UNITY
OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS
VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2
AUGUST 2009

Homeward Bound

Hurricane Katrina Fourth Anniversary Edition

We dedicate this newsletter in memory of those who lost their lives as a result of the broken levees, and for the men, women, and children who have fallen into homelessness as a result of Katrina.

FACES OF HOMELESSNESS POST-KATRINA

70-YEAR OLD CLIENT COLLECTS CANS TO REPAIR FLOOD-DAMAGED HOUSE...

After being denied recovery funds, Mr. Earnest Hammond collects cans to rebuild his home

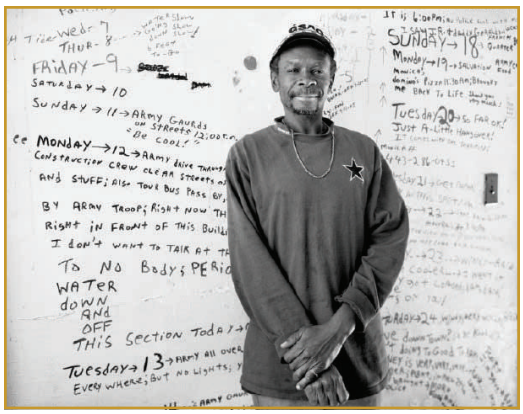
In April, UNITY Homeless Outreach Team members came upon a flooded house with walls covered with mold in the Seventh Ward. A jagged hole in the roof was evident where someone had chopped his way out during the flood. The outreach workers thought the house was abandoned, except for a strange sight. The first floor rooms were filled with large plastic bags containing thousands of aluminum cans. Soon after they entered the home the owner, 70-year-old Earnest Hammond, emerged from his FEMA trailer in back of the house to greet his unexpected visitors. Mr. Hammond, like approximately

(Continued Page 4)

...WHILE DISABLED MAN JOURNALS ON THE WALLS OF ABANDONED BUILDINGS HE CALLED HOME...

Tommie Mabry began writing on the walls of his apartment in the B.W. Cooper Housing public housing development in the days after the city flooded as a way to deal with the intense loneliness he felt being one of the few remaining residents in a shattered city he had called home for over 20 years. Writing on the walls was also a way to express himself creatively. "Expressing yourself is kind of like a breath of fresh air," he explained. Tommie had lived in the complex for over 10 years, doing household

(Continued Page 5)



Mr. Tommie Mabry standing in front of his wall journal in the B.W. Cooper housing development

MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When the levees failed in 2005, nearly every New Orleanian became homeless. Now after years of wrangling with insurance companies and disaster recovery programs, and countless hours of back-breaking work, thousands of storm-damaged homes have been rebuilt, often with the assistance of volunteers from across the country, to whom we are forever grateful.

But the extent of the devastation here remains overwhelming. Much remains to be done to rebuild our community. Four years after the nation's most catastrophic disaster, the effects of the levee failures are most keenly felt by New Orleans' most vulnerable residents. For many New Orleanians with limited means and physical or mental disabilities, the struggle for a decent place to live continues.

As we have described in this newsletter with the stories of Earnest Hammond, Tommie Mabry, and the post-Katrina experiences of UNITY's Outreach Team, homelessness has emerged in New Orleans in ways never imagined before the flood. Who could have foreseen that in 2007 and 2008 two large homeless camps numbering hundreds of desperate men and women would form in the heart of downtown New Orleans? Or that 6,000 people, many elderly and disabled, would resort to living in New Orleans' more than 65,000 abandoned buildings?

With one of every five abandoned buildings currently showing signs of occupation by homeless people, UNITY is on the front-lines responding to this unprecedented homeless crisis. We and our 60 member agencies provided services and housing to 18,825 homeless people last year, including 4,667 homeless children. We re-housed 457 disabled people from the homeless camps into safe, decent apartments over an eight-month period — the largest number of street homeless re-housed in such a short period of time in the nation. We led the successful fight for 3,000 permanent housing vouchers for people with disabilities, of which 875 have been targeted for the homeless of New Orleans and Jefferson Parish. We are beginning development of mixed-income housing sites for the chronically homeless and working poor, developed in partnership with the Common Ground Institute of New York.

And our new Rapid Re-housing Program for Homeless Families will save 366 additional families and children from the indignity and despair of homelessness.

Despite these accomplishments, UNITY struggles to find full funding to meet the magnitude of the crisis we face. As grateful as we are for government funding, it is inadequate and highly restrictive. It is only because of the generosity of concerned people in the New Orleans area and around the nation that UNITY can continue its work.

As we re-commit ourselves to rebuilding New Orleans and working tirelessly to save our most vulnerable neighbors from the ravages of homelessness, we deeply appreciate your continued support.

With deepest gratitude,
Martha

Martha J. Kegel

UNITY OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS HONORED

Freedom Fellowship Ministries of Greater New Orleans/ United Church of Christ honored UNITY of Greater New Orleans with the *2009 Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell-Jackson Social Justice* award for UNITY's work "improving our community and enhancing the lives of our city's homeless citizens" on March 7th at St. Paul's United Church of Christ in New Orleans. Shamus Rohn, UNITY Director of No One Suffers Alone Outreach, accepted the award on behalf of UNITY. The Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell-Jackson serves as the President of the North American Region of the World Council of Churches and has been a leader on social justice issues her entire life.

Vicki Judice, Director of Programs, accepting Women of Substance Award on behalf of Martha Kegel

On May 8th UNITY of Greater New Orleans Executive Director Martha Kegel was one of five local attorneys honored at the *14th Annual Grace House Women of Substance Luncheon*. Other awardees included Kim Boyle, Eneid Francis, Susan Tyler, and Sharonda Williams. The honorees were chosen because they are role models for the clients and graduates of Grace House, and for their support of the mission of Grace House, which is to assist chemically dependent women in leading sober and productive lives by providing long-term residential treatment, regardless of ability to pay.

UNITY'S OUTREACH TEAM DESCRIBES HOW KATRINA HAS IMPACTED THEIR WORK

In a staff meeting in early August, the nine members of the UNITY Welcome Home Outreach Team discussed how their work seeking out homeless people has changed since Katrina. Below is a summary of their thoughts.

Claiborne Ave. homeless camp in 2008

Since Katrina, outreach to the homeless in New Orleans is a new and difficult undertaking. Many clients report their homelessness started with Katrina and the reduced housing stock and subsequent skyrocketing rents. With the increase in homelessness came the camps at Duncan Plaza and Canal/Claiborne. UNITY Outreach worked for months to house the residents of the camps, where hundreds of severely disabled persons lived in inhuman and unsafe conditions. After we resettled 457 persons in permanent housing, our focus turned to the huge number of abandoned houses and the homeless seeking some sort of shelter within, inadequate though it is. Now much of outreach staff time is spent on finding disabled homeless persons living in the abandoned houses and putting them on the Permanent Supportive Housing Registry awaiting housing vouchers to become available.

Mike Miller, Director of Supportive Housing Placement, conducting vulnerability survey with camp resident

It seems to those of us who did outreach before the storm that the homeless we are finding now are sicker and more disabled. When a whole city falls, those at the bottom fall the farthest. Many factors could be in play - the trauma experienced, the fewer resources for mental and physical health care, the scattering of families who provided a safety net to those barely hanging on. Those calling UNITY for assistance will frequently report that while they can sleep on a family member's couch a night here and there, most of the time they go to the shelters or sleep outside.

We talked about the now housed gentleman we picked up this past winter on a freeze night to transport to a shelter. He was blind and unable to care for himself on the streets. He was so filthy that his odor literally brought tears to the eyes of those around him. At times the team found him crawling with ants. That did not stop the compassion, however. The Outreach Team worked diligently over the next few months to house him. Today we marvel at how healthy he looks and how well the Housing First approach works. With supports he is living with comfort and dignity in his new apartment, his mental is health improving, and his sight has been restored with an operation! It is as if he came home from a long and horrendous journey.

Shamus Rohn, Director of No One Suffers Alone Outreach Project, searching an abandoned building

We discussed the reasons we keep going out on the streets day after day. One worker stated that we have to go out because no one wants them, they are seen as human debris. It's not easy, though, this search and rescue operation done by the team, going through overgrown yards and abandoned houses with shaky stairs and floors covered in pigeon poop and rusty syringes. Sometimes the group laughed loudly at the most bizarre incidents only a homeless outreach team could witness. In a quieter moment one talks about how overwhelming the work is because you go to help one and ten more appear. Yet, none of us will ever give up. Angela Patterson, the outreach team director reflected, "I think that there is hope in the midst of hopelessness and light in the midst of darkness."

ELDERLY MAN EXHIBITS "CAN-DO" SPIRIT (CONT. FROM PAGE 1)

Mr. Hammond in flooded home surrounded by cans he plans to sell to rebuild

80% of FEMA trailer residents, was still rebuilding his home. He collected and sold aluminum cans to help pay for the cost of building materials. In April, Mr. Hammond began receiving notices from FEMA, telling him to relinquish his trailer by June 1. Then he and other homeowners with limited means would have had no choice but to live in their damaged homes, becoming homeless in their own homes. Intense advocacy efforts by UNITY and other agencies on behalf of FEMA trailer residents avoided this catastrophe, and on May 29 FEMA reversed course and announced that no one in temporary FEMA housing units would be evicted. Furthermore, HUD announced that the 3,450 families still in trailers or temporary housing — including many elderly, poor and disabled — would receive priority for permanent housing vouchers. Additionally, the Obama administration vowed to allocate funding for case managers to assist residents with their Road Home paperwork, connect residents with volunteer resources to help them finish rebuilding, or find permanent housing.

Earnest Hammond exhibits the "can-do" spirit of so many New Orleanians since the storm. A truck driver for 29 years, he moved into his house in 1963, renting it for 11 years before saving enough money to buy it. "I done worked and got it all together and the storm came and wiped it out.. But you got to do something, you can't just sit around". In addition to collecting thousands of aluminum cans to pay for rebuilding, he also panted a garden to offset his expenses for food. Since finding Mr. Hammond in April, UNITY asked the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana's Jericho Road housing program to rebuild his home. Volunteers are now assisting Mr. Hammond rebuild his home.

Mr. Hammond and his garden

JOURNALING HIS LIFE ON THE WALLS (CONT. FROM PAGE 1)

Mr. Mabry and his wall journal in an abandoned building he called home

chores for an elderly woman and her disabled son. After escorting the woman and her son to the Superdome, he stayed in the apartment to wait out the storm. He remained in the apartment, which took in over a foot of floodwater, for six weeks before security personnel from the Housing Authority of New Orleans forced him to leave the complex in October 2005. He then began a three and a half year odyssey of homelessness, living in abandoned buildings in the Broadmoor neighborhood until UNITY's Outreach Team found him, thin and malnourished, in the early spring of 2009. The interior walls of the abandoned building where he was living had also become a kind of giant diary, where he recorded his thoughts as well as kept track of the happenings of his days: "I saw Tanya yesterday. Wonder!"; "Went to 843 Camp Street. 6:00 A.M. Had fruit loops, king cake, coffee"; " Al, Get well now!"; "I feel, I feel, I fall out, In store".

Close up of Mr. Mabry

In the first abandoned building Tommie lived the ceiling collapsed. He described it as "like a brick hitting you in the head. Have you seeing stars." Tommie also had to contend with rats scurrying about, extremes in temperature, no running water or electricity, and the ever present loneliness. A mental condition had kept him from seeking treatment for festering sores and other health issues. Moments after entering his new apartment where he was placed by UNITY, his caseworker, Mike Miller, asked him what it felt to finally have his own apartment again. Tommie took a sip of water, paused, and turned to Mike and said, "It's a tall day of wonder. It's a tall day of wonder for sure." Tommie will continue to receive support services from case managers with UNITY partner agency Odyssey House so that he receives medical treatment and remains housed. His rent is now paid for by a HUD housing voucher for homeless persons with disabilities.

Mr. Mabry clutching MRE's provided by UNITY's outreach team

Four years after Katrina UNITY estimates that over 6,000 people are living in abandoned buildings in Orleans and Jefferson Parish, while 5,500 others are living in other homeless situations. We look forward to the day when it is no longer "a wonder" for our disabled residents to know the dignity and security of a real home.

A video taken by Mike Miller of Mr. Tommie's move from an abandoned building to his own apartment can be found at UNITY's blog , "Signs of Life in New Orleans," www.blog.unitygnono.org.

Visit us on the web

www.unitygno.org

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UNITY LAUNCHES INTERFAITH INITIATIVE TO END HOMELESSNESS

Mr. Mickey discusses his life as an abandoned building resident as Shamus Rohn looks on

Over 60 faith community leaders, UNITY staff, and homeless and formerly homeless persons participated in the "kick-off" of UNITY's Interfaith Initiative to End Homelessness in mid-July at the UNITY main office. During the breakfast meeting faith leaders heard powerful testimonies of what life was like on the streets and how having a home has changed lives. Religious leaders shared how serving the homeless has enriched the spiritual life of their faith communities. The event took place on July 17, the one year anniversary of the humanitarian closure of the homeless camp on Claiborne Avenue, which could not have been accomplished without the committed efforts of scores of faith communities. The Interfaith Initiative to End Homelessness seeks to build upon that success by seeking the assistance of faith communities in helping to re-integrate homeless persons back into the community through opportunities for social interaction and by preparing an apartment with the furnishings that will make it a real home. For information on how your faith community can participate in this effort, please contact Catch Patton, Manager of Community Engagement, at 821-4496 ext. 116, or kpatton@unitygno.org.

Faith leaders listen attentively to the testimonies of formerly homeless persons.