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Native returns to revive Seeks to boost state agency's role

By BILL MOONEY
STAFF WRITER

TRENTON — The city of Monique King-Viehland's youth lives on in her memory.

She remembers a tidy, well-kept neighborhood of row houses and apartments in the Wilbur section of Trenton, a working-class enclave in the East Ward where people looked out for one another.

"People lived there and took care of their homes," she recalls. "It was a community. It feels very different now."

These days, as King-Viehland sits in her seventh-floor West State Street office that offers a panoramic view of the Battle Monument neighborhood, she recalls the Trenton that once existed and refuses to believe it cannot be restored.

It's true that her old neighborhood has seen better days.

And she grew up in what was sometimes a one-parent household, with her mother the strong influence in her life.

But this also is someone who, after being named the 1994-95 New Jersey Girls State governor at the age of 17, announced she wanted to be the first female president of the United States.

King-Viehland learned how to dream big.

After years of schooling and employment elsewhere, her life's path has brought her home as executive director of the Capital City Redevelopment Corp., a nonprofit state agency whose purpose is the economic revitalization of Trenton.

She makes it clear she intends to use her position to make the CCRC an agent of positive change in a city plagued by the loss of businesses and persistent crime.

King-Viehland, 31, who now lives in the Hiltonia section of Trenton with her architect husband, Brian, and their 2 1/2-month-old daughter Sekou, is the first paid director the agency has had in five years.

She was appointed in December to the \$113,000-a-year CCRC job after working in state government doing community development work in Camden and Trenton and as a special assistant to Gov. Jon Corzine's former deputy chief of staff, Jeannine LaRue.

CCRC, a 20-year-old agency affiliated with the state Treasury Department, had, in King-Viehland's words, fallen into a lull.

The agency, which oversees economic development loans and grants, is supposed to focus on a broad area around the Statehouse. It is an irregularly shaped region roughly bounded by Route 29, Calhoun Street, East and West State streets, Market Street and South Clinton Avenue.

Past initiatives have included a \$50,000 grant to the Trenton Downtown Association to boost tourism and a loan of approximately \$500,000 to help build the Trenton Marriott hotel.

The CCRC has a staff of three, including King-Viehland, and an operating budget of less than \$500,000 a year, but it oversees a revolving loan fund of approximately \$5 million, she said.

Under her stewardship, she said she intends for the agency to take a more hands-on approach toward shaping Trenton's future, conducting regular meetings with Trenton's administration as well as nonprofit economic development agencies.

She said that under the Corzine administration, the state has accepted that it has a stake in Trenton's fate. "This is the capital city," she said. "We are the largest landowner in the city. We have a real commitment to acting as a partner with the city."

Mayor Douglas H. Palmer, who acknowledges that Trenton's history with the state has involved some friction, is delighted to hear that.

"If it wasn't for her, I don't know where that organization would be at all," Palmer said. "I wish she could have been here 10 years ago."

But 10 years ago, King-Viehland was not looking homeward.

She grew up in the late '70s and early '80s in a two-bedroom apartment on Cuyler Avenue with her mother, stepfather, grandparents and younger brother. Her biological father, she said, was a drug addict. "It took me a long time not to be ashamed of that," she said.

Her story, in which she writes that her father was an addict and left the family when she was 2, was included in a book published in May, "If I'd Known Then: Women In Their 20s and 30s Write Letters to Their Younger Selves," compiled by Pennington author Ellyn Spragins. The book is a collection of first-person accounts by women from various walks of life.

Her mother, who gave birth to her at the age of 17, was a major influence in her life. "Without my mother, in particular, I would not be where I am today," King-Viehland said. "My mother set the direction for where I would go in my life. She never let me take no for an answer."

She attended P.J. Hill Elementary School until eighth grade, then moved to Ewing and graduated from high school there. She went on to attend Smith College in Northampton, Mass., the nation's largest liberal arts college for women, and then she obtained a master's degree in public policy and management from Carnegie Mellon.

After working in private-sector jobs for a few years, King-Viehland was hired by the Corzine administration.

When she was handed the keys to the office of the Capital City Redevelopment Corp., she said she accepted them with a purpose in mind. "Either I was going to shepherd the organization's closure or we were going to have to be different," she said. "We needed a recurring revenue stream."

Among the agency's joint projects with the city administration are revitalizing the train station and its neighborhood, and transforming Route 29 with its state-owned parking lots into a revenue-generating source. "That is prime real estate in the city of Trenton," she said.

And if King-Viehland ends up being one of the people responsible for bringing Trenton back, she will know where the seeds of that success took root.

"Your family and the way you grow up shape your perspective on the world," she said. "Who I am is the person who grew up in that apartment. I understand that's where I'm from."

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PHOTO CAPTION: KING-VIEHLAND