

Rebirth on the Bayou

by Lauren Boston

New Orleans' Columbia Parc has revitalized a former public housing site destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, proving for some that you can go home again.

Nearly five years ago, resident Deborah Maize stood in front of her vacant St. Bernard public housing apartment with her three children and grandchild, trying to make sense of it all.

The community in New Orleans' 7th Ward had been ridden with crime and poverty, but for Maize and more than 900 other displaced families, St. Bernard was still home. Ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, the mold-infested buildings were flooded with up to 10 feet of water and eventually deemed uninhabitable.

For the next three years, the development remained empty, a community in limbo. "Some people were upset the buildings weren't being fixed, but I was just hoping they'd build something else," says 49-year-old Maize, who lived at St. Bernard for more than 20 years. "St. Bernard had its bad parts and its good parts, but there comes a time in our lives when we all need a change."

Almost 500 miles away, Atlanta philanthropist Tom Cousins was eager to dig his heels, and a shovel, into another project. In 1995, the real estate mogul helped turn an Atlanta housing project previously known as "Little Vietnam" into a flourishing mixed-income development. Cousins then founded Purpose Built Communities, an organization dedicated to providing holistic redevelopment strategies and advice to troubled communities across the country. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the former St. Bernard neighborhood seemed to be an ideal setting for his guidance.

Under Cousins' wing, a group of New Orleans business leaders formed the Bayou District Foundation, a nonprofit organization committed to restoring the area where St. Bernard used to stand. Together with developer Columbia Residential, they are creating a revitalized and thriving mixed-income community that aspires to offer former St. Bernard residents educational, recreational and housing opportunities unlike any they've had in the past.

Reaching Out

In 2007 the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) decided to demolish the St. Bernard public housing site and seek proposals for a new development. HANO selected a development proposal from the Bayou District Foundation and Columbia Residential to create Columbia Parc, a mixed-income community that will eventually include 1,325 for-sale and for-rent units. Columbia Residential has successfully redeveloped and currently manages over 30 mixed-income properties, but Columbia Parc marks their largest community to date.

To begin to fill the apartments it was constructing, the Atlanta-based developers reached out to displaced St. Bernard residents, many of whom were now scattered throughout the country. The outreach included thousands of personal phone calls, monthly meetings, three mailers and a website to ensure that as many former residents as possible were given the opportunity to return. Columbia Residential President Lynn Cassell says the outreach efforts have been rewarding. "I am extremely proud because our focus is on families and their success, not only the success of the real estate asset," she says.

In compliance with HANO guidelines, priority for Columbia Parc's public housing units was given to those who were living at the site at the time of the hurricane. Maize, who temporarily

relocated to Houston before returning to Louisiana, was one of the first contacted. She didn't need much convincing. "I really appreciate the chance to come back," she says.

Nearly 300 other families have applied to return to the new units and were placed on a waiting list. Former residents have been impressed with Columbia Parc, says Jim Grauley, President and Chief Operating Officer of Columbia Residential. "The most gratifying experience I have is to see and hear former residents react and speak when they first see the new development," Grauley says. "The combination of their memories and their expectations being exceeded by the beauty and quality of the new community is really powerful. Rebuilding hope and trust in this community so devastated is a humbling responsibility."

'Like A Resort'

New Orleans Police Officer Stephen Harrell Sr. was tired of his 45-minute commute to work. Also displaced by Hurricane Katrina, Harrell wanted to move back to the city when he came across Columbia Parc. "Columbia Residential created a model set-up of the whole community and it looked like a huge improvement over what was there before," Harrell says. "It was uplifting to see and I wanted to be a part of it."

Harrell moved in February when Columbia Parc welcomed its first residents. Owned and managed by Columbia Residential, the mixed-income community operates under a one-third market rate, one-third tax credit, one-third public housing unit mix. Every apartment features granite countertops, hardwood-style laminate floors, energy-efficient stainless steel appliances, a balcony or front porch and individual alarm systems. Constructed under eco-friendly guidelines, all of Columbia Parc's units are built to LEED Silver standards. Other onsite amenities include a lifestyle and business center with computer stations and an entertainment clubhouse that boasts a 46-seat movie theater, Internet café, fitness center, catering kitchen, luxury pool and interactive splash park.

All of Columbia Parc's units are designed and managed identically, with low-income apartments mixed with market-rate throughout each building. Residents live side-by-side regardless of income and are held to the same high standards. It's this approach, Harrell says, that's turning the neighborhood around. "Change is hard when people have lived in a community for so many years, but you look at Columbia Parc, a place that once had murders on this same site, and you know New Orleans needed this bright spot," he says.

Resident Cynthia Harry agrees. "You would think you were at a resort," says the mother of two, who lived in Michigan for 20 years before returning to her native Louisiana. "I wanted to retire in New Orleans and as soon as I saw this place, I knew this was it. I fell in love."

Others saw potential in the new community as well. The first phase of property development, which will include a total of 466 mixed-income apartments, reached 10 percent of its total lease-up in March and is expected to reach 30 percent occupancy by the end of June, as construction on more buildings is completed. Phase I development is expected to continue through November.

Kareem Slater, Vice President of Columbia Residential, says the interest in Columbia Parc has been incredible. "Essentially, the 466 apartments were largely pre-leased in April, just over 60 days into opening the property," he says. "We're leasing units as fast as we turn them over."

With Phase I nearing completion, Columbia Residential plans to commence construction on two additional city blocks of housing later this year, followed by a third and final phase of affordable single-family homes and apartment units for the elderly. Total build-out is expected to reach 1,325 for-sale and for-rent units and cost a projected \$300 million. The investment, Maize says, has paid off in the residents' quality of life. "I think I'm living in the White House," she says. "People laugh, but that's truly how I feel."

Sense of Community

Building state-of-the-art apartments has only been one-third of the effort to create a healthy, revitalized community. Taking a holistic approach that combines recreation, education and housing, the Bayou District Foundation plans to integrate the mixed-income development into the greater Bayou District, a renamed, master-planned neighborhood that will include Columbia Parc and the surrounding areas next to New Orleans' 1,330-acre public park, City Park.

The foundation plans to bring educational and recreational opportunities to all of the district's residents. The Bayou District will eventually include a K-8 charter school, a new high school, an early learning center, sports facilities and commercial development projected to cost an additional \$130 million. With a focus on cradle-to-college education and community outreach, the Bayou District Foundation's future plans also include a public golf course and the development of a program modeled after The First Tee of East Lake, a national golf instruction and life skills course for local youth. Grauley says the Bayou District is designed to include the elements of a healthy neighborhood.

"The development is aimed to be a catalyst for revitalization of an entire community that was previously anchored by a dense, 100 percent public housing site that was further impacted by the hurricane and flooding," Grauley says. "The project includes much more than just housing, with critical educational, recreational and commercial components, and it's all part of the plan to rebuild a healthy community, allowing residents at a variety of incomes to take advantage of the new development."

It's a plan the Bayou District Foundation hopes will change the cycle of poverty in New Orleans. Chairman Gerard Barousse Jr. says the community is giving residents of lower incomes something they seldom had: an opportunity. "Our vision provides a model for what's possible when public and private entities work together to offer people better choices for their most fundamental needs," he says.

Despite the vision for revitalization, there are those who still feel the sting of St. Bernard's demise. But for the majority, Columbia Parc at the Bayou District has proven that you can go home again. And for Maize and her family, the second time is that much sweeter. "I feel like the Jeffersons," she says. "Movin' on up."

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