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## Former first lady's impact still felt at Atlanta's Rosalynn Apartments

*Rosalynn Carter helped bolster efforts to create more housing for people with mental illnesses.*

By Matt Kempner  
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The hallucinations began when she was 19. Ellen Roberts saw and felt them, as if people were touching her arm.

“I had to tell myself, ‘No. I’m OK. I’m OK.’”

Over and over again, she was treated in hospitals, where doctors struggled to find medicines that helped. She’d get out and find work. But, inevitably, her illness — a combination of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder — would rise again.

She feared she would end up living on the streets. In 2004, she was out of a job, short of money and about to be put out of her apartment.

“I was so worried,” Roberts said. Then she felt the ripple effects of a former first lady of the United States.

Roberts applied for and got housing, thanks to a nonprofit launched by a number of Georgians, including Rosalynn Carter, who turns 96 on Friday.

Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter are well known for their work with Habitat for Humanity and the creation of the Carter Center to foster peace, eradicate diseases and spread democracy.

In addition, Rosalynn Carter — who is struggling with dementia, the Carter Center recently announced — long championed addressing mental health issues and pushed for support of caregivers.

Still, many people are unaware of her fingerprints on 3Keys, the nonprofit that helped Roberts.

For years, the organization has provided housing for nearly 500 people at a time who suffer from severe, chronic and persistent mental illness and are homeless or on the brink of it.

In the 1980s, Gabriele Lockridge was a single mom running out of options. Her son, then about 25, had schizophrenia and had spent nearly a decade on a rotation of hospitals, jail cells, the streets and his mother’s apartment.

“He needed help and nothing was available,” Lockridge remembered.

She didn't have a lot of resources or money to cover her son's lifelong needs.

Decades earlier, there had been a push around the nation to get patients out of long stays at sprawling mental hospitals, including Georgia's massive Central State Hospital in Milledgeville. But once released, those patients often found there were insufficient supportive services to help them stay safe and housed. Many ended up homeless.

Lockridge joined forces with a friend, Pat Reeser, who was an assistant to the president of a local Atlanta bank and knew other powerful people in the local business community. Together, they recruited friends who recruited friends, all with the goal of starting an organization to create housing for people with mental illnesses.

The hope was that businesses could raise construction funds and then government dollars would cover operating costs for the housing and supportive services, from case management to rides to medical appointments.

But the organization needed someone with more pull. Lockridge led a group to meet with Rosalynn Carter several years after President Jimmy Carter left the White House.

She asked the former first lady to become the honorary chairperson of the nonprofit, then called Project Interconnections.

Carter agreed. She soon helped recruit other board members. She suggested honing the organization's focus to center on the homeless.

And she met with neighbors to find backing for what would become the first of five housing developments in Fulton and DeKalb counties.

Her work attracted attention.

When George H.W. Bush was president, first lady Barbara Bush visited one of the organization's projects.

During the Clinton administration, second lady Tipper Gore added her support. Carter's work for the nonprofit included speaking to potential donors.

"She is a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, warm person. I worked with her for 30 years," Lockridge said.

Lockridge hasn't seen her benefactor in a while, though, as the pandemic and then Carter's health problems curbed her active involvement with the nonprofit's events.

Up until a few years ago, the former first lady appeared at annual fundraisers for 3Keys. She would often tear up talking about the impact of the organization, a spokeswoman for the nonprofit said.

In an email, a spokeswoman for the Carter Center described 3Keys as very successful and said the former first lady was proud of it. Carter wrote in a 2018 letter to the nonprofit, “My dream is to see this model replicated in communities across America.”

Eventually, the organization put her name on one of its developments, the 56-unit Rosalynn Apartments in Chamblee.

Roberts moved into the Rosalynn Apartments not too long after they opened.

She greeted Carter several times at fundraisers, where the former first lady would tell the audience before an auction: “Dig deep and bid high.”

While many residents may spend the rest of their lives in housing provided by 3Keys, others, including Roberts, have moved on.

When she was a resident, she started working in the complex’s front office, gradually increasing the length of her shifts. Now 60, Roberts is married. She and her husband own a condo not far away. But she still works part time at the apartments and serves on the 3 Keys board.

Residents of Rosalynn Apartments are provided some disability services, though some community activities were cut back during the pandemic.

People living there are responsible for keeping up with their medications. They cook for themselves.

All of the small, efficiency units have exterior doors that face an interior courtyard.

Residents come and go as they please. Some have cars of their own. Others rely on public transportation.

They pay 30% of whatever income they have — including disability payments — for rent.

Scott Walker, 3Keys chief executive officer, said the organization hopes to acquire land for a new 100- unit community along the west side of the Atlanta Beltline.

“There is absolutely a shortage of affordable housing for people with disabilities,” Walker said.

Rosalynn Carter and her husband left an indelible mark on the nonprofit, he said.

Joe Howard, 66, has lived at the Rosalynn Apartments for years.

He keeps a photo taken one of the times he greeted the former first lady at a 3Keys fundraiser. He is in a cowboy hat, a cross dangling from his necklace. Carter’s hand is clasped in his. He said he remembers her words. “She told me to continue to do good work.”

The Carters “have been a great inspiration for me,” he said.

Some others who live in the complex are unaware of the Carter connection. That doesn't mean they aren't grateful.

"I live here because I need to," said 62-year-old Stefan Emerson. He added later, "This is a special little home for me."