



Senior housing gets \$1.2M revamp

A new look and new name — Serenity Towers — bring smiles to the residents, most on fixed incomes.

BY BECKY BOWERS
Times Staff Writer

SOUTH PASADENA

Less than two years ago, Bethany Towers residents reported broken air conditioning and elevators, dirty common areas and old, stuck windows. Federal auditors peered in as its nonprofit owner struggled.

"I thought they were going to condemn the building. It was that bad," says Judy Robertson, 65, an eight-year resident who had watched her home deteriorate.

Now new Orlando owners with charitable funding have invested more than \$1.2 million in improvements, from a boring boiler to a splashy aquarium. The renamed Serenity Towers has a fresh, tropical look — and relieved tenants, most of whom get federal vouchers that keep rent low.

"It is nice," Robertson said. "I'm not ashamed to have someone come over and see me anymore."

Last week, tenants, contractors, housing agencies and new owners gathered in the renamed Boca Ciega Ballroom — it had been the lunch room — to celebrate the renewal.

It's a third project for Elevation Financial Group, led by a pair of brothers who say they have a mission to preserve affordable housing. Their parents, David and Marilyn King, raised them in Orlando, where their father is a civil litigator and their mother an activist.

President and CEO is Chris King, 31, who studied religion, politics and public policy at Harvard, then got a University of Florida law degree.

His brother, vice president Michael King, 40, went to Duke, then got a master's of fine-arts degree at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before pursuing an acting career, including a late '90s role in *As the World Turns*. He now dabbles in faith-based productions, writing and producing the 2006 movie *The Way Back Home*, and developing a TV series *The Pastor*.

They gather private funding for their purchases, typically from Central Florida families, Michael King said. The Glenda G. Morgan Charitable Foundation, a small Altamonte Springs charity with assets of \$10.5 million in 2008, financed renovations, and will now earn interest on the project.

Jim Branson, a Housing and Urban



Photos by DIRK SHADD | Times

Residents play cards in the newly renovated ballroom at Serenity Towers in South Pasadena on Thursday.



Residents Earl Suri, 68, and Mary Shelton, 89, welcome the new look. "You're no longer ashamed to invite your family and friends," Suri says. "I've nicknamed it the Serenity Towers Beach Resort."

Development director for multifamily housing in Florida, Alabama and Mississippi, drove from Jacksonville to greet the brothers in the ballroom. He says he's thrilled to see them preserving affordable senior housing.

The federal status means residents of the 210 units pay only a percentage of their income for rent and utilities, and are eligible to have subsidies and voucher pro-

grams cover the rest.

Bethany Towers was built in 1972 with HUD-insured loans, and its affordable status would have expired in 2012. Often, new owners of such buildings pump in money only to turn them into luxury condos, forcing tenants with vouchers out. Instead, the Kings pushed to keep Serenity affordable, and 60 empty, run-down units — fully renovated — are all now leased.

"It's inspiring to see someone pull so hard to make this happen," Branson said.

It provides a healing moment for Gary Hofmeyer, who as a former pastor of Bethany Reform Church sat on the Bethany Housing board as the church and towers struggled financially. "It was hard, but I feel like we found the best solution for the people who lived there," said Hofmeyer, now pastor at Northwest Presbyterian Church in St. Petersburg.

The March 2009 sale for \$1.6 million marked the start of the turnaround. Tenants who stayed got new windows and watched the 17-story complex come back to life.

Earl Suri, 68, has lived in the complex almost four years. "I was here in the dark days," he says.

When he moved in, his kids were impressed by the 10th-floor view with glimpses of the bay. Later, he woke up to roaches, and the stained lobby embarrassed him. Now he waves a hand to the lobby's elegant shell theme, with palms outside.

"You're no longer ashamed to invite your family and friends," he says. "I've nicknamed it the Serenity Towers Beach Resort."

Times researcher Carolyn Edds contributed to this report.