

Providence Builds Homes and Hope

Jim Kelly sees the fingerprints of a higher power in places and situations others do not.

In his capacity as chief executive of Catholic Charities, Kelly had gone to the New Orleans airport after Katrina to assess the condition of some 5,000 evacuees stranded there. Near the baggage claim area he pulled back a plastic tarp and in a dimly lit alcove found about 30 frail elderly patients on stretchers.

“It was a hospice,” Kelly recalled. “It was clear that most would not leave that airport alive.” Kelly knelt down next to a woman. She told him her name was Edna. He prayed with her and patted her head, and as he got up to move on, she seemed to get agitated. Kelly tried to calm her by tucking the covers around her body. But she fought to free her arms from the tangle of blankets. Then she reached up and made the sign of a cross on Kelly’s forehead.

In the weeks and months that followed, Kelly said he felt that blessing on his head as he moved through his devastated community and as his agency doled out millions of pounds of food and water and counseled thousands of people cast adrift by the storms.

But all the relief measures weren’t nearly enough to restore the city he loved—not by a long shot.

At one of the early “trailer” meetings in Baton Rouge where relief agencies and community groups were meeting with state officials in FEMA trailer parks, Kelly said it struck him. “There was no plan for housing. We needed to do something to try to bring people home.”

Catholic Charities had been involved in community development projects before, but nothing of the scale or difficulty of restoring neighborhoods flooded or damaged by Katrina and its aftermath. Kelly began meeting with other Catholic groups and community-based groups. They formed a collaborative and set an audacious goal of bringing 20,000 people home.

But they needed help to pull it off.

Help Arrives

In December 2005, Kelly crept through bumper-to-bumper traffic to Baton Rouge, where a group of housing advocates were hoping to get an audience with the head of the state housing finance agency. Arriving late, Kelly discovered that the state official had been called into another meeting. He grabbed lunch, sat down at the table, and, as was his custom, bowed his head to pray over the meal.

The woman sitting next to him said, “You just prayed.”

Kelly replied, “Yes, I did.”

Over the next half hour, Kelly says, he had a wonderful conversation with Doris Koo, who was in charge of the Gulf Coast Initiative of the Enterprise Foundation. The Columbia, Md.-based developer of affordable housing had sent her to the Gulf region in the dark days after Katrina and Rita to look for ways to assist local groups in the massive rebuilding effort.

“What a coincidence it is that we would be sitting next to each other,” Koo told Kelly.

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—Jim Kelly, CEO,
Catholic Charities

“Oh no, Doris,” Kelly replied. “I don’t believe in coincidences. I believe in providence.”

Two weeks later, Koo returned to New Orleans, and Kelly showed her other restoration projects that Catholic Charities had completed. The two agreed that their organizations would collaborate in an effort to renovate damaged properties and revitalize New Orleans neighborhoods.

Working Together

By April 2006, Kelly and Catholic Charities had spun off a community development corporation to head up the rebuilding effort. Several different Catholic groups were involved and they were stuck on a name. “I said, ‘What about All Saints?’ But they said, ‘No that sounds like a funeral home or a cemetery,’” Kelly recalls. “Then I got an e-mail from Doris. ‘It’s Providence,’ she said. ‘That’s the name.’”



Providence’s proposed new Treme neighborhood in New Orleans

Providence Community Housing committed itself to restore, rebuild or redevelop some 7,000 homes for 18,000 victims of Katrina over the next five years. Enterprise was its primary partner in the effort.

In August 2006, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Housing Authority of New Orleans selected Providence and Enterprise to redevelop up to 1,500 affordable homes on and around the site of the Lafitte public housing development, a 27.5-acre parcel in the historic Treme/Lafitte neighborhood of New Orleans. Parts of the development were damaged by flooding after Katrina. See the [news release](#).

How to rebuild neighborhoods in New Orleans has spurred vigorous debate—and most recently, a class action lawsuit that alleges racism and an

intention to prohibit the return of low-income African-American families for the inaction and delay in repairing and reopening public housing units.

Yet, proponents of redevelopment say that some public housing projects had long since been left to deteriorate into dangerous places with few services, little nearby businesses and poor schools. While residents acknowledge the problems, many also remember close-knit communities where people looked out for each other.

Reporters Laura Maggi and Gwen Filosa, analyzing the housing situation a year after Katrina for New Orleans’ *Times-Picayune* newspaper, wrote: “The quandary facing New Orleans comes down to some tough questions: Does the city build it right or build it fast? At the same time, while it might be a noble goal to reinvent public housing in New Orleans over the long term, what does that do for displaced poor residents who want to go home now?”

Plans for Public Housing

In their plans for the Lafitte neighborhood, Providence and Enterprise have tried to respond to these concerns by committing to one-for-one replacement of public housing at Lafitte and to a right of return for former Lafitte residents. In the weeks and months after the storm, Enterprise and Providence spearheaded an outreach effort to find the 865 Lafitte resident families, who were scattered across 36 states.

“In many cases, we were the first people residents had heard from since being evacuated,” said Michelle Whetten, who assumed oversight of Enterprise’s Gulf Coast Initiative after Doris Koo became Enterprise’s president and CEO in January 2007.

Their surveys found some residents who did not plan to return. But the vast majority wanted to come home as soon as possible and be part of the effort to improve their community. They wanted a neighborhood with access to health care, day care and other services—and businesses for and owned by residents. Providence and Enterprise have responded by building alliances with partners such as the Urban League, Daughters of Charity and Total Community action to provide comprehensive case-management services.

Plans call for renovating and opening some of the Lafitte apartments for those residents who want to return immediately, while building new homes on and off the Lafitte site for the remaining residents. Enterprise and Providence hope to leverage every federal dollar with some \$8.37 in private and state funds for the rebuilding.

As was true in the initial relief efforts after the hurricanes, faith-based groups are the ones making the most headway in responding to these concerns. “Twenty months after Katrina, there is very little rebuilding going on. Let’s be frank,” Kelly said in an interview in May 2007. “I believe now more than ever that it is going to be the nonprofits and the faith-based groups again leading the rebuilding effort this time because we are about mission, not about money or margins.”

RWJF is supporting Enterprise with a \$1 million seed grant to provide technical assistance to groups like Providence. Program Officer Marco Navarro pushed hard for RWJF to support housing redevelopment after Katrina in hopes that the longer-term impact would be healthier communities—a priority of RWJF.

“The rebuilding would eventually take place,” Navarro said, “and I thought perhaps we could see if the rebuilding could take place in a more reasonable way. If a subdivision is developed, why not have sidewalks, why not have neighborhoods that would promote physical activity and be healthier than what was there before?”

“Now, that is kind of a lofty idea,” he said, “but the idea was to seed that mindset, to seed that notion that if you rebuild something, you should think about it holistically.”

It’s a leap of faith. A concept Jim Kelly and Enterprise understand.

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