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Kurt Hegre / The Fresno Bee
George Finley, 79, is one of the winners of the Fresno West Coalition for Economic Development's Risk Takers, Dream Makers award.

A voice for west Fresno

George Finley began community work during LBJ's 'War on Poverty.' He hasn't stopped.

By Jeff St. John / The Fresno Bee
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In his 54 years living and working in west Fresno, George Finley has learned that economic revitalization takes a team effort.

Which makes Finley something of a team captain.

"I like to see the groups work together, and get together, to push for the things we all want to get done," the longtime community activist said Monday, as he and a group of volunteers worked on renovating the Hinton Community Center.

It's just one of many organizations for which Finley serves as a board member and on-the-ground organizer. His roster includes positions with the Fresno Housing Authority board, the Fresno County Economic Opportunity Commission, Fresno's Redevelopment Agency and the Edison II Merger Committee, a citizens committee that advises the Fresno City Council on land-use issues in the neighborhood.

"It keeps me busy, I can tell you that," the youthful 79-year-old said. But he said he sees the task of revitalizing his neighborhood worth the effort.

"What we're talking about with west Fresno is ownership," he said.

Finley said that means bringing affordable homes to the neighborhood, supporting homegrown commercial development and increasing community involvement in the government and nonprofit groups working in the area — all of which requires teamwork.

It's that effort that will win Finley recognition at the second annual Risk Takers, Dream Makers awards luncheon noon Thursday at the Cornerstone Conference Center in downtown Fresno.

Sponsored by the Fresno West Coalition for Economic Development, the award luncheon is a way to "showcase the people who have made a sacrifice, particularly a financial sacrifice, for west Fresno," said Keith Kelley, coalition president.

Such sacrifices are challenging in west Fresno, the neighborhood that lies west of Highway 99 bounded by Belmont, Marks and American avenues, where 2000 census figures indicate 42% of the population lives under the federal poverty line.

But that doesn't mean growth can't happen there, Kelley said. Just look at the Kearney Palms Shopping Center, where stores now see brisk business, despite concerns by developers that the neighborhood couldn't support them, he said.

Or consider the \$20 million, 300-acre, revitalization project that will bring homes, apartments, a swimming-pool complex, community center and new commercial opportunities to a mile-long stretch of California Avenue, he said.

These projects, and others like them, all came about through partnerships between government and community-based organizations, Kelley said. This year's awards recognize players from a lot of different teams who have helped make them happen.

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