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Working on possibilities in New Orleans



S. RENEE MITCHELL

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What if? In New Orleans, that's really the only question worthy of consideration.

Ruminating over "Why me?" is useless. Debating "Who's to blame?" is unproductive. And "What next?" can be depressing when you consider that most of the 80 percent of New Orleans that drowned after Hurricane Katrina has still not been resuscitated.

And the two-year anniversary is four months away.

"We cannot wait to put our lives back together or to wait for someone else to do it for us," says LaToya Cantrell, president of the Broadmoor Improvement Association. "We have to do it ourselves."

Besides, "what if" ushers in hope. It elbows out a victim mentality and points out the possibilities.

What if we build energy-efficient houses with sustainable building materials? What if we make it easier for teachers, police officers and low-income renters to own homes? What if when we reopen our schools and public library, we link them to social service programs?

The "what ifs" were the most inspiring souvenirs for participants in Portland's recent Flight of Friendship tour to New Orleans -- as well as other individuals and groups who had previously made the trip.

Andy Nelson, executive director of Hands On Greater Portland, which encourages volunteerism, recently took a group to New Orleans and is planning another volunteer trip for Portlanders this fall.

"What's getting done in New Orleans is because people are going down there and doing it," Nelson says. "It's really the greatest call for domestic service that we'll see in our lifetime."

So far, Broadmoor, a neighborhood of 7,000 in the heart of New Orleans, is the prime example of what can happen when residents solve their own problems.

Organizers first created a "Broadmoor Lives" campaign -- with bumper stickers and yard signs -- in order to encourage folks to come back and rebuild.

Then they set up meetings for residents to create the neighborhood's first 329-page comprehensive plan -- all without city funding.

Two of the key elements are an education corridor that links the school, library and the YMCA, and a homeownership program that targets the disabled, elderly, single parents and other populations.

"This is their vision, and we're incredibly proud of that," Cantrell says. "We accept responsibility for the future of our community. We're making it come back better and stronger."

Most of Broadmoor's revitalization money comes from a \$5 million, one-year commitment from partners of the Clinton Global Initiative, such as Shell Oil and CH2M Hill, an engineering and construction company founded in Oregon.

It also has a partnership with Travelocity.com, which is designing software that will allow donors to buy specific items -- such as a refrigerator, stove, books or even a front door - for Broadmoor and other New Orleans residents.

The project, called Bootstraps Initiative, is expected to work like an online bridal registry, where residents of specific cities, such as Portland, can adopt a New Orleans neighborhood for at least a year.

"This is what happens when you put residents in charge of their own neighborhood," says Hal Roark, executive director of the nonprofit Broadmoor Development Corp., a post-Katrina, neighborhood-based community-development agency coordinating the Bootstraps Initiative. "We come up with fabulous ideas."

S. Renee Mitchell: 503-221-8142; rmitch@news.oregonian.com