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Public housing exhibit fosters museum drive

Tour will help raise money for a National Public Housing Museum

By Tom Mullaney, Special to the Tribune

February 12, 2010

With the largest redevelopment of public housing in U.S. history under way in Chicago, organizers of a public housing museum here hope also to change perceptions of public housing as an incubator of crime, broken lives and urban blight. They want people to also see how it fostered family, close-knit communities and upward mobility for countless Chicagoans.

A display of the latter idea can be found at Merchandise Mart, where the exhibit "History Comes Home" offers a glimpse of what the public can expect from the National Public Housing Museum, planned to open in the last remaining building of the Jane Addams Homes, 1322 W. Taylor St.



"In 2012, the National Public Housing Museum will open as a permanent home for this complicated — yet often inspiring — history of public housing in America," said Marjorie Craig Benton, co-chair of the exhibit's opening reception. "If all people know about public housing is the tragic side, the exhibit will teach that there's more to the story."

The exhibit, in the Mart's entry lobby, is the first stop on a 24-month U.S. tour to raise awareness and critically needed dollars for the museum. It includes a replica of a circa 1955 CHA apartment complete with boarded-up windows; inside is an interactive display of historical artifacts such as an RCA Victor TV console, an enamel kitchen table, metal roller skates and photos of tenants from CHA archives. Throughout the exhibit — on dinner plates, atop an old-style notebook and printed on recipe cards — one discovers stories of former residents from Chicago to Boston, New Orleans and Sacramento.

Dick Portillo remembers growing up in the Mother Frances Cabrini Homes at 800 N. Mohawk St. in the early 1950s, then a neighborhood of Irish, Italian and Jewish families.

"It was a close-knit community," said Portillo, founder and president of the Portillo Food Group. "Because there was no air conditioning or TV, life was out on the street in summertime. Neighbors knew each other. They looked out for each other's kids and would tell your parents if you were into any trouble."

Portillo's experience is the missing part of public housing's story, but not the exception, said Keith Magee, executive director of the museum. Among public housing's graduates who have fashioned successful careers are President Jimmy Carter, jazz artist Ramsey Lewis, rapper Jay-Z and the newest Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor.

Lewis Jordan, the current head of CHA, shares a public housing history as does Sunny Fischer, executive director of the Richard J. Driehaus Foundation, a major museum supporter. Fischer also contributed her old desk to the exhibit.

To meet its 2012 planned opening, the museum needs \$8 million to break ground, said Magee. Museum backers hope to raise \$17 million to renovate and restore the Taylor Street building; CHA has promised to donate the site if the museum raises \$13 million by next year; and Magee said he is in discussions with a benefactor considering a \$3 million gift.

The planned museum will re-create seven apartments to cover seven decades of public housing's history, from its New Deal origins to the present. Magee calls it a "museum of conscience" whose mission is to "open public discourse on public housing and challenge stereotypes" such as "the violence, gangbangers and welfare mothers."

"We will make the walls talk," he said.

Funding for the "History Comes Home" exhibit came from the Chicago Community Trust and the Reva and David Logan Foundation. The museum, which is partnering with the University of Illinois' architecture and art design departments as well as the College of Urban Planning and Public Administration, will move its offices to the university April 1.

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