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KAWAIDA TOWERS, INC.

Inamu Amiri Baraka .. SPIRITUAL LEADER

Cheo Afuasi .. President
Kaimu Mtetezi . Vice President
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NEWARK -- Groundbreaking ceremonies will be held at 2 p.m. Thursday, October 12 for the 16-story Kawaida Towers apartments in the North Ward, an event which represents an historic breakthrough for this city's black community.

Sponsor of the \$6.4 million development, which is being financed through a 48-year mortgage from the Housing Finance Agency of the State Department of Community Affairs, is Temple Kawaida. Spiritual leader of this organization is poet-playwright-black nationalist Inamu Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones).

Even though this represents a significant step toward revitalizing New Jersey's largest city, Kawaida Towers, at 129-141 Lincoln Avenue, near Delevan Avenue and Broadway, remains an unlikely program with an even more unlikely sponsor. The development is the product of an unprecedented black-white collaboration.

The guiding concept behind the 210-apartment unit program for low and moderate-income families is described by participants as "mix and match". At the top, the mix includes three men -- Baraka, who is known as one of the nation's most outspoken black nationalists; Raymond A. Brown, a Jersey City lawyer, National Guard colonel, member of key State committees and boards, counsel to Kawaida and a black who moves comfortably within New Jersey's highest professional and civic levels; and Alvin E. Gershen, Trenton-based, nationally known urban planner who is housing consultant to the project. All three will participate in the groundbreaking ceremonies along with various public officials, including Newark Mayor Kenneth A. Gibson.

The "mix and match" concept represents perhaps the most unique feature of Kawaida Towers. It results from the determination of Temple Kawaida and Baraka to give blacks the greatest possible control over their own institutions -- in this case, housing. While the Kawaida Towers contract contains the customary affirmative action clause requiring that a certain percentage of minority workers be given a piece of the job action, it provides no opportunities for black entrepreneurs -- a shortcoming noted by Baraka and discussed in great detail by him with Brown and Gershen. The trio quickly agreed that blacks should hold leadership positions on major building projects. It took

longer for them to agree on how this could be accomplished. The problem was that few blacks had experience in construction management.

Ultimately Kawaida Towers emerged as a logical vehicle to give blacks the leadership opportunities that are being sought. It was recognized, for example, that few black architects had successfully handled high-rise apartments. So the Kawaida Towers principals sought out Romolo Bottelli, well-known Maplewood architect, to serve as the architect on the structure. They matched him with a black architectural consultant, Majenzi Kuumba, of Newark.

Gershen, who is chairman of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, has planned several successful urban renewal and innovative housing programs throughout the State. He brought a young black housing consultant into his office -- Vernon Clash, of Newark, who is working with Gershen Associates not only on Kawaida Towers but on other major housing and planning developments as well.

The general contractor is Bruno J. Lucarelli, Jr., of B.J. Builders of New Jersey, Inc., West Long Branch, one of the most experienced building contractors in the development of subsidized housing. He has agreed to use qualified black subcontractors wherever possible.

And even Brown, one of the State's best-known trial lawyers, but not a real estate specialist, found himself matched with a white co-counsel, Nathan A. Schanerman, of Newark. The latter specializes in housing law.

Thus the components were fused and Temple Kawaida was prepared to prove it could move decisively in behalf of both Newark and its black community. Kawaida Towers is being constructed in a section of the city inhabited largely by Italian-Americans who have been among Baraka's severest critics. What many have failed to recognize is that the North Ward also long has been the home of a large segment of Newark's black community.

Kawaida Towers is being built on a 1.77-acre site and will include 45 efficiency, 90 one-bedroom and 75 two-bedroom units. Approximately half the apartments will have balconies. Rentals will range between \$117 and \$188 per month. Federal interest subsidies will permit qualifying tenants to receive rent reductions of up to 70%. The basement and first floor of Kawaida Towers will be devoted exclusively to community rooms, including a hobby shop and Day Care Center. The building is scheduled for completion late next year.

The president of Kawaida Towers, Inc., Cheo Mfuasi, notes that the high-rise is being constructed within the general framework of the Temple Kawaida ideology -- a framework which deals with all ideas and problems relating to the black community.

"Kawaida in Swahili means tradition and reason," Mfuasi said, "and we are applying both in our approach to this program."

Mfuasi (formerly S. George Reed, Jr.), 33, was a public school teacher and social worker in Chicago before moving to Newark and becoming active with Temple Kawaida in the late 1960's.

Baraka, Brown and Gershen credit Newark Mayor Kenneth A. Gibson with helping to provide much of the impetus for local approval of the program which includes a provision for payment of 15% of rentals in lieu of taxes. The City Council pitched in by unanimously concurring.

"The main thrust of Temple Kawaida is self-reliance," Baraka declares, "and whether you are talking about building a building, writing a play or singing a song, it is difficult to be successful without proper skills. It is these skills that must be learned by our black brothers and sisters. Commitment is not enough."

The 38-year-old Baraka refers to Newark as "New Ark", which reflects his conviction that the city can be made to lead the rebirth of all of the nation's cities. He views Kawaida Towers as one of the most important steps to be taken toward that rebirth.

Many members of the Temple Kawaida wear a lapel button which displays Baraka's photo and beneath it this legend: "Kazi is the blackest of all."

"Kazi" in Swahili means work and "blackest" in this instance is a synonym for best.

Kawaida Towers is one example of what can be accomplished when philosophy is translated into kazi.

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