

Enderly Park's 'squeaky wheel' got things done

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She was the squeaky wheel of Charlotte's Enderly Park neighborhood who saw to it that her "good people" were given sufficient oil to operate properly.

Bette Rae Thomas, a native Charlottean who had lived mostly in her Tuckaseegee Road home since childhood, died Oct. 24, 2011.

She was 82 and shared her name with the nearby Bette Rae Thomas Center.

In the 1930s, Bette attended Enderly Park Elementary School. Decades later, when it fell into disrepair, attracting vagrants, prostitutes and drug dealers, Bette campaigned to have it torn down.

She succeeded. In 2001, before a crowd of local residents and the public officials she had organized, Bette told the demolition crew: "Take it down, boys."

She saw a need

She was a longtime community activist. Although she had no children of her own, she saw their needs.

The Enderly Park Recreation Center, built in 1948, didn't provide adequate hours or activities.

"We're a threatened and fragile neighborhood," Bette told the Observer in 2005. "I'm just trying to give them something to look forward to."

She didn't know her neighbors had signed a petition requesting that the new center, which sits just six blocks from her home, be named for her.

Bette's position in the neighborhood grew from her lifelong nursing career. At first, folks sought only her medical advice. Next, they questioned where they could get help with other problems. She found out for them.

She gnawed at bureaucrats, politicians and officeholders. She pushed for improved roads, services and housing for her community. "I have run those men ragged," she once said.

She was just as devoted to planting flowers at the neighborhood entrances at Tuckaseegee and Effingham roads as she was at pushing police to raid drug houses. Enderly Park was her neighborhood.

"She was truly a remarkable woman because of her love for her community and her service to her neighbors and fellow man," said Avery Phillips, a longtime friend and a fellow member of University Hills Baptist Church, where Bette's family have been members since 1929.

'Always in charge'

"She was a shy person, but she was not shy about something she believed in strongly," said her nephew, Bill Thomas. "She wanted things done right and she did everything to ensure that. She was so precise, so particular, and she was always in charge."

"This is my community and everyone around here is my neighbor," Bette once told a reporter. "I want them to have a nice place to live and I want to hold onto my community. We have good people here."

And Bette Rae Thomas was most certainly one of them.

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Funeral service is 1 p.m. today at University Hills Baptist Church. Burial is in Forest Lawn West Cemetery.

Caption: Thomas