



Everything New Orleans

## Hope is alive in Providence Community Housing renewal of blighted Marrero neighborhood

Published: Sunday, May 31, 2009, 1:51 AM Updated: Sunday, May 31, 2009, 1:58 AM

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Not long ago, if you drove down Ames Boulevard in Marrero toward the river, you ran into a complex of dilapidated buildings, the shells of burned out apartments and torched cars. Villa D'Ames, at Fourth Street and Ames Boulevard, was known more for homicides, the drug trade, prostitution and turf wars than for its medal-winning Marrero Lightning United Track Club or its adult literacy programs. Residents lived in fear. Just ask Pastor Sterling Mealancon of the neighboring Progressive Church at Fourth and Cohen streets, whose congregation has waged its own 13-year battle to take back the community. When he first became pastor, the area was rife with crime and blight.

"We came in and started buying up some of the blighted property and tearing down crack houses," Mealancon said. "I also found illiteracy, many single parents who had desires but didn't know how to pull their lives together. They had children in school, but didn't know how to help them excel."

So the church went on a mission to clean up the neighborhood.

It raised money to buy dilapidated property and land wrought with environmental issues. That work inspired a new attitude in the community. Mealancon created a civic group called the Rebirth Community Action Association, which faces off with elected and law enforcement officials about crime, blight and quality of life issues.

The church also bought and cleaned up an 18-acre Brownsfield Program site last year, where it will build a \$6 million Family Life Center. That facility will house a worship center, classrooms, meeting rooms, a fitness center, a cafeteria and other amenities.

But the arrival of the \$22 million St. Bakhita Apartments erected on the land of the former Villa D'Ames gave an even bigger boost to Progressive Church's efforts. St. Bakhita, developed by Providence Community Housing, Enterprise Community Investment and CLB Porter, is a village of 100 two- and three-bedroom townhomes for low and moderate-income families, who pay rents from \$403 to \$861 per month.

The nonprofit Providence was founded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to address the vast need for affordable housing. Spokeswoman Andreanica Morris said it took 40 days to lease the entire community.

"We knew there was a need for multi-family housing on the West Bank, " she said. Leasing all 100 apartments so quickly "demonstrates the need for quality affordable housing."

Mealancon praised the developers' involvement with the neighborhood civic group, saying that they met with them and heard their concerns in an effort to make sure that St. Bakhita doesn't return to the old ways of Villa D'Ames.

"I see it as a great asset, us working together with management and the developers to make our whole community better, " Mealancon said. "It will take all of us working together. As a community, we can be a model of how things can change and things can become better."

Morris said developer Shawn Barney made sure that St. Bakhita's players made the "right connections" and communicated with residents that they weren't "going to build it and walk away."

"We're engaging with the community to ensure that we serve the people, " she said.

So today, on the grounds of the old Villa D'Ames, where hope hovered between life and death, hope is alive and prospering.

"I see a whole new light coming to this community, " Mealancon said. "If people can see better, they will believe better."

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