

FRANKLIN AVENUE BORN AGAIN

Hope fuels painstaking process of recovery in New Orleans' 8th Ward

Editor's note: Photographer Jessica Raimondi traveled to New Orleans in 2006 with a group of UMass Dartmouth students who spent their spring break cleaning up damaged homes. She revisited New Orleans this spring.

By JESSICA RAIMONDI
Standard-Times correspondent

NEW ORLEANS — Willy Aperwhite lifts his tired feet off the ground and sits in the trunk of his car in the driveway at his family's house. He looks down the street and sees a waiting assembly line of broken houses that are still stained greenish-brown from the 10-foot-high floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. The slanted roofs silhouette a blue, dimming horizon. He shakes his head and sighs.

"My whole neighborhood was evacuated," he said. "Out of seven houses on the block, maybe two to three of them are back."

He takes a sip from a cold can of after-work beer. "My thing is the isolation. I have to worry about my daughter wanting to walk somewhere when nobody's out there."

It has been 21 months since Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005, and the Franklin Street subdivision in New Orleans' badly damaged 8th Ward is still feeling the effects.

While the 15-foot high piles of garbage that once overflowed into the streets are no longer there, small pieces of year-and-a-half-old trash remain littered throughout the lawns of the many abandoned properties. A handful of white FEMA trailers sitting next to the houses-in-progress are about the only signs of life on these other wise ghostly streets.

The FEMA trailer that sits on 2434 Franklin Ave. might be the one that reflects the most hope for the future of this neighborhood. Here, a family of more than 30 believes the city will one day turn around for good.

Every day around 3 p.m., the silent streets of the neighborhood slowly begin to echo with voices as the children of the Wright family come home from school. Brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews reunite. Inside the family's compact trailer, pregnant mother of three Muffin Wright prepares dinner. The smell of frying catfish, melting macaroni and cheese and cold potato salad permeates the warm air. While waiting for dinner, the children either play basketball, ride bikes, wrestle or secretly buy treats from an ice cream truck. The adults try to relax.

When the sun goes down and it is time to sleep, they leave, heading over to a temporary house across town where they have been since Katrina devastated their home.

This growing family — together before, during and after the storm — has worked very hard to make their house pass inspection so it can be rebuilt. The interior is exceptionally clean. They have so far replaced the frame's weak two-by-fours and rewired the electricity. They hope to move back in by the end of June.

But like most other struggling families in New Orleans, if they had had the financial support from the beginning, they would have finished the job a long time ago.



The childhood home of Lori Marquez, left, in March 2006, seven months after Katrina struck, and again, below, in April 2007, the rubble cleared away.



Just down the street at 2534 Franklin, neighbors Keith and Joe Brown also are struggling to rebuild. Since their mother has been forced to stay at a FEMA house in Houston where their stepfather has spent the past 21 months suffering from a Katrina-related illness, the brothers have spent much of their time staying and working on the house in order to keep the family's homeowner's insurance. The building has changed little since March 2006, when a group of UMass Dartmouth students volunteered to empty and gut it, but Joe's recent busy work was the removal of remaining nails and sheetrock from the ceiling.

While doing this of course, it was impossible not to see the gaping hole in the roof where his stepfather was rescued during the storm. Before he was let out of the enclosed attic, he had spent 24 hours breathing asbestos. He is now being treated for emphysema.

It is safe to say that New Orleans' financial distress is the city's biggest handicap against recovery. While many are working hard to get a normal life back in an honest fashion, far too many are resulting to criminal action.

When 50-year-old Keith Brown, who saves his own home-improvement money by rolling a little bit into a sock every week, was asked why he thinks crime in New Orleans is getting worse, he said it is because there are a lot of teenagers and young adults who don't want to work.

"If they're used to doing something (selling drugs, stealing or murdering) and it's easy, they're not going to work," he said. Keith believes the parents of the people committing today's crimes are the ones responsible. "My mama raised us the right way, and I love her to death for that. The young people are the ones who need to step up to the plate and realize what the city is going through."

Brian Thevenot, a crime specialist for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, notes the increasing crime rate per capita. Before the storm, a typical year's murder rate was 250 among a population of 454,000. Population today is down to 255,000, but at the current rate (78 thus far) there will still be about 250 murders.

Burglary, theft and robbery are increasing, as well.

The people of Franklin Avenue have different theories about lack of safety and the rising crime rate.

"I think if you're not in the underworld with drugs, you are pretty safe. You don't hear people in uptown or the French Quarter (areas of the city that have completely recovered from Katrina) being affected by drugs," Mr. Aperwhite said.

"I worry about my kids (coming into contact with the wrong people) every day," Muffin Wright said while standing outside with her arms folded, watching her children play basketball. "God forbid ... if anything ever happened ... I don't know what I would do."

Joe Brown speaks over the phone from his house in Houston.

"Yes, I'm worried about my brother. There's so much violence, we talk a lot (on the phone) and I go down there every week when I work to check up on him. When I'm not there, he just stays to himself, locked up in that trailer, and he'll be there until he's done rebuilding his house."

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Photos by JESSICA RAIMONDI
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Brothers Keith and Joe Brown have been working together on their mother's house at 2534 Franklin Ave. in New Orleans. While they both have their own homes in a trailer on the property. The blue spray paint in the background, a familiar sight on New Orleans properties devastated by the storm, is a reminder of their stepfather's ordeal as he waited 24 hours after Katrina hit hardest to be rescued through a hole in the roof.



Willy Aperwhite outside his family's home in the slowly recovering neighborhood of Franklin Avenue in New Orleans' 8th Ward.

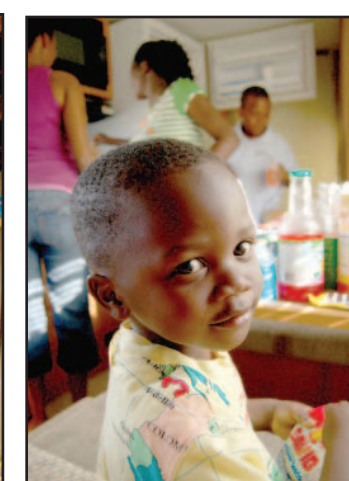


Muffin Wright prepares fresh catfish in her family's FEMA trailer to feed her three children and extended family of more than 30 at 2434 Franklin Ave.

Private contractor Joe Brown tears down the remaining sheetrock from the ceiling of his mother's house at 2534 Franklin Ave. as sunlight streams through the roof where his stepfather was rescued in 2005.



From left, brothers Ronald, Edward, Terrence and Kevin Brown relax and play cards at Edward's house at 2434 Franklin Ave. They have been working together to rebuild, and hope to move in by the end of June.



'Baby D.' Wright snacks on sunflower seeds before dinner.

Delta Petroleum forklift operator Willy Aperwhite stands in his relative's finished home off Franklin Avenue. The mirror was salvaged from the muck after Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of the neighborhood, and it has been refurbished.

