

Authority to mark 65th anniversary by honoring public housing heroes

By ERICA ERWIN
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The roar of the crowd, the flash of lights, the sound of her son's name booming over the stadium loudspeakers.

Peggy Sparks still remembers the first game her son, Cliff Crosby, played in the NFL.

"I can't believe he's come this far," Sparks said.

While Crosby, an Erie native and a defensive back for the Indianapolis Colts, prepares for Sunday's game against the Jacksonville Jaguars, Sparks will accept an award naming him a "Hero of Public Housing."

Crosby, who turns 29 today, and 11 other Erie residents who once lived in public housing will be honored during the Erie Housing Authority's 65th an-



Thelma Grady
Thelma Grady has been an active supporter of Erie's Northwestern Legal Services, past president of the Erie County Council of Public Housing, Erie County Council of Public Housing, Erie County Council of Public Housing, and the Erie Tenants Council. She has been a mainstay of public support for free legal services to low-income people throughout the state. She lived in Harbor Homes, Harbor Homes Annex, and Scattered Sites from the early '70s to the mid-1990s. "I really had a good feeling about my stay in public housing," she said. "It was a place where I could have a good quality life, safe and affordable. It was all one big family. I do have to say that when I need assistance, I go to the Bible. It has solutions for everything." Many times, she says, the Bible gave her courage to approach the Authority and suggest ideas. "The Authority always listened," she said. "And many times, the ideas were accepted. In the 1980s, the Erie Housing Authority was doing things with education and employment that other authorities aren't even doing today."

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Thelma Grady worked to support the rights of public housing tenants. Now she's being honored as a "Hero of Public Housing" by the Erie Housing Authority. A page in an Erie Housing Authority calendar marks her road to success.

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niversary celebration Friday.

The awards are given to those who have lived in any of the Housing Authority's developments and become successful.

"Through these awards, we want to show the larger population the caliber of individuals who have gone through public housing," Executive Director John Horan said. "It's a pretty impressive list. Even the most jaded person would look at the list and say, 'Wow.'"

Former Erie resident Eleanor Smeal, co-founder and president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, will deliver the keynote speech at the awards ceremony, which will be held at the Avalon Hotel, 16 W. 10th St., Friday night.

While growing up in Harbor Homes, Crosby, then a star-athlete at East High School, would meet with friends and throw the football in the streets, Sparks said. Living in public housing spurred Crosby to achieve, she said.

"I never once heard Cliff complain about where we lived," said Sparks, who has long since moved from that first apartment in Harbor Homes on East 10th Street.

"Cliff talked about going away to college and being something," Sparks said. "He didn't say what he wanted to do, but he knew he wanted to go



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Dennis Tobin, the regional director for the Bureau of Narcotics and Drug Control in the state Attorney General's Office, said growing up in public housing taught him to cope with any situation. Now he's being honored as a "Hero of Public Housing."

college and make something of himself. He said he didn't want to be a drug dealer and hang out on the streets with his other friends.

Thelma Grady was surprised that the Housing Authority thought she was a success, that the organization wanted to honor her as a hero.

After moving to Erie more than 30 years ago from Mississippi, Grady found a steady job in a local dry cleaner and an

affordable apartment at Harbor Homes.

Though she has since moved into a senior-citizen apartment complex, Grady said she counts her years in Harbor Homes as some of the best in her life.

"I never regretted that I had to live in public housing," Grady said. "I always treated it like it was my own home."

One of the founders and the first president of the Erie Tenant Council, Grady was committed to

protecting the rights of her neighbors and others who lived in the authority's developments.

"The most important thing tenants need to know is their rights," said Grady, 71. "When they know their rights they make better tenants because they know what they can and cannot do."

Dennis Tobin, another honoree, said he wouldn't trade his experiences growing up in public housing for anything.

"When you grow up in public housing, it prepares you for anything," said Tobin, now the regional director for the Bureau of Narcotics and Drug Control in the state Attorney General's Office.

"Nothing can surprise me now. ... There are no boys that grew up in public housing. They're a bunch of little men."

Tobin, who grew up in a home filled with seven children on Buffalo Road, said growing up in public housing makes a person well-rounded.

"You're not given anything," he said. "You make everything for yourself. You strive to do better because you were never given anything, and that's the way it should be for everybody."

"That's what living in public housing taught me."

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