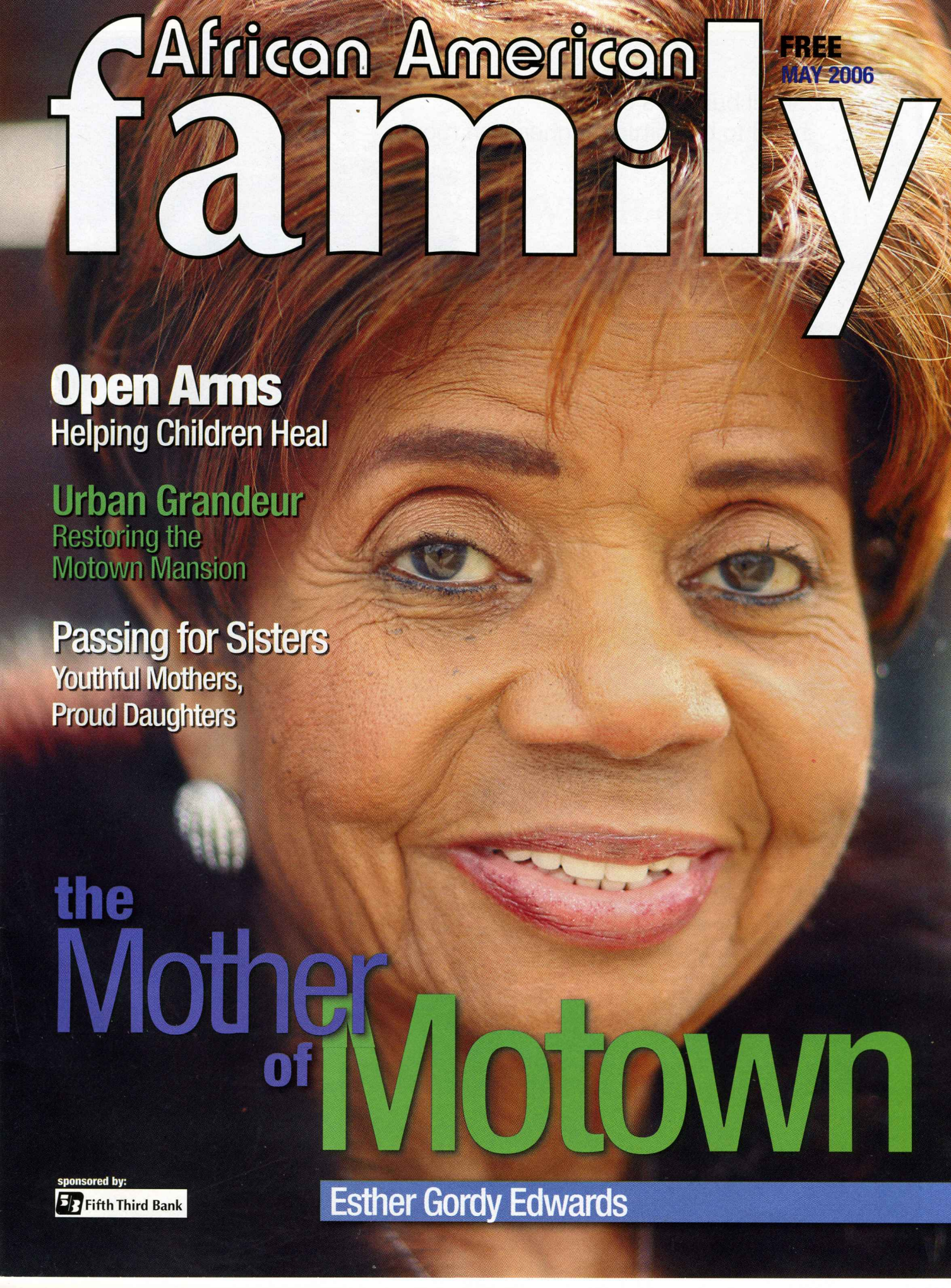

African American
family
FREE
MAY 2006
Open Arms
Helping Children Heal
Urban Grandeur
Restoring the
Motown Mansion
Passing for Sisters
Youthful Mothers,
Proud Daughters
the
Mother
of
Motown
Esther Gordy Edwards
sponsored by:
Fifth Third Bank

# Urban

## Brother-sister team restore historic Motown Mansion

By Eddie Allen Jr.

She calls herself "mistress of the manor."

But clever titles only tell part of the story that led Cynthia Reaves to her residence at one of Detroit's most popular historic homes.

By purchasing the sprawling, castle-like house at 918 Boston, better known as the Motown Mansion, near the John C. Lodge Freeway, Reaves says she invested in a living legacy.

Once owned by Motown Records founder Berry Gordy, the palatial mansion holds memories of not only some of the world's greatest entertainers, but of some of the most successful entrepreneurs to ever live in Detroit.

Reaves, 43, says she is the first woman to buy 918 Boston.

"I think it's really incumbent on people who are professionals and have quality jobs to commit to the city and live in the city," she says.

A partner with the Honigman Miller Schwartz and Cohn Detroit law firm, Reaves says it was not only her commitment to the city where she was raised, but her passion for structural design that led her to the mansion's door.

"I have always had a love of architecture, but I didn't think I could deal with the math and science," she laughs while sitting in the mansion's cozy sunroom. "I've learned now from my friends who are architects that they don't deal with it, either. They have the engineers do it for them."

The sunroom is just off the front entrance and overlooks a winding driveway that runs between an athletic building and the backyard. Inside, there are nine bedrooms, seven dining areas, a gourmet kitchen, basement ballroom, mosaic tile and marble flooring, much of it punctuated with fine wood paneling and antique furniture. An underground tunnel lined with photographs of the Commodores, Jacksons and other top Motown acts of the 1960s and 1970s leads to the athletic building where there is a pool, gym and two-lane bowling alley. Stained glass windows, bronze front and back doors and indoor and outdoor fountains decorate the structure and surrounding landscape.

An eclectic mix of ethnic symbols, statues and artistic details flow from one room to the next, reflecting the various imprints of five occupants who have owned the mansion since it was built in 1917. Acorns, which are symbols of good fortune in the original homeowner's native Denmark, decorate various fixtures, and there are other rare details throughout the house.

No stranger to the neighborhood, Reaves grew up on Boston a few houses away and across the street from 918. She recalls enjoying star sightings as a child when she and Ken Reaves, her younger brother and partner in the mansion's renovation, watched Gordy's private events from upstairs at their old home.

"We saw the Jackson 5 playing (miniature) golf in the yard, and we saw Aretha Franklin," she says. "They would roll the red carpet around the corner. We remember those things."

While attending school at the University of Michigan and then practicing law

# Grandeur

in Washington, D.C. Reaves was far away from her old neighborhood. But following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in Washington, D.C. and New York, which claimed the lives of a few personal friends, she returned to Detroit to stay with her mother again.

"I kept driving past the house and the windows were always shuttered. I couldn't tell if anybody lived here," she says.

Reaves later learned that the property had been empty since 1967 when Gordy relocated, except for a groundskeeper who occasionally lived there until his death in the 1990s. She researched the property and wrote to Gordy in California, telling him of her interest in keeping the house as a legacy to future Detroiters and visitors to the city. Gordy sold her the house in 2002, and she and her brother began renovating it the next year.

Reaves will not disclose what she paid Gordy for the purchase, but says she recently declined a $1.7 million offer from another potential buyer.

"The story's not over for me here. It's kind of a labor of love," she adds.

Insisting that she is not a millionaire, Reaves says she frequented Home Depot and made numerous eBay purchases during the mansion's ongoing refurbishment. Problems related to frozen pipes had caused wall and ceiling damage in the house, and contractors had dislodged chunks of marble from the floor as they worked, says Reaves.

Even before Detroit's best-known music magnate bought 918 Boston – reportedly after bringing a few Motown artists to do a private show and help sway the previous owner – self-made millionaires occupied the home: Nels Michelson, an immigrant from Denmark, turned his lumber business into a profitable home-construction company, and built the mansion for himself. A coil-maker who supplied parts to auto companies later bought the house and added the athletic building in 1926.

Gordy bought it from a librarian who had convinced a border to dress as a servant and help give the appearance of wealth, Reaves says. Similar stories that she has heard and learned about the mansion are shared during tours she provides and at special events where she opens the home to community groups who visit.

**Artistry:** *Cynthia Reaves stands between ornamental doors handcrafted in the 1920s.*

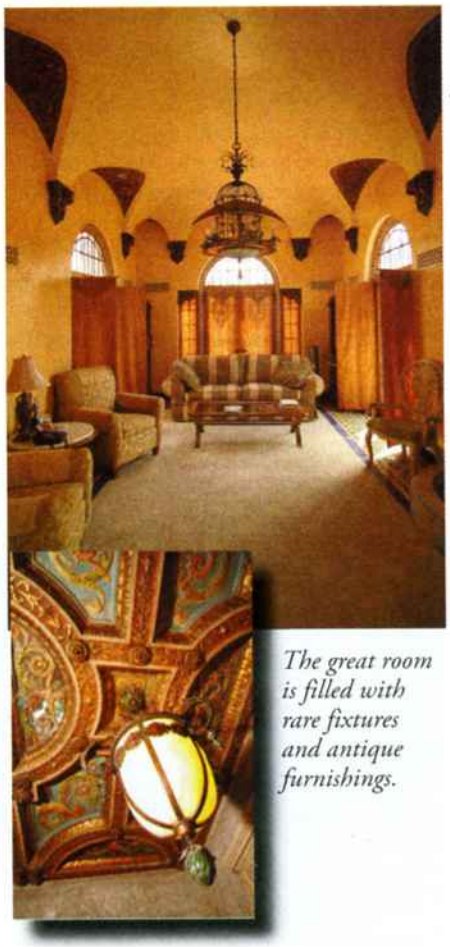
The mansion is listed in national, state and local historic registers, says Danielle Lewon, a Detroit Historic District Commission staff member. She adds that even without the distinction of Gordy's ownership, 918 Boston would likely meet the criteria required for a site designation plaque or other recognition.

But for now, Reaves, who shares the space with her brother and mom, says she and her family are content with their own designations. She calls the haven a mansion and points out a front door archway that she commissioned an artist to paint with spiritual symbols from throughout the world.

"We wanted people of all cultures to feel welcome in our house," she adds, "and to feel blessed when leaving."

*For information about tours or holding special events at the Motown Mansion, e-mail info@motownmansion.com.* ✣

*— Eddie Allen Jr. is author of Low Road, the Life and Legacy of Donald Goines. (St. Martin's Press, 2004).*



*All Photos by Rob Sillars*

*The great room is filled with rare fixtures and antique furnishings.*