

# BRONX *Times*



## FIRM RUN BY MLB'S VAUGHN REHABS 2 MORRIS HEIGHTS BUILDINGS

*By Bret Nolan Collazzi*

For the past nine months, Laverne Watson's apartment has been absolutely powerless, meaning no light bulbs, no refrigerator, no stove.

She credited the personal blackout to a leak in an upstairs apartment that cascaded into her hallway fuse box.

"They have faucets upstairs but no sink," she said, "so it drips down."

Watson's is one of dozens of apartments at 1971 and 1975 Grand Avenue that have been neglected for years. Luckily for the tenants, their new landlord is Mo Vaughn, a onetime All-Star first baseman for the Boston Red Sox who briefly donned the Mets uniform as well.

Vaughn founded Omni New York with his lawyer, Eugene Schneur, after a weak knee ended his baseball career in 2003. Together, they buy and rehab rundown housing. The Target V Apartments on Grand Avenue, bought for \$8.1 million last month, comprise the firm's third property in the Bronx and sixth citywide.

The buyout couldn't have come at a better time. Graffiti is sprawled throughout the 83-unit complex. Roving gangs claim the halls. Many apartments have no cabinets or appliances. Some have not had hot water for six months.

"There are apartments here where people have literally lived without showers, bathtubs or any appliances," said Carrie Class, Omni's director of asset management. "I was in one apartment where they could use only one electrical socket because the others had sparked out."

Already, repairs are in motion. Just days after Omni assumed ownership of the buildings on Thursday, July 13, for \$8.1 million, it trucked in a temporary boiler — still parked at the curb — to supply hot water.

On July 21 — the date reporters were invited to tour the buildings with Vaughn and Emily Youssouf, president of the NYC Housing Development Corp., which financed a loan of nearly \$7 million — new cabinets lined the sidewalk and technicians were installing wiring for security cameras.

In total, Omni plans to invest about \$2.5 million in a new roof, new windows, brick pointing, a new boiler, fresh paint, new radiators, new appliances and more, Schneur said. Repairs should be completed within four months, and because most tenants receive federal rent subsidies, most will not face higher rents.

The famously burly, bearded Vaughn said he always wanted to serve some humanitarian purpose after his career ended, but that his poor performance for the Mets in 2002-03 and his early retirement convinced him to focus his energies on New York.

"When I was on the verge of retirement, I felt that it was necessary to try to give back to New York City, because I didn't get a chance to fulfill my commitment," he said.

He said he and his partner have a "passion" for housing rehabilitation because you can immediately see the impact of your work.

"To live in the conditions these people face is disgraceful," he said. "We're trying to change that, and it's a win-win for all of us."

Indeed, during the tour, tenants seemed optimistic that after years of neglect, permanent repairs were on the way. Counted among the hopeful is Laverne Watson.

"They've come in and started to do repairs already," the five-year resident said. "I know things will be different around here."

Minutes later, Class rounded the corner on her way to Watson's blacked-out apartment and shouted, "It will be done by next Friday, Ms. Watson. Then you can start moving in."

As she shuffled to her next problem spot, Class joked: "I hope it's that easy for everybody else."