

## POP QUIZ

### MEET DON FALK

He recently became executive director of the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp (TNDC), one of San Francisco's most active affordable housing developers. Before stepping into the top post, Falk served as the nonprofit organization's director of housing development.

**Q** How did you get into the housing biz?

**A** I studied economics and urban studies in college, and did my thesis on discrimination in housing. After graduate school, I couldn't find a job in the field, so I offered to volunteer one day a week for a small group in West Oakland (Calif.), Jubilee West. They said they could afford a 20% FTE (full-time equivalent) administrative assistant, and it progressed from there.



**Q** As an affordable housing developer, what do you see as the biggest challenge for the industry in 2006?

**A** Sustainability. We've built housing and organizations, but without reliable sources of ongoing funding, the former will deteriorate and the latter will fail to thrive. The second biggest challenge, from my perspective, is developing sufficient capital or rental operating subsidies to create homes for people at the lowest income levels where the country's housing crisis silently lives.

**Q** How do you plan to overcome that challenge?

**A** Politics. We can only be successful as part of a movement, working with allies across the spectrum to move resources toward those who lack power and influence - it's a long-term effort. And in the short-run? Fundraise. It's a heck of a way to live, like driving cross-country while filling

the gas tank one gallon at a time.

**Q** A cool touch at one of your recent developments?

**A** The roof garden at Curran House, in the middle of the Tenderloin, where families can sit amid citrus trees and enjoy the sun, or garden in the big planters or look over the wall and get a fantastic view of San Francisco.

Another example: the ground level at Curran House, where the expansive lobby opens up (by means of a huge glass roll-up door) onto a beautiful courtyard with a bubbling fountain. The edge of the courtyard is defined by large bamboos growing against the adjacent buildings and moss and ferns surround the smooth concrete floor. Sitting there, you would never know you're in the middle of one of the densest neighborhoods in the country.

**Q** Favorite business book?

**A** *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* by Peter Bernstein; and by Jerry Adler, *High Rise: How 1,000 Men and Women Worked Around the Clock for Five Years and Lost \$200 Million Building a Skyscraper*.

**Q** What's in store for TNDC in 2006?

**A** TNDC currently has nine projects in its pipeline, and we'll be focused on keeping those on schedule and budget, while starting one or two new ones, not to mention operating more than 20 supportive housing developments and serving 3,000-plus adults and children who live there, and, of course, raising \$2 million in charitable contributions to sustain the effort. ■

## PHA boss stays in unit

THE TOP MAN at the Hartford Housing Authority decided he wanted to know firsthand what life is like at one of his properties, so Lancelot Gordon Jr. recently spent the night at the Nelton Court project.

"I wanted to be sensitized to the culture and the life that goes on in the developments," said Gordon, who lived in public housing years ago.

Nelton Court is the oldest public housing project in Hartford, Conn. A



year ago it was a fairly stressed property, but the housing authority has worked to improve the development, according to Gordon. He proudly reports that the environment was safe and clean even after a big basketball game there.

During his stay, he examined the property, visited with residents, ordered barbecue from a nearby restaurant and slept in a vacant unit that was modestly furnished. In the morning, he had coffee with his neighbors.

The visit opened his eyes to a few physical problems at the development, including some lights that did not work, a situation that may have gone unnoticed during the day.

More important, it was an opportunity to connect with residents, according to Gordon, who was interim executive director at the time. "I thought it was the only thing to do," he said.

Gordon has since been named to the top post at the authority. ■