still menace public housing neighborhoods. The ills of poverty have not disappeared. Nor is Armstrong everybody's hero.

Some elected officials and legal aid society lawyers are concerned about the fairness of the curfew and eviction policies. Several city council members remain opposed to

Armstrong's scattered site program, which will demolish rows of badly deteriorated public housing units and move some of their residents into single-family houses throughout the seven city council neighborhoods. By moving 194 of the 7,000 families living in public housing to these scattered sites, Armstrong will double the number of Housing Authority families already integrated into neighborhoods.

Despite these pockets of opposition to specific programs, almost everyone in Omaha agrees that something upbeat is going on in Omaha's public housing projects. Where most urban public housing systems are caught in a downward spiral, Armstrong and his programs are attacking the grim status quo, upgrading the quality of life and offering, says Omaha Mayor P.J. Morgan, "hope and dignity" in places like South Side Terrace.

There is, for starters, Operation Shadow. It pairs public housing youths with authority employees who become their role models and mentors. For three to four hours a day, two or three times a week, a youngster—most participants are 8 to 12 years old—shadows an employee as he or she goes about daily duties: typing reports, repairing a door. The kids form a bond with their shadowee—and vice versa.

Mike White, maintenance coordinator at South Side Terrace, one of the Housing Authority employees who volunteered to be shadowed, says, "At first I thought I wouldn't have time, but when you get to know the kids you look forward to them coming." One 9-year-old who lives with an alcoholic mother developed a special bond with White. "He never received a passing grade in school till someone cared about him," White says.

White's shadow is not the only one. "Teachers tell me that they see a definite change in the behavior and attitude of some of these kids," says Don Benning, assistant superintendent of Omaha Public Schools.

Armstrong fosters education in other ways. Hundred-dollar savings bonds are awarded to every public housing child who maintains a perfect record of attendance during a school year. Seven colleges have earmarked scholarships for high school graduates who live in public housing. The

## PERSONALITY

savings bonds and one of the scholarships are financed by a foundation Armstrong set up and funded, in part with a \$1-a-month surcharge on public housing residents' cable television fees. (Armstrong had negotiated a deeply discounted rate for public housing residents, so the \$1 extra is not seen as particularly painful.) Twenty percent of the foundation funds are used for education projects, such as the scholarships and savings bonds; 30 percent is set aside to help residents who have emergencies and are unable to pay rent; and 50 percent is for special projects, such as parent-sponsored activities for the public housing children. The

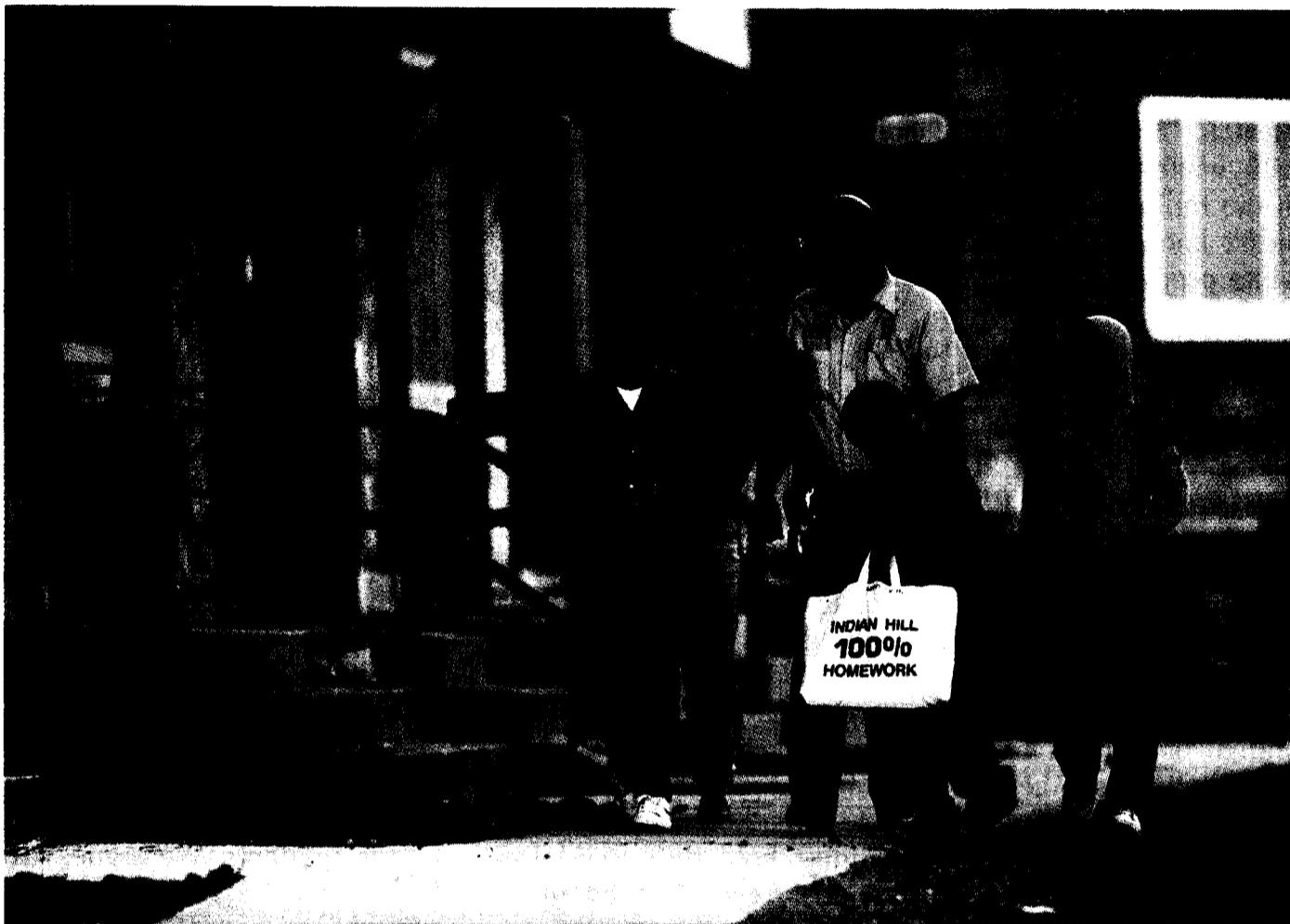
rest of the funding and scholarships comes from businesses, churches, colleges and other groups throughout the Omaha community.

The governor, the mayor, city council members and members of Congress and the state legislature have come to the ceremonies where the scholarships and bonds are presented, as has HUD Secretary Jack Kemp.

Nebraska politicians attend in part because it's good publicity. Who, after all, wouldn't want to be associated with public housing success stories? But there's a practical reason, too. Armstrong has on his staff 32 people who are certified voter registrars. Whenever an adult who is qualified to vote moves into public housing, Armstrong makes sure that newcomer is registered. With registration of the housing authority's 10,000 adult residents close to 100 percent (it had been 55 percent when Armstrong took over) and voter turnout an impressive 80 percent (up from 20 percent before Armstrong's arrival), elected officials take notice of issues of concern to public housing residents. "I don't tell the residents how to vote," Armstrong says. "I just tell them to vote."

Armstrong also puts pressure on parents and, by extension, on the kids to be responsible for getting an education: A family can, under the rules, be evicted if school-age children do not attend school, although that has never actually happened.

A child's absence of more than two or three days activates a network that Armstrong and Assistant Superintendent Benning set up: Calls from principals or teachers to housing authority staff and public housing parents trigger personal visits to the families of absent children to see what the problem is. If a child is hungry, doesn't have



Young residents of the South Side Terrace housing project regularly hang out with maintenance coordinator Mike White as he does his job, forming a bond.

appropriate clothing, has to babysit a younger child or the like, Armstrong's staff will arrange the necessary assistance. Armstrong says his aim is to take away all excuses for not attending school. Benning says the cooperative effort "has changed the attitude not only of the parents and students but of staff in our school district."

**R**obert Lee Armstrong, now 55, was born in St. Joseph, Missouri, 150 miles south of Omaha, and got his early education there at a time when schools, restaurants and most other public accommodations in that city were segregated. "There just wasn't any question about going to a place where you weren't supposed to be," he says of his early years.

Nonetheless, his family had a history of fighting for its place in the sun. He comes from what he calls "a family of firsts." His grandfather was St. Joe's first black police officer; a great-uncle was the city's first black to work as a clerk in the Post Office. His father, who started out as a butcher in a meat-packing house, rose through the ranks to become the first black in Missouri to be president of a labor union local, the United Packinghouse Workers of America.

"We're people who are achievers," he says of his role models. "I was expected to do the same."

Armstrong became the first in his family to go to college, attending Langston University in Oklahoma, an all-black school at the time. He went away to college, he says, to test his mettle. "My family was looked upon as successful. I never knew whether I was getting good grades because I was good or because of my family. I wanted to see how I did on my own."

From college he went into the Army, winding up in Germany, after a stint studying Russian. "I didn't go to school with white people until I was in the military. I used to say I didn't know there were dumb white people till I was 27 years old."

He came back to the states in 1959, with his wife, Edwardene, whom he had married after graduating from college, and the first of their two sons. They headed for Slaton, Texas, where Armstrong taught high school history and government classes, and coached basketball and track. After his father was killed in a car crash in 1963, Armstrong wanted to live closer to his mother in St. Joe. He and his wife applied for teaching jobs in several nearby cities; Omaha was the first to respond.

But he never taught school in Omaha. "When I arrived, Mutual of Omaha had just been picketed by the Urban League because the company hadn't hired professional blacks in the home office. A friend of my father's suggested I apply for a job. I must hold the record for interviews—I had nine of them before they hired me." During the six and a half years Armstrong was an underwriter with the insurance company, he spent his spare time umpiring baseball and softball games, eventually becoming well-known as the president of the umpires' association. After watching Armstrong umpire Little League games, the mayor told him he liked the way Armstrong dealt with the parents of players and asked him to apply for a position as director of a job training program funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. Armstrong took a program slated for termination as unsuccessful and turned it into one recognized by the U.S. Department of Labor as one of the best in the country.

Other administrative jobs in city government and the private sector followed until Armstrong applied for and won the directorship of the Housing Authority in May of 1986. He took that job, he says, because he wanted to see what he could do when he had contact with poor people "on an ongoing basis. I wanted to see if I could help them help themselves and teach them how to participate in the American process."

Among his efforts to achieve such goals, it is Armstrong's eviction policies that have caused the most controversy. Drug dealing and failure to pay rent are, in that order, the most common causes of eviction, as they are in most public housing. An eviction rate of about 20 families a month would be the norm for a housing authority the size of Omaha's, with 15,000 residents. In his first year, Armstrong ousted between 60 and 80 families a month; now it is five or six a month. Armstrong says that is because so many of the troublemaking families are gone.

There are those who argue strongly that the eviction policies and the curfew and anti-loitering rules violate tenants' constitutional rights. The policy that permits eviction of a family for the criminal activity of one member of the household, says Gary Fischer of the Omaha

To critics of his policies,  
Armstrong replies:  
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all the rules. They  
usually argue that we're  
not tough enough.

Legal Aid Society, is too broadly and vaguely written. "It goes way beyond the authority that is in the federal law." Fischer has represented families who sued the Housing Authority over their eviction notices. Some won the right to remain.

Senator Ernie Chambers, an independent whose district encompasses several Omaha public housing neighborhoods, sees the curfew and some of the eviction policies as unconstitutional denials of equal protection of the law because they single out poor people for treatment others are not subject to. But that said, Chambers adds that he believes Armstrong "has very innovative ideas and the courage to implement them. I have less concern about the inequities with him administering the policies than I would with someone else."

Armstrong says the eviction policies, the curfew and similar measures are not simply imposed on residents. "We don't implement any rule here unless it is first approved by the residents. We argue, fuss and debate. Usually what the residents argue about is that we aren't being tough enough."

Could Armstrong's approach to running a public housing authority work elsewhere? Omaha, after all, is a medium-sized city of 350,000. Some 15,000 people—59 percent of them black, 3 percent of them Hispanic—live in publicly owned housing; the waiting list for public housing projects hovers between 50 and 100 families. In Chicago, the public housing population is 10 times higher at 150,000 residents; the waiting list is 100,000. Most of the 40,000 units are in densely populated high-rise towers, rather than the rows of one-story apartments common in projects earmarked for families in Omaha.

Nonetheless, Michael Hanratty, executive director of the 9,000-tenant Fort Worth, Texas, housing authority, believes that "most of [Armstrong's] programs are replicable because they're done on the local level. Bob's relationship with the Omaha school department is no different than most public housing authorities'. He's just extended it further." Hanratty says he's borrowed a leaf from Armstrong's book and is pushing a voter registration drive among his public housing residents.

Armstrong's own answer to the replication question is both no and yes. He sees this heartland city as a place with country values, where everyone talks to each other. "That creates opportunities to solve problems. It's not like public housing in Chicago. Vince Lane [the head of Chicago's public housing] is doing an excellent job there but, to me, his job is unmanageable."

On the other hand, Armstrong points out, and others agree, that good management can work anywhere. An unusual management tool he uses is his personal availability to tenants who have complaints. Signs throughout the developments give his telephone number, and his secretary

## PERSONALITY

has instructions to put tenant calls right through, whatever they interrupt. "They know I'm available. But they also know that other staff should be able to handle most matters," Armstrong says. He attributes the successes in his project to the can-do spirit of the staff. "People ask me to send them documents to show how these programs [like Operation Shadow] can be done. But I can't write it up. It's a matter of participation with residents, staff and people."

Armstrong also uses a managerial technique that is common in private industry and some government agencies but not generally in public housing: holding his managers accountable for performing up to written standards set for their positions.

But he tempers tough management dictums with a personalized style. He gives staff members time off to see their children in school activities. "Most staff members volunteer their off-duty time for our program. They're coaches, mentors, tutors for kids in public housing," he explains. "If they're willing to do that, the least I can do is give them on-duty time off to be there for their children." No one, to his knowledge, has taken unfair advantage of the free leave time.

Juanita James, resident relations supervisor, who left a good job in the Omaha school system to work for Armstrong, says she was drawn to the housing authority

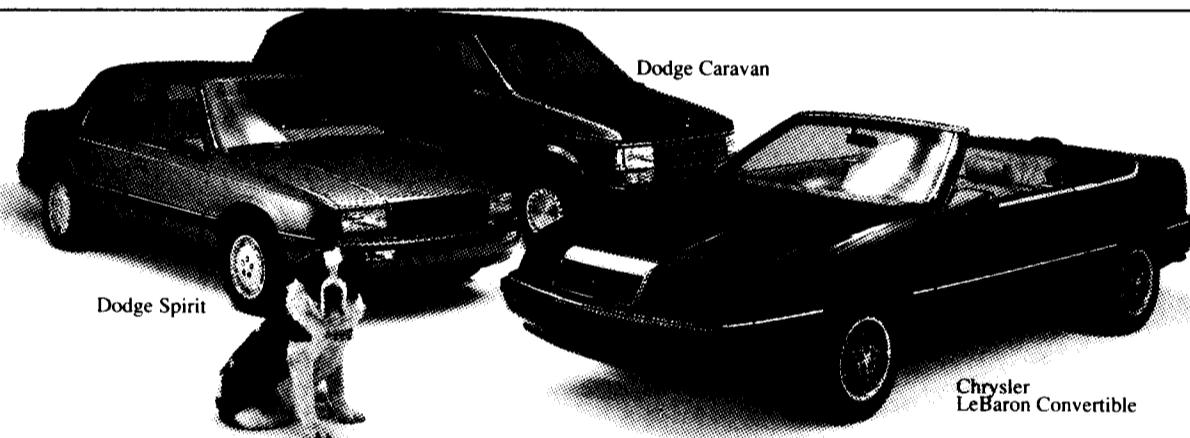
because of the autonomy Armstrong gives his staff. "You don't have to go through 55 channels here... If Bob Armstrong thinks residents will benefit from an idea you have, he tells you to go for it."

Armstrong does not see himself as the head of a social service agency; rather, he considers himself the chief executive officer of a corporation with 160 employees, \$90 million in assets and a \$22 million operating and modernization budget that serves 15,000 clients. As such he deals directly with other CEOs in Omaha. He calls the presidents of corporations to talk about anything from job opportunities for public housing residents to zoning issues that affect the community at large. His direct relationship with the business community has translated into jobs, scholarships and donations of everything from computers to a warehouse load of new furniture for public housing residents.

Such efforts are, he insists, an integral part of heading up a public housing agency. "We're not looking for real quick solutions. We do things first-class. We treat people with dignity. If they get used to that, they won't accept less." He pauses.

"We have to create an atmosphere that's conducive to positive learning. And we have to show everyone in this country that public housing is not a waste of taxpayers' money." □

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