

Real Stories

MEET THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN MAKING CONNECTIONS NEIGHBORHOODS

2007

New Orleans

Nearly 228,000 homes were damaged or destroyed in New Orleans when the levees broke. In Central City, where Nena Handy grew up, half the neighborhood went underwater. Eighty percent of the residents were renters, many living in old shotgun houses like Handy's, long neglected by truant landlords. Before Katrina, Handy's ramshackle rental had holes in the floor and gaps in the walls. With no insulation, the house was damp in the winter and sweltering in the summer. After Katrina, "the critters took over," she says of the roaches, rats, and termites that moved in as the waters receded. Handy had had enough. She convinced her husband, Neil Maneaux, they could do better.



NENA HANDY, HER HUSBAND CORNELIUS
"NEIL" MANEAUX, AND THEIR SONS
JASON AND CORNELIUS ON THE PORCH
OF THEIR NEW HOUSE.

Nena Handy is trained as a professional chef and makes a mean jambalaya, one of her husband's favorite dishes. "I'll cook anything I can get my hands on," she says. From the kitchen window of the house she was renting, Handy could see a construction crew next door putting up a brand new modular home. Fed up with a "slumlord that never got around to fixing anything," she decided to talk to Chris Ross, a man she'd seen on the building site. "I just told him flat out I wanted it," she recalls.

Chris Ross is project director of the New Orleans Neighborhood Development Collaborative, the contractor-developer of the house Handy had her eye on. NONDC is one of several nonprofit developers in New Orleans building houses that low-income and working families can actually afford to own. "We're about making investments in people, not just places," Ross says. "We're about changing lives. More than 60 percent of the households in Central City get by on less than \$20,000 a year. Economic development is fine, but it needs to take into account the needs of low-to-moderate income families."

Ross sent Handy to a local bank for financing. She and her husband had never even bothered with a checking account and knew nothing about financing a house. But her husband had a good job as a manager with a grocery store, and they felt they could swing a mortgage.

"They walked us through the whole process, answered all of my questions," Handy remembers. "Our credit checked out perfect. We just needed to save a bit." Then Katrina hit.

"Once the levees broke, I knew everything was lost," she says about her hometown. A month after the storm, her husband returned to his job, and Handy began making trips from Baton Rouge, where the family was staying, to complete the loan application

for the house. When the city officially reopened, they moved back into the rental. Though the house hadn't flooded, the storm had shredded some of the siding and the roof. Birds flew in through the holes, but at least Handy and her family had a roof over their heads. Others weren't so lucky.

Lack of affordable housing remains the central dilemma for low-income families hoping to make a life in post-Katrina New Orleans. Forty-eight thousand rental units were damaged or lost in the flood. Five thousand renters in public housing evacuated with the





CHRIS ROSS, PROJECT DIRECTOR FOR THE NEW ORLEANS NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATIVE, ON THE CONSTRUCTION SITE OF A NEW HOUSE GOING UP IN CENTRAL CITY.

storm; only a handful has been permitted to return. Community activists and residents have advocated for reopening the housing, at least temporarily, and the issue is now in the courts. Rents are up a whopping 40 to 70 percent in many neighborhoods across the city. And while the distribution of recovery funds for homeowners has been glacially slow, renters have been largely left out in the cold.

Katrina shattered lives and tore off roofs, but it also blew a hole wide open in the political culture of the region. Community groups and advocates for the poor have stepped into the breach in an effort to have a say about the region's future on everything from housing to wetlands restoration. Living Cities, a consortium of major foundations (including the Annie E. Casey Foundation), businesses, and government entities, is working to shape an equitable housing recovery policy and to ensure that a fair share of recovery funds benefit low-income residents, including renters.

"We're looking at a real opportunity," says Chris Ross. "We have the chance now to invest in Central City and its people, an investment that should have been happening during the last 30 years, but didn't. How do we create public housing, for instance, that includes an exit strategy from poverty for families that have lived, raised their kids, and died there? How do we fund and

develop mixed-income housing for low-to-moderate working families who want to return or stay here?"

NONDC has joined with other nonprofit developers to build or rehab 75 houses, a small but a promising start. Living Cities, with the research and advocacy organization PolicyLink, has helped to organize 40 community-based organizations, including NONDC, into the Louisiana Housing Alliance to act as a voice for equitable housing policy.

Nena Handy, her husband Neil, and their boys, Cornelius and Jason, made do in the rental until their loan application was approved. "We could've moved somewhere else, but we decided to stay in the city," she says. "To me it's home and I wanted to get back here by any means necessary." With a small down payment, they signed the papers and took possession of the house Handy had had her heart set on. It had come through the storm unscathed.

The first night in their new home Nena Handy stood in the front room and asked her husband what he saw. "A beautiful woman," he said with a grin. **SHE PUT HER ARMS AROUND HIM AND TOLD HIM, "I SEE A HOUSE, A HOME—OUR OWN HOME!"** Handy counts their investment as a legacy for her sons. "This house is not only for us to be proud of, but for our kids as well."



“IT’S A WONDERFUL FEELING NOT TO BE RENTING,” SAYS NEIL MANEAUX (BELOW) WITH HIS SON.



JUST THE FACTS

- Only 40 percent of New Orleanians have returned since the storm, according to the Louisiana Recovery Authority. Finding affordable housing remains one of the greatest challenges.
- Nineteen thousand people called Central City home before Katrina; 80 percent of the households were renters.
- Congress allocated \$7.5 billion to help eligible homeowners in Louisiana get back into their homes. By winter 2007, the state-administered Road Home program had paid benefits to 391 claimants, out of 103,700 who had applied.
- Twenty thousand households lived in federally subsidized housing in New Orleans before Katrina. Sixteen thousand of those housing units were lost in the storm.
- Although many of the 5,000 public housing units in the city suffered little or no damage, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has barred residents from returning to their homes and has announced plans to demolish as many as 3,000 units.
- Several parishes surrounding New Orleans have passed city council resolutions barring subsidized rental housing projects in their jurisdictions.



GET CONNECTED

Making Connections New Orleans

Connect with community initiatives in Central City.

1712 Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard
New Orleans, Louisiana 70113
504.581.5900

www.LouisianaRebuilds.info

One-stop website for resources and information about recovery assistance, schools, health, housing, and jobs.
1.877.527.3284

www.gnocdc.org

Greater New Orleans Community Data Center

A community data resource focused on New Orleans's neighborhoods.

HOPE Community Credit Union

Checking and savings accounts, financial education, credit repair, home and business loans.

1726 Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard
New Orleans, Louisiana 70113
504.581.4673

New Orleans Neighborhood Development Collaborative

Ready to own your own home? Talk it over with a professional.

1055 Saint Charles Avenue, Suite 120
New Orleans, Louisiana 70130
504.524.3919

Ashé Cultural Arts Center

Art, culture, classes, and community.
1712 Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard
New Orleans, Louisiana 70113
504.569.9070

Central City Renaissance Alliance

A community organization devoted to making sure residents' voices are heard in the rebuilding of Central City.
504.581.5301

Central City Partnership

A collaboration of community groups active in promoting the revitalization of Central City.
2020 Jackson Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana 70113
504.581.5301

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Its mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.

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MAKING CONNECTIONS

Making Connections works to improve the lives and prospects of families and children living in some of America's toughest neighborhoods. Common sense tells us that children do better when their families are strong and that families do better when they live in communities that help them succeed. *Making Connections* New Orleans seeks to improve the quality of life for families in the Central City neighborhood by engaging residents, community and cultural organizations, and public and private partners in a variety of coordinated strategies that create affordable housing, asset-building opportunities, quality early education, and jobs for residents of the neighborhood. *Making Connections* is an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

