

# THE BAY STATE Banner

## “This Old House” Gives New Life to Foreclosed Roxbury Home

By Sandra Larson  
January 14, 2010  
Bay State Banner

In the sharp chill of a December morning, Lanita Tolentino, 30, joked around with workers in the front yard of a major renovation project on Roxbury’s Woodbine Street. For months, she had monitored the progress, watching the siding put on, the new roof shingled, a front porch emerge.

The house would soon be hers, and she was growing excited. She grew up a few blocks from here; many members of her large Cape Verdean family still live nearby. She brought her aunt along on this visit to see the house coming to life.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, Tolentino peered up to admire a thin stripe of red accent paint recently added below the new roof. Then she stepped aside to make way for a camera operator, director and producer as they backed up, huddled and conferred over how to frame the next shot.

This is no run-of-the-mill project — it’s going to be on national television.

Since last May, the carpenters, camera operators, producers and plumbers of the PBS home renovation series “This Old House” — now in its 30th season — have toiled together here to craft not only a careful renovation, but also some eye-catching TV footage.

Far from their typical suburban home improvement project, the show’s team has returned to its Boston roots to face a tough challenge: bringing this foreclosed, vacant and deteriorated Roxbury home back to life.

“We’re responding to the times, this very unusual housing crisis,” said Deborah Hood, the show’s senior producer.

In a dark economic climate and a foreclosure-torn neighborhood, this house and its new owner represent a silver lining of sorts. Someone else’s loss — abandoned and left to rot — will become Lanita Tolentino’s gain, a polished gem and a starting point. Thrilled to be able to put down roots in



**David Lopes**, president of **Wellington Construction** and general contractor for the “This Old House” renovation project in Roxbury.

her community, this hopeful first-time buyer could break the cycle of risk and loss that left this house so devastated.

When the producers approached city of Boston officials last spring to propose a Boston project, the Department of Neighborhood Development (DND) seized the opportunity to further its stabilization efforts in a troubled neighborhood.

“We told them it would be good to do a foreclosed property, and they thought that was a great idea,” said DND Director Evelyn Friedman. The department had identified high-foreclosure zones for improvement and redevelopment projects, and Woodbine Street lies in one of the targeted zones.

Roxbury has borne a large share of the nearly 3,000 foreclosures in Boston over the past five years. The DND’s maps show at least a dozen properties in foreclosure on Woodbine Street and its surrounding blocks. A few sit conspicuously empty, windows and doors boarded up.

But the producers of “This Old House” sought out the highlights of the area, and they were not disappointed. When the series premieres Jan. 28 (in Boston, the first segment airs Wednesday, Feb. 3 at 8 p.m. on WGBX 44), viewers around the country will get a sense of the vibrant Roxbury that surrounds this once-abandoned house.

“Coming into this community from outside, the suburbs where we usually work, has been a treat,” said producer Hood. “The show will be informed by the color and stories of Roxbury.”

Part of one segment features the Dominican restaurant Merengue (“a hidden gem,” said Hood) on nearby Blue Hill Avenue. In another segment, David Price, executive director of Nuestra Comunidad, a local nonprofit community development corporation, gives the host a tour of revitalization projects in the Dudley Square area.

Nuestra Comunidad purchased the dilapidated house from the bank last May for \$89,000. The organization is coordinating the renovation and is technically the homeowner at the start of the series.

But for the show to sparkle, it needs the input of the home’s future occupants. So Nuestra Comunidad invited graduates of its first-time homebuyer classes to enter a lottery for a chance to buy one of the house’s two units. Potential winners had to qualify for a mortgage and be ready to commit to buying a gutted shell they could only imagine as a home. They also had to be willing to appear on television.

Tolentino, who works as director of volunteer engagement at United Way of Massachusetts Bay, recalled the day of the lottery. She was present at Nuestra Comunidad’s office, but focused on her BlackBerry, catching up on some work. Then she realized her name had been called.

“I said, ‘They just picked me, they picked me!’ It was surreal,” she laughed.

Besides providing an opportunity for a first-time homebuyer, this renovation has been a boon for some local workers and companies.

The general contractor is **David Lopes**, president of **Wellington Construction** of Mattapan. Lopes, a Mattapan resident himself, said he makes a practice of hiring workers and subcontractors from the community. “All my guys are local guys,” he explained.

One of his workers is Angel DeJesus, 25, a recent graduate of a training program at YouthBuild Boston, a Roxbury nonprofit that provides hands-on training in the building trades for city youths. DeJesus said he started on the project in May.

At work on the site in November, he sounded neither star-struck nor nervous about having his first professional work be featured on a nationally-viewed TV show, but clearly pleased.

“I definitely think this is a great opportunity,” he said. “I feel blessed. It’s a way to do the type of things I was striving for.”

Thirty years ago, the first “This Old House” show featured a house on Percival Street in Dorchester, just two miles from Woodbine Street. Both that project and the current one aimed to “spark the neighborhood and show investment in the area,” said Richard Trethewey, the show’s plumbing and heating specialist.

“Both houses were on the brink of a decision, to rip it down or renovate,” said Trethewey. In the Woodbine Street house, all the copper, some of the historic molding and a marble fireplace had been plundered, and there was serious water damage because of holes in the roof. But, Trethewey said, it’s always better to preserve if possible.

“You want to really think about how to keep the fabric of a neighborhood,” he said over the steady roar of a generator as he waited for his cue on a gray day in November. Gesturing toward the tops of the neighboring houses, he added, “These beautiful mansard roofs — they deserve to be kept.”

Happily for her, it turns out Tolentino doesn’t mind appearing on camera. On the site, in sunglasses and shivering a little in a short red leather jacket, she hammed it up with show host Kevin O’Connor before he had to turn his attention to the day’s filming.

She estimated she’ll be moving in by February, possibly in time to catch the show on TV in her new house.

On that mid-December morning the walls weren’t even finished, much less the kitchen, but Tolentino’s aunt, Teresa Reaves, was already planning ahead. The family has a tradition, she explained, of cooking cachupa, the signature Cape Verdean stew, when someone moves into a new home. Reaves thought Tolentino’s father, who still lives over on Humboldt Street where Lanita grew up, would want to be the cook.

Tolentino looked doubtful. A party, on the brand new floors? Maybe. Maybe a Super Bowl party. Or a gathering to watch the televised rebirth of her house.

“If we can put mats down,” she said.