

DAILY NEWS



Mo Vaughn in front of building that's part of his affordable housing project in Morris Heights.

GOING TO BAT FOR HOUSING

By LORE CROGHAN
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Mo Vaughn, who struck out as a New York Met, is hoping to be a bigger hit now for the city.

Lombard for NWS The hulking first baseman, who retired from baseball because of a wrecked knee, is fixing up run-down low-income housing as his second career.

A hero for the Red Sox in Boston, the southpaw slugger decided to start his post baseball life here, to make amends for his Big Apple struggles.

"I owed it to people to rectify things," Vaughn told the Daily News.

Just two years after launching his company Omni New York with mergers and acquisitions lawyer Eugene Schneur, Vaughn's on his sixth renovation project - a pair of apartment buildings at 1971 and 1975 Grand Ave. in Morris Heights in the Bronx.

Omni closed a week ago on the \$8.1 million purchase of the 83-unit complex - where tenants haven't had hot water in six months because of a busted boiler.

Monday, Omni parked an 18-wheeler with a temporary boiler outside the buildings - to give residents hot water while the busted boiler gets repaired.

Yesterday, cardboard cartons filled with kitchen cabinets sat on the sidewalk awaiting installation. Many apartment kitchens don't have cabinets, refrigerators or stoves.

Other repairs will include new roofing, new windows, new floors, a new security system with lots of video cameras and a paint job. The tenants - who receive Section 8 assistance - will not pay higher rents after the rehab's done.

"We're here to do the right thing so people can live like they're supposed to," Vaughn said yesterday to reporters who were invited to tour the property.

When Vaughn set out on his second career, some people wondered whether he was serious. Mayor Bloomberg and city housing officials asked, "Do you really want to do something, or do you just want to plant trees?" Schneur recalled.

Vaughn - who had done lots of charity work in Boston - was dead serious. But it did take time to adjust to the business world's 9-to-5 routine after his 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. ballpark schedule, he said.

To shorten their learning curve, he and Schneur found a joint-venture teammate, Robert Bennett, who has 15 years of experience in affordable-housing development. Vaughn discovered his famous name made it easier to get bankers to take his phone calls.

The trio has bought and renovated two apartment complexes in Mott Haven, the Bronx - and is completing rehabs in East New York, Brooklyn and Nassau County, as well as constructing a new building in upstate Seneca County.

As a ballplayer, Vaughn was all about home runs. But as an affordable-housing developer, he's comfortable with hitting singles - meaning smaller projects like the Morris Heights buildings. "Collectively, it all adds up," he explained.

Nationwide expansion comes next. He has signed contracts for properties in inner-city Miami, Gillette, Wy., and Lafayette, La.

He vows to keep working until he's built his business into something big, "bigger than IBM," as he sometimes jokes to Schneur.

"We're gonna tackle it until we get tired," Vaughn said. "And we've got a lot of energy."