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By **Susan Dibble**

Anne V. Houghtaling, the new executive director of HOPE Fair Housing Center in Wheaton, still remembers one of the housing discrimination cases she handled earlier in her career.

A black woman wanted to move from her neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago to an apartment in Berwyn and was told the apartment wasn't available, even though the rental sign remained up. She and her son, a new high school graduate who planned to join the military, decided to remain in their Chicago neighborhood and save money to buy a house.

Soon after, her son was killed in a drive-by shooting and never fulfilled his dreams.

"Had she been able to move, it just would not have happened," Houghtaling said. "There were a large number of murders in that neighborhood. There were none in Berwyn that year."

Back then, Houghtaling was HOPE's director of compliance, serving under the Fair Housing Center's legendary first executive director, Bernie Kleina. She worked at HOPE from 1995-2001 before moving on to the National Fair Housing Alliance in Washington, D.C., for the next 10 years.

When Kleina recently retired after leading the Wheaton agency for more than 40 years, Houghtaling was chosen to take his place. She officially started Oct. 1.

"It helps that I'm aware of his legacy, and I want to continue," Houghtaling said. "It's a little daunting."

But Kleina and Jay Mitchell, president of HOPE's board, said Houghtaling's experience with fair housing issues on the national level make her well-qualified to lead the agency in expanding its mission.

Mitchell said Houghtaling was chosen from among more than a score of candidates.

"Anne stood out," he said. "She brings back a wealth of experience with what HOPE is doing and what it wants to do."

Kleina, who served as a board member of National Fair Housing Alliance, continued his association with Houghtaling after she left the Wheaton agency.

"HOPE has always meant so much to me. I'm just relieved that someone is taking my place who can do a better job than me," he said. "I feel she brings not just knowledge, but wisdom, so I expect great things from her."

Fair housing career

As a newly minted attorney, Houghtaling began her legal career working for a homeowners association in Arizona. Her interest in fair housing was sparked when the association opposed construction of an eldercare facility that would have served many people with disabilities.

In one of the few cases in which she represented the interests of the homeowners rather than those of the association, she researched federal fair housing laws and was aided by the Southern Arizona Fair Housing Center.

"Oh, that's what I want to do," she decided. "Fair housing seemed very interesting to me."

Houghtaling contacted Kleina for an informational interview about fair housing without knowing HOPE had a position open. She was hired and spent six years with the Wheaton agency, overseeing the intake of complaints about housing discrimination, designing tests to measure whether discrimination was occurring, training testers and coordinating legal counsel. Houghtaling also worked on national testing projects, including a 2000 study the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development did of rental and sales in the Chicago area.

When Houghtaling moved to the National Fair Housing Alliance from 2001 to 2011, her focus changed from investigating individual housing complaints to looking for systemic patterns of discrimination.

For example, the alliance found builders who received tax credits failed to comply with federal requirements to make a percentage of the units accessible to people with disabilities. After a lawsuit was brought against one major homebuilder, 30,000 units were retrofitted, she said.

Discrimination often is subtle, but Houghtaling said she was surprised to find "whites only" ads posted for housing for people displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

"It was really blatant, and these ads were from all over the country," she said.

Another project found that lenders maintained foreclosed homes better in white neighborhoods than in black or Hispanic neighborhoods. One study done in 12 cities showed that real estate agents often steered white buyers toward better neighborhoods even though they knew they were supposed to treat all buyers alike.

“That was a real eye opener,” Houghtaling said.

Looking ahead

Houghtaling said HOPE will continue to investigate housing discrimination complaints in 28 counties in northern and north-central Illinois as it does now, but she also wants to look at systemic patterns of discrimination.

Mitchell said HOPE board members agree more focus should be put on investigating systemic problems.

“If we can see that pattern, we can address it before the complaints come,” he said.

HOPE received 1,941 new housing complaints in 2010, with the largest numbers for familial status, such as discriminating against families with children (669), national origin (562) and race (340). None were received for color, a major change from when fair housing became part of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

Kleina, a talented amateur photographer whose photos of the Civil Rights Movement have been shown in national venues, will continue to work with HOPE to educate younger generations about the roots of the Civil Rights and fair housing movement.

HOPE also provides training for housing providers, lenders, real estate agents and tenants, and fields calls that are landlord-tenant disputes rather than discrimination complaints.

With a budget of \$500,000, Houghtaling expects to add three people to the center’s full-time staff of five. She said the center also welcomes interns looking to gain valuable experience.

Now staying with family in the Western suburbs, Houghtaling is looking for a place to live. Outside of fair housing, her passions are her two dogs — a border collie and Burmese-border collie mix — and cooking and baking.

“If I weren’t in fair housing, I probably would run a catering company,” she said.

For information on HOPE, see hopefair.org or call (630) 690-6500.