

New Encore Tampa apartments honor activist Essie Mae Reed



Richard Danielson, Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA — Essie Mae Reed didn't learn to read until she was 40, but the longtime public housing activist was not known to flinch in the face of injustice, bureaucracy or even unhappy neighbors.

"I whooped 'em," Reed, who died last year at age 84, recalled in a video played Monday about a long-ago dispute with fellow tenants at the old Central Park Village apartments.

Today, Central Park Village itself is long gone, torn down in 2007. But Reed's memory lives on in the newest apartment building to open at Encore Tampa, an ambitious redevelopment emerging from 28 acres between downtown and Ybor City.

The new building is seven floors of apartments for low-income tenants aged 62 or older. It is the third building to open at Encore Tampa, now nearly a decade in the making, and officials said its name — "the Reed" — honors a community volunteer who made a big impact.

"This city didn't tell Essie Mae Reed they loved her; they showed her," Reed's daughter, Sheila Reed, said during Monday's ceremony.

A housekeeper, Reed began advocating for fellow public housing residents in 1967. She fought for Boys & Girls Clubs in public housing and established tenant groups that evolved into residents councils.

"People thought we was nobody because of living in the slums, but we could all be something given an opportunity," she once said.

In 1971, she became the first black woman to run for the Tampa City Council. Along the way to winning 10,476 votes, she successfully challenged a municipal filing fee for indigent candidates.

By the 1980s, candidates were coming to her. Her grandson, Nicholas Reed, recalled once visiting her apartment and meeting an unfamiliar woman who asked for his grandmother's help. The visitor was then-Mayor Sandy Freedman, and that day, she was almost certainly accompanied by her aide, campaign manager and future mayor Bob Buckhorn.

"A go-to person," Buckhorn said of Reed. "If you wanted something done in Central Park Village, you had to go see Essie Mae Reed."

On Monday, dozens of Reed's relatives and dozens of local officials, bankers and others gathered to celebrate the latest group of residents to move into Encore.

The Tampa Housing Authority teamed up with the Banc of America Community Development Corp. and the city of Tampa to develop Encore, which eventually is expected to cover 12 city blocks.

The history of the area goes back to Reconstruction, when freed slaves started building wood shacks north of downtown. By the 1940s, the area had grown from a haphazard jumble known as the Scrub to a stopover for jazz headliners on the "Chitlin' Circuit." Cab Calloway played the Apollo Ballroom, Hank Ballard wrote *The Twist*, and Ella Fitzgerald performed on Central Avenue. (Encore's first building is called "the Ella.")

By the early 1970s, Central Avenue was in steep decline, ravaged by the construction of Interstate 275, the demolitions of urban renewal and days of rioting after the police shooting of a 19-year-old black man.

By the 2000s, little remained except for Central Park Village's brutalist concrete block architecture, toothpaste green paint and high crime rate.

Encore is meant to be a mix of subsidized housing and units that sell or rent on the open market. At build-out, its plans call for up to 794 apartments, 300 condominiums and 268,000 square feet of offices and stores, including a hotel, museum, school and grocery store.

But after the last residents left in 2007, Encore's redevelopment was slowed by the real estate crash, Great Recession and a lawsuit over financing that went to the Florida Supreme Court.

The project's prospects brightened after the Obama administration awarded the housing authority \$38 million in federal stimulus funds, most of which went to build Encore's streets, sewers, centralized air-conditioning plant and other infrastructure, plus a \$30 million Choice Neighborhoods grant.

Still, with public agencies, private bankers and nonprofit groups involved, putting together the deals for Encore are complex. Built at a cost of \$29 million, the Reed had eight different sources of funding.

The Reed's 158 one- and two-bedroom apartments rent for a percentage of the residents' income. One-bedroom rents range from \$383 to \$716 a month. Two bedrooms go for \$402 to \$865 a month. The building includes a 220-space parking garage, pool, community garden, fitness center and secure access.

"I love it," said retired Chase Bank employee Charlotte Bonaparte, 73, who moved after hearing about the Reed while volunteering at a senior center in Town 'N Country. "It is comfortable. It's safe. The apartments, to me, are fabulous."

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