

Madam Speaker, I rise today to recognize Ms. Essie “Big Mama” Reed for her outstanding contributions to the Ft. Lauderdale community. Big Mama stands apart as an exemplary citizen and living testimony to compassion and generosity.

Big Mama’s impact on Ft. Lauderdale began in 1988. When her youngest son was just a month old, Big Mama’s husband abandoned the family, leaving them homeless. For the next three years, Big Mama and her three sons slept on the concrete floor of the fish market she owned. Despite being destitute and unable to provide her sons with such basic things as school supplies, Big Mama and her boys regularly prayed after school at the Royal Assembly Church.

It is her triumph over personal adversity that inspired Big Mama to begin a crusade of personal outreach. Realizing how fortunate she was to have caring neighbors who provided her and her sons with basic needs, Big Mama decided to give back by helping at-risk youth avoid the common street predators of drugs, gangs, and prostitution.

In the early 1990s, Big Mama solidified a values-based approach that, when coupled with her uncommon bravery in the face of long odds, has helped keep over 1,300 area youth on a promising path.

Big Mama’s contribution has been particularly meaningful to the Ft. Lauderdale School System. With scores of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, Big Mama provides personal afterschool care and guidance for students who might not get the attention they need at home. Big Mama also holds popular “shut-ins” four times a year at her church, where local school children are exposed to a “selfless passion for excellence in education and social advancement” through self-reliance. All this prompted Rhoda Gawlowski, assistant principal at New River Middle School, to say of Big Mama: “I have never, ever met a person like her. She helps everyone in our school: the children, the parents, members of the community. I don’t know how she does it, but she manages to find time to spend with every student who seeks her out.”

Big Mama’s commitment to service, however, is not limited to Ft. Lauderdale Schools. After Hurricane Wilma devastated Florida in 2005, leaving residents without power and food, Big Mama made sure everybody had something to eat. And I mean everybody. Working together with local leaders, Big Mama was able to secure enough donations to personally cook for 1,000

low-income residents in a week. All of this from a woman who recently faced her second bout with homelessness because her house – what people in Ft. Lauderdale refer to as a sanctuary – did not meet local code with its leaky roof covered, in some parts, with a plastic tarp.

Big Mama also founded the Team of Life, a Ft. Lauderdale nonprofit, to allow her personal outreach efforts to reach even more people in her community. The organization regularly organizes charitable drives during the holiday and back-to-school seasons with great success. In addition to an annual turkey drive that collects turkeys for needy families – 20,000 in 2009 alone – so that they may enjoy the Thanksgiving holiday, Big Mama organizes an annual health drive to immunize local children whose families otherwise could not afford such vital care.

Through it all, Big Mama has never asked for recognition. All she wants is for Ft. Lauderdale children to experience the reality of a better tomorrow. Because of such uncommon grace, compassion, and generosity, I stand before you, Madam Speaker, to recognize Ms. Essie “Big Mama” Reed as a true American hero.

- [ARCHIVED HEROES](#)