For developer Van Vincent, rehabbing rental buildings is more than a business. “I believe in ‘transformational housing’—buildings with the ability to transform the communities in which they are located,” Vincent says.

In 2008, Vincent acquired three dilapidated apartment buildings in the 6800 block of South Normal in Chicago’s Englewood community that fit his description of “transformational housing.” Located across the street from a high school they had the potential to be good, solid family housing. Unfortunately, they were nearly half vacant, near foreclosure, and gang ridden.

Within a year, Vincent had cleared out the gangs, rehabbed the vacant units, cleared away graffiti, fixed the elevators, and improved the buildings’ public spaces and hallways—all for a modest cost of $17,000 per unit.

But developers can’t preserve affordable housing alone.

Vincent had acquired the properties from Community Initiatives Inc. (CII), a subsidiary of Community Investment Corporation (CIC), the Chicago region’s most experienced investor in multifamily affordable housing preservation and a nonprofit organization. CII was appointed receiver of the buildings by the City of Chicago after the original owner had stopped making mortgage payments.

A line of credit from CIC allowed Vincent to acquire the buildings in a tight credit market. The Cook County Assessor’s office reduced the tax assessment through its Class 9 Program. And two stalwart renters kept the buildings going during the tough times by picking up trash, putting out fires, securing the back door and challenging drug users to respect the community.

Everyone’s commitment has paid off. “Our tenants smile at us, talk to us and tell us what’s going on. That didn’t happen before,” says Vincent.