

Encore development is new site of Tampa's holiday donation tent

By Libby Baldwin, Times Staff Writer

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A community brought about by attempts to divide people will bring them together with the relocation this year of the Metropolitan Ministries Holiday Tent.

Encore, the Tampa Housing Authority development honoring the city's once-vibrant black entertainment district along Central Avenue, is providing space for the charity to collect and distribute holiday meals and gifts to low-income families in Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and Polk counties.

The Central Avenue district was created when Jim Crow laws forced African-American businesses out of downtown in 1900. As many as 10 percent of the units in the Encore development will be for public housing.

Metropolitan Ministries had to seek a new location for its holiday tent once construction started on the site it had used for several years, the Heights project at the north end of the downtown Riverwalk.

Tim Marks, president of Metropolitan Ministries, said he hopes the seasonal campaign — launched in 1982 — can remain there for the next two to three years.

"Nothing's permanent in Tampa these days," Marks said with a laugh. "The city development offices and planning departments were awesome for us; they helped us figure out how this can work."

Tampa's JVS Contracting and Stantec Engineering and Oldsmar's Falcon Electric donated their services to bring the tent to life.

"Not everyone can come to the kitchen and cut carrots, but they can do their part," said Marks, who says the charity has never had to turn anyone away.

The holiday tent, one of the city's most visible works of a charity, also provides clients with housing assistance, education for children and adults and life skills training.

The tent, which opened for donations Thursday (Nov. 3) and will remain up through December nearly spans the length of a football field. An estimated 10,000 volunteers will serve some 18,000 families. The most-needed items include frozen turkeys and hams, cereal, stuffing, gift cards and presents intended for teenagers and infants.

In addition to prepping turkeys and stuffing, volunteers put together "Boxes of Hope" that include fruit, vegetables, yams, beans, soup, cereal, and a dessert item.

"My first year here, I met a woman named Barbara, who said we gave her hope," Marks said. "I thought we just gave her a turkey and a Onesie for her child, but she used this big word — hope."

Yinette Rosa went from volunteering at Metropolitan Ministries to seeking its help when she became a single mother about three years ago.

"I have no idea how I would have made it without them," she said, tears in her eyes.

Rosa is especially thankful for the gift donations that made Christmas morning possible for her two children, 6 and 4.

"You think kids don't know the struggle, but they see it," she said. "How can you tell a kid Santa isn't coming this year? That's a tough one, but they came through. Everyone who gave was Santa Claus; it's the North Pole, right here in our city."

Thousands of clients are familiar with one of the regular "Santas" — a local pilot who did some soul-searching after 9/11 and started donating money.

Al Steele moved to Tampa in the late 1980s and began volunteering at the tent about seven years ago, prompted by his wife Ann.

"It's great to write big checks," she told him, "but let's go down and get our hands dirty."

Together, they run about one third of the tent now, spending hundreds of hours every year on this and other charity projects.

"The beauty of this place is, right now, we're a very divided country," Steele said. "This is the one place where we can all come together."

Last year, volunteers delivered more than 3,000 hot Thanksgiving meals with all the trimmings to the homes of those who are unable to shop or cook for themselves.

"The separation of messaging that you're hearing in this election cycle, you see the opposite of that in the tent," Marks said.

"People that wouldn't talk to each other on the street are hugging. We're just very grateful for support of the Tampa Bay community."

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>>If you go

Metropolitan Ministries Holiday Tent

What: Most-needed contributions include frozen turkeys and hams, cereal, stuffing, gift cards and presents for teenagers and infants.

Where: 905 N Governor Street, Tampa

When: 8 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays; and noon-4 p.m. Sundays. Closed Nov. 24-27.

To learn more: (813) 209-1218 or www.metromin.org

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