

Goodbye St. Leger, hello St. Ambrose

Evanston demolishing troubled site for new homes

Neighborhood crime magnet torn down



Photographer: WCPO

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CINCINNATI - Anzora Adkins climbed aboard an O'Rourke Wrecking Company crane Wednesday and with little coaching knocked down the first bricks of the St. Leger Apartments in Evanston.

"It was a little scary, but I managed," the Evanston Community Council President proudly said.

Hundreds of neighborhood residents and civic leaders turned out to watch her begin the demolition of the century old structure that's become a community eyesore and magnet for crime.

In its place, the Model Group will develop 26 new units called the St. Ambrose Apartments, named for the patron saint of learning.

"Evanston is the educating community and the name is so fitting," Adkins said, noting that Xavier University, Walnut Hills and Purcell Marian High Schools and others are in the

neighborhood.

The project has been Adkins' dream and goal for the past three-and-a-half years to continue Evanston's revitalization. Seeing it become reality left her very satisfied.

"It was a feeling of being blessed that our vision is about to occur because a community without vision will perish," she said.

Three generations of Boykins family members were on hand for the demolition. The family lived at the St. Leger for years. In fact, Cierra Boykins, 21, lived most of her life there.

"Everyone might think it was a bad place, but I didn't," she said. "I loved it here. This was my home."

Looking on were two Cincinnati Police Captains who commanded District 2 for a total of six years. The St. Leger is in District 2.

"This has always been a central location or hot spot for crime for the way the building is configured," said Capt. Doug Wiesman, who led District 2 from 2007 through 2010. "It's got three different streets with three different addresses, but it's the same building."

Capt. Wiesman said taking the building down is a fantastic opportunity for Evanston.

That sentiment was shared by Capt. Paul Broxterman, who commanded District 2 from 2010 through 2012.

"This building was such a centerpoint for drug activity for so many years," he said. "There are so many entrances it was a nightmare for us trying to police. Drug dealers will have to find another place to conduct their activity."

Vanessa Pugh came to the ceremony after stopping to pray at the front of the St. Leger, where her son T.J. Womack, 16, was murdered in January. The case remains unsolved.

"I'm happy it's going down," she said. "No more violence. No more drugs."

Cincinnati City Manager Milton Dohoney Jr. scrapped his prepared script and forcefully spoke from his heart about how the city is in transition and how neighborhoods face significant challenges.

"We have bloodshed that is being spilled unnecessarily and if you want to change conditions in the neighborhood, then you've got to change the environment," he said. "That's what taking down this building represents. We're not apologizing for it because there needs to be more opportunity in neighborhoods."

Dohoney added, "We have children standing over here who need opportunities. They need to see possibilities and removing things like this creates that for them."

Adkins sees the transition from St. Leger to St. Ambrose as one more step in attracting more businesses and residents to Evanston and improving its image.

So does Pastor Peterson Mingo, vice-president of the community council.

"Evanston will no longer be identified by the St. Leger," he said. "It will be identified as a neighborhood that's moving on -- a neighborhood that has hope -- a neighborhood that basically has as future."

As the first bricks fell from the St. Leger, Mingo and several other coaches from the Evanston football team gathered seven of them together.

They'll be part of a memorial to seven young men he and the others have coached -- young men that have been killed at or near the St. Leger.

"It gives a lot of families who lost loved ones here a sense of closure," he said. "As this building goes down, it's the past going down."

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