

Jackson House stalwart gets help

USF students join effort to save historic building

BY KATHY STEELE
The Tampa Tribune

TAMPA — Willie Robinson Jr. made an instant connection with two University of South Florida students when he visited their class to speak about the historic Jackson House. He has been a persistent, often lone, voice in recent years while pressing for rehabilitation of his family's historic rooming house.

During the segregation era, the two-story, wood-frame house was among the few places blacks could find lodging. Among its famous visitors were entertainers Ella Fitzgerald, Cab Callaway, Count Basie and James Brown.

"He brought pictures and told stories," said 26-year-old Abney Henderson. His subject was Tam-



Jackson House owner Willie Robinson has fought for years to preserve his family's historic structure.

pa and its racial history; but more importantly, she said, "It was personal to him."

Henderson and 22-year-old Brandy Langley now have joined Robinson in telling the story of the 111-year-old rooming house and the black business district that once surrounded it.

Both are USF graduate students in Africana studies.

Robinson's maternal grandmother, Sarah Jack-

son, was the original owner of the 24-room boarding house, which was built in 1901 as a six-room cottage at 815 Zack St. Jackson also operated the Jackson Cab Co., Tampa's only black-owned taxi service in the 1930s.

Robinson's mother, Sarah Robinson, inherited the Jackson House and operated it until her death in 1989.

Bracken Engineering put together a three-year timeline and a nearly \$1 million cost estimate to complete the restoration. The firm is donating about \$80,000 of in-kind services to the project.

Robinson hopes the house, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, can become a home for veterans.

The area around Zack and nearby Central Avenue was once the black business district, featuring shops, restaurants and entertainment venues such as the Cotton Club and the



CLIFF MCBRIDE/STAFF

Jackson House was the only boarding house in the area available for blacks during segregation. An engineering firm estimates it will cost \$1 million to renovate the structure.

Apollo Theater. Robinson's father, Willie Robinson Sr., owned a Central Avenue barber shop.

Urban renewal in the 1970s dismantled much of the district. The Jackson House is the last residential structure standing.

"This is where people during segregation had to

work with each other and depend on each other to survive," Henderson said. "Urban development took that away. It broke the relationship."

Henderson was unaware of the Jackson House's history until Robinson spoke at USF.

Robinson said his efforts

to save the house sometimes have felt like "taking two steps forward and one step back." With Henderson and Langley adding their voices to his, Robinson is more hopeful.

ksteele@tampatrib.com
(813) 259-7652