



Upbringing drives advocate

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When Caroline Murray was just 2, her mother divorced her father, and her father vanished, leaving the family without his support.

Her mother, who currently lives in the Boston area, moved around a lot in New England and struggled to raise Murray, her two older brothers and an older sister. When Murray was about 13, her mother finally settled in Stow for about four years, teaming up with another family to rent a home.

Murray, today an Amherst resident, said her difficult upbringing helped turn her into a tenacious social crusader and a firebrand.

For about the past 14 years, Murray has been director of the Anti-Displacement Project in Springfield, a private nonprofit organization that organizes poor and low-income people to fight for their rights and benefits.

"Everyone is a product of their experiences in life," said Murray, who graduated from Nashoba Regional High School in Bolton and then obtained a bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1987. "It made me who I am today."

The Anti-Displacement Project is located in a 6,600-square-foot building at 130 Union St. in the city's South End. The project, which has dramatically expanded under Murray's leadership, includes the Casa Obrera Worker Center, which provides job training in construction and a landscaping and painting business with \$500,000 in sales. A grand opening for the worker center will be held on June 11.

The project is also noted for organizing low-income tenants and helping them create associations to purchase properties. It receives grants from foundations and boasts a yearly operating budget of \$500,000.

Murray said the group focuses on creating new institutions, such as the landscaping and painting business, and giving control to low-income people.

Between 1996 and 2005, the project received \$60.5 million in public money to purchase and upgrade 1,400 units of low-income, subsidized housing in Western Massachusetts, including buildings in Greenfield, Springfield, Westfield and Holyoke. Subsidiary nonprofits own \$45 million in real estate, which is controlled cooperatively by tenants.

To protect the wages of workers in the region, Murray leads efforts to expose contractors who violate the state's prevailing wage laws, which require that workers on public projects be paid a rate based on union wages.

Last year, Murray reported to state authorities that a Canton company - Reliable Window and Siding - was breaking the state wage law at an overhaul of an apartment complex in Springfield. The attorney general ordered the company to pay \$95,000 in unpaid wages and \$10,000 in penalties.

Murray said violations of the state wage law are rampant. She said business owners often cut corners on

wages to submit the lowest bid to win the contract. Often, the victims are immigrant workers from all over the world, including Mexico, Poland and Russia.

"People better watch out," she said. "We are coming after them. We're keeping track."

Murray, who is divorced, has two daughters, Akua Murray-Adoboe, 15, and Araba Murray-Adoboe, 12, who both attend Amherst public schools.

Her two daughters have grown up with the Anti-Displacement Project.

Murray said she has been an advocate for change for so long that she wouldn't know what else to do. Murray started organizing people in 1987 and 1988, when she was on the field staff of presidential candidate the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

"It goes back to my experience growing up and seeing the struggles of people as they try to make a better life," she said. "It made me want to make the world a better place. It also made me angry. It made me want to do something about it." Dan Ring is a staff writer for The Republican who covers the Statehouse in Boston. If you have questions related to the Western Massachusetts delegation or issues being addressed by the state Legislature, please send them to pluspapers@repub.com, attention: A View from the Hill; be sure to include your name and a daytime telephone number.

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