

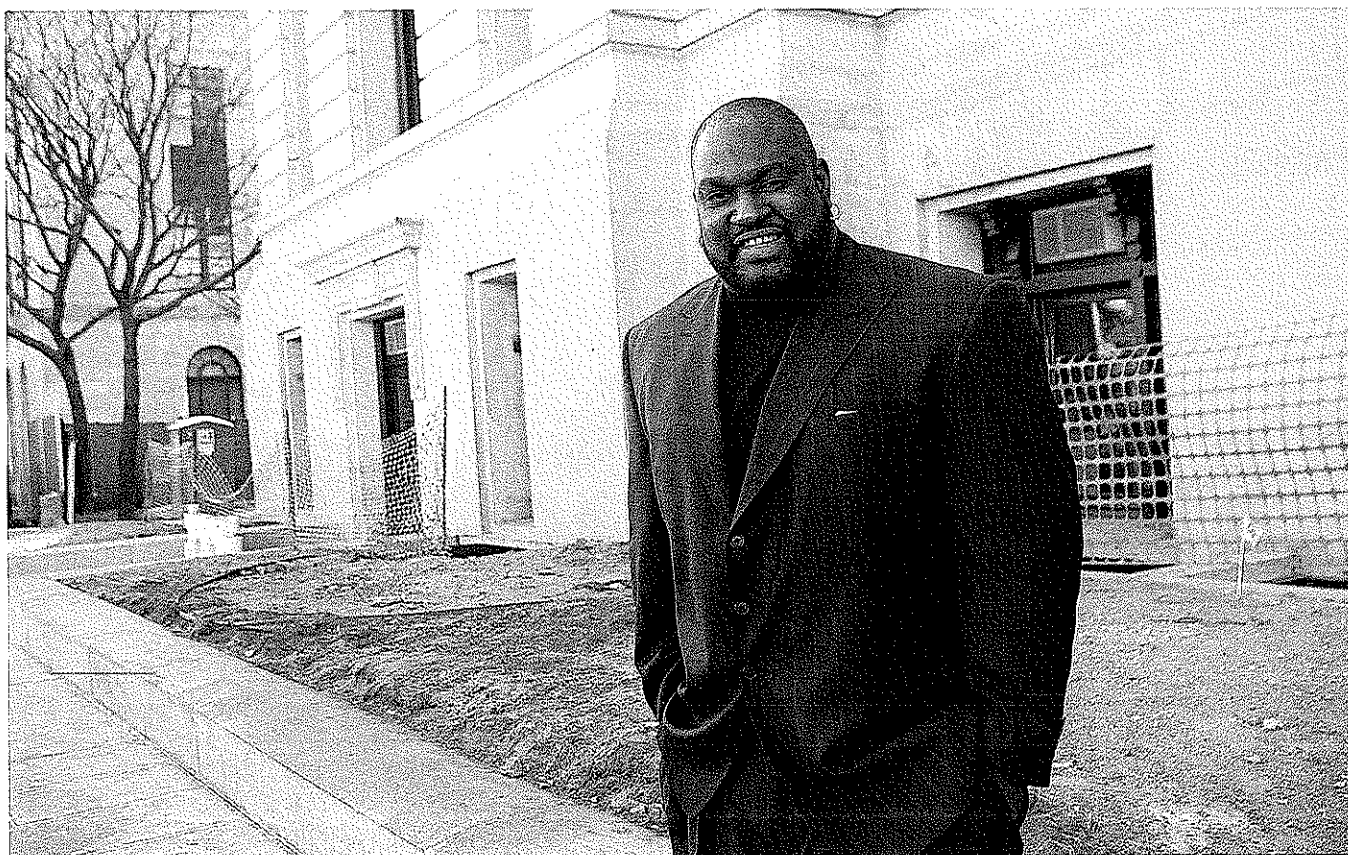
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Vaughn the Developer Wants People Safe at Home



Dith Pran/The New York Times

Mo Vaughn, in Newark, is a partner in a company called Omni New York LLC, which arranges housing for people with modest incomes.

By **GEORGE VECSEY**

Mo Vaughn wears a different uniform now — a black suit with bold stripes, every day, in boardrooms or at construction sites. The power suit is part of the message. He is not a ballplayer anymore.

"I still can't go back and smell the fresh grass," he said.

It's too soon since his body broke down and he played his last game in May 2003. Besides, he is busy in his new life.

Vaughn sniffs the hallways of the two renovated buildings at Grace Towers in Brooklyn, the walls and floors spotless, the elevator purring, security cameras at every turn.

"You stop and think," Vaughn said with the same passion he displayed in a Red Sox uniform. "There are people who have been living in Grace Towers for 25 years. These are people's homes. People live and die here."

He's not Santa Claus, not in that business suit. He's an entrepreneur, and his chosen

field is affordable housing, using bonds and tax credits and government approval.

"But do it for the right reason," Vaughn added.

Before Nomar, before Manny, before Big Papi, Mo Vaughn was the big man on the Red Sox, a preppe and a Seton Hall man with a stable childhood and strong opinions.

"Great guy," one Red Sox fan in New York said Friday when she heard what Vaughn was doing. "He was involved in every charity in Boston. They love him up

there.”) Now he is a visible partner in a company called Omni New York LLC, which arranges housing for people with modest incomes.

A sports columnist, popping in for a few hours, cannot possibly address the finances and methods of a company. But I’ve been in some tough places, and I could see (and smell) the upgrades at the southwest corner of Pennsylvania and Pitkin in the East New York section of Brooklyn.

Vaughn and his partner, Eugene Schneur, and their site manager, Mildred Pimentel, met me Thursday in the parking lot, behind handsome fences and electronic barriers. They used computerized cards, the kind used in hotels, instead of keys to get through the airy entrance. They showed me a community room in the well-lighted basement — seven computers, used for enrichment classes in finance or college applications, open to residents.

“Let people help themselves,” said Schneur, who said he came from Russia to Brighton Beach when he was 7, and worked up from poverty. Vaughn’s parents were teachers, and lived comfortably in Norwalk, Conn. Vaughn needs space and lives over in New Jersey, while Schneur lives in Manhattan. Schneur was Vaughn’s lawyer when Vaughn hobbled through his final futile \$15 million years with the Mets, retiring at 35.

“I knew I was going to do something

else with my life,” Vaughn said the other day. “Let somebody else be general manager or manager. I had to get totally away from it. I had my time. I’m not as good as I was. That’s it.”

Vaughn shudders when he mentions former teammates who have lost all their money. “They didn’t learn how to live on a budget,” he said, sadly.

As Vaughn’s career ended, Schneur approached him about going into real estate, warning him: “You have a choice. Do you want to be part of a process? This is going to go faster than anything you have ever seen.”

Vaughn added: “He was right. I’m a developer. That’s what I do. I want people to take me seriously.” He works a five-day, 12-month schedule, so “totally immersed” that he can travel only on weekends. One of his rules for himself is: “Don’t have guys around you who tell you everything’s good. I need Gene to tell me the truth.”

With help from Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and his staff, and commitment from Citibank, the partners began in the Bronx and now have holdings in New York and New Jersey. Vaughn recalls one closing in which 70 people were spread over a dozen tables, all updating the fine print, for two days. Now people are beginning to see results.

“You didn’t go out after a certain time,” said Nelson Lee, who lives at

Grace Towers and works there as a maintenance man. “You’d step over people in the lobby.”

“The cabinets were falling out, the elevators were out for days, the roof was bad, the fans didn’t work, there was vandalism,” Lee said, adding, “As a church brother, I say I am blessed.”

Lee’s wife, Daisy, invited me into their immaculate two-bedroom apartment, displaying new cabinets, closet doors, windows, stove, refrigerator, toilet, sink and tiled bathroom floors. “Wouldn’t you want to be here?” Lee said.

In a few months, Vaughn and Schneur will take over the notorious Noble Drew Ali Plaza in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, a complex known for its toxic mixture of dilapidation and fear.

“Armed guards, cameras, tanks, whatever it takes,” Vaughn said, adding that the first step was to secure the perimeter, putting up fences and installing cameras that capture a two-month history of every corner of every hallway.

“You burn a CD, you see what happened, and a police car comes in, lights flashing,” Vaughn said. “The police will ramp it up if they have a tool to work with. That happens a few times, everybody knows.”

When the process begins at the Noble Drew Ali Plaza, Vaughn plans to be right there — in his new uniform, the business suit.

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