

Posted on Sun, Oct. 08, 2006

N. Miami retail company reaches out to underserved areas

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Years before Miami became *the* hot spot for redevelopment, Redevco was building shopping centers in underserved urban neighborhoods like Liberty City and Richmond Heights.

Redevco's projects are worlds apart from those catering to the people moving into condominiums that cost a half-million dollars or more.

For President Debra Sinkle Kolsky, it's about creating shopping places to meet the needs of Miami's inner-city communities and giving people like Deborah Dean a place to call their own.

Until six years ago when Redevco built the Shoppes at Liberty City, Dean had to leave her neighborhood just to do her basic shopping.

"This is really the only place for us to shop," said Dean, as she finished buying groceries at the Liberty City Winn-Dixie. "I hope they decide to build something else. I've been here all my life, and this neighborhood has really been neglected."

Kolsky can't change it all, but she likes to believe she's at least making a difference. In addition to Liberty City, Redevco built Promenade Plaza in Richmond Heights and now manages the center in a public-private partnership with the Richmond Heights Community Development Corp. The company also owns Brownsville Renaissance Center in unincorporated Miami-Dade and has several urban redevelopment projects underway in Miami, Little Haiti and the Black Gables area of Coral Gables.

'A SOCIAL COMMITMENT'

"We have a mission, and it's not just about the bottom line," said Kolsky, who runs the North Miami company along with her husband, Allan Kolsky, Redevco's chairman and founder. "It's a social commitment for us. We're happy to give something back."

When the Shoppes at Liberty City opened in October 2000, it marked the area's first major commercial development in about a decade. The 79,000-square-foot strip center includes national tenants like Winn-Dixie, Radio Shack, Payless ShoeSource, Simply Fashions and Wendy's.

While those names are on every suburban street corner from Kendall to Pembroke Pines, their arrival in Liberty City was viewed as a sign of hope for a community that had long struggled to rebound from the impact of the 1980 riots.

Overcoming the lingering perception of Liberty City as a crime-ridden neighborhood was one of Kolsky's biggest challenges in luring retailers to the project.

"When people heard Liberty City, all they could think about was the riots," Kolsky said. "It had been 20 years, but people still referred to the riots like it was yesterday. It's the perceived fear of these neighborhoods."

Kolsky used police department statistics to prove to retailers that crime rates were no worse than other neighborhoods. She even agreed to an unusual lease clause: allowing one retailer the option to break the lease if crime got too bad.

But those were problems Kolsky never had to face. Since the center opened, she's had only one vacancy, when Hollywood Video closed earlier this year because of issues within its own business that had nothing to do with Liberty City.

Sales have continued to grow since the center's opening, as retailers have learned the value of operating in a market with little competition.

"For us, business has been great," said Sasha Malvo, assistant manager of Simply Fashions. "These people love to shop."

Miami City Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones hopes Redevco's success will inspire other developers to consider retail projects in neighborhoods like Liberty City, Overtown, Wynwood and Little Haiti.

"I consider them pioneers, a developer that has no fear of going into the urban market," Spence-Jones said. "I welcome people like that to my district because that's the only way you're going to rebuild it."

SHARING THE PROFITS

In many of its projects, Redevco creates a public-private partnership so the community can share in the profits. The company first utilized this model after Hurricane Andrew, when it sold 51 percent of Promenade Plaza to the Richmond Heights CDC, which ultimately took control in 1998. Now Redevco only manages the center.

The CDC has been able to use profits from the center to build homes in the community and give scholarships to local residents, things that they say wouldn't have been possible without Redevco.

"They want to see the community thrive economically," said Patrick Merit, executive director of the Richmond Heights CDC. "They're not here to take from the community. They want to see the community grow and develop as we do."

Most recently, Kolsky has been struggling to break ground on the Bahamian Village, a mixed-use project in the Black Gables that has been almost six years in the planning.

Redevco once again created a public-private partnership with the Lola B. Walker Homeowners' Foundation of Coral Gables. Plans call for a mix of retail stores, a community center and office space on the 1.7 acre lot at U.S. 1 and Grand Avenue adjacent to the McFarlane Homestead Historic district. The community's portion of the proceeds will be invested in preserving the neighborhood's historic homes.

Residents are glad that Redevco has stuck with the project. "They don't start something and not finish it," said Leona Ferguson Cooper, a local activist whose husband heads the foundation. "Some developers would have been more than frustrated by now. Debra is the kind of developer that has the interest of the community at heart."