

Former New York Mets slugger Mo Vaughn building a better tomorrow in the Bronx

BY Jesse Spector

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

Saturday, May 15th 2010, 3:42 PM

A tenant walks down the hallway on the eighth floor of Thessalonica Court, a 191-unit apartment building on St. Ann's Ave. in the South Bronx, and his face lights up as he approaches the building's landlord.

"This is my friend, with the Mets!" he says. "Mets all the way!"

Mo Vaughn only played 166 games with the Mets after making three All-Star teams and winning the 1995 American League MVP award with the Red Sox. But in his post-baseball life, as co-founder and managing director of the real estate development company Omni New York, the only tie Vaughn has to his Boston days is the color selection for the Thessalonica Court playground. "Fenway green, baby," he says while continuing a tour of Omni's first project.

"I always felt - it's like coming to New York to play, you've got to play well in New York - it's the biggest place," Vaughn says. "If you have a chance to do business, you do it there. That was my mindset - not Boston, not California. New York City. If you can do it, you do it in the biggest place - the best place."

Vaughn hit 328 homers in his big league career, but only 29 with the Mets, his final two years in baseball. The 42-year-old, who grew up in Connecticut, says he once couldn't imagine living in an apartment, but now does just that on the East Side of Manhattan. The central location allows him an easy commute to any of Omni's properties.

Omni bought Thessalonica Court and the nearby Brookhaven Apartments in 2004. At the time, says Gus Velasquez, Thessalonica's superintendent for the last seven years, "There was no tile on the floor. There was graffiti all over the walls. Twenty people in the hall, in the staircase, fighting. Everybody smoked in the hallway. Now you don't see one person. Everyone's in his apartment."

That transformation is thanks to Vaughn and his company, which undertook a 12-month rehabilitation project and not only cleaned up Thessalonica, but made it a desirable place to live - now with a 500-strong waiting list of low-income families receiving government housing subsidies. Omni is now up to its 23rd project with the March purchase of the Dr. Betty Shabazz complex and Medgar Evers Houses in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and last month Vaughn received the John W. Macy Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, sharing a dais in Washington, D.C., with fellow honoree Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and the directors of UNITY of Greater New Orleans.

"It's probably the most nervous I've ever been," Vaughn says. "Before I walked over, I said, 'God, please let these words come out of my mouth the right way.' And it did. That was a tremendous thing. Everybody had speeches, I had nothing. They had all these real stories of (Hurricane) Katrina and different things. But I think it's a great story, this whole thing. We come from all different places and formed a team that is successful."

One of the key members of that team is Eugene Schneur, the other co-founder of Omni, who was Vaughn's attorney when the first baseman came to him with the idea to bring a business model to New York after seeing it work in the Midwest. As Schneur puts it, "We do well by doing good."

Says Vaughn, "If you think about it, a for-profit entity and doing good? It's usually one or the other, but not both."