At Friendship Houses, engaged adults offer local youth life-skills training and love, as well as educational and recreational activities.
A community in Shreveport, Louisiana, changed its future by connecting neighbors to each other

By Anne Snyder

In 1970, Rosie Chaffold moved to Shreveport from Bastrop, Louisiana. She was looking for a neighborhood with good schools and churches, and she specifically wanted “a rural philosophy, where people could pretty much know each other and look out for each other, and your children will do what I tell them to do and my children would do what you tell them to do.”

Miss Rosie, as she’s now called, found what she was looking for in a working-class black neighborhood called Allendale. At the time, Allendale had a mix of homes, businesses, restaurants, and congregations. Tina Turner and James Brown graced its music halls. For the first 15 years of her life there, despite unrest throughout the South, Allendale was exactly what Miss Rosie hoped for. “Students went to school, adults went to work, and families went to church. Children played with one another. We could leave our doors unlocked. It was wonderful.”

But by the mid-1980s, many of the children who had grown up in Allendale were going off to college or the military and moving to the suburbs. Homeowners began to rent out their properties. Allendale began to slide. At first, it was just a messy house here, an act of un-neighborliness there. But soon people started averting their eyes on the street, locking their doors, and hunkering down as one block sprouted six crack houses, and gun shots became routine. An interstate was built that cut off the neighborhood from the rest of Shreveport. Before long, Allendale was “pitiful. I actually felt ashamed to see something so beautiful go down so quick.”

The deterioration of the neighborhood was linked to a deterioration of behavior. In the healthy Allendale there had been a moral ecology that nurtured traits like trust, self-discipline, and neighborly care. But that got pushed aside. Marriage rates plummeted. Children grew up without fathers or loving attachment from neighbors and extended family. As isolation increased, so did drug use and the murder rate. In 1991 there were 80 homicides in Allendale—almost two killings per week. Before long, every single business in the neighborhood had closed or moved away.

Meanwhile, the larger city of Shreveport seemed uninterested. Legally, segregation was over, but whites weren’t interacting with the city’s black neighborhoods. An ethos of privacy and gated communities crept in. Wealthier kids shifted from local Little Leagues to travel teams and cultural exposures far away. Adults lost touch with their neighbors. City parks and playing fields grew fallow with disuse.

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Mack McCarter is a Shreveport native and proud alumnus of the city’s largest public high school. In the late 1960s he went off to become a civil-rights activist, and then moved to Texas for seminary and the pastorate. When he returned to Shreveport in 1991, he was shocked. He wasn’t just seeing a city in a tailspin, he was watching a whole culture decline. It kept him up at night, wondering what could be done.

Decades of walking alongside people struggling with broken marriages, abuse, familial dysfunction, and loneliness convinced McCarter that relationships have rules—rules that are “just as ineluctable as the laws of gravity.” And “if society is fundamentally relational,” McCarter says, “then, from what I’d learned from thousands of hours of pastoral counseling, society could be healed.”

McCarter wrote up some of his observations. Community life starts in acquaintances, fueled by simple conversation. After repeated sharing of ideas and opinions, these eventually grow into friendships. Finally, deeper convictions and feelings are shared, producing an intimacy that makes people more vulnerable and more interlinked and trusting, which McCarter calls partnership. He had a suspicion that most anti-poverty and social-improvement efforts were undermined by a failure to build the healthy relationships they require—relationships that were the necessary foundation for things like safety, good neighboring, and motivated workers.

McCarter came up with a formula: Build community first, teach the skills of caring, and walk the talk with simple acts. Once people realize the power of relationships, he hypothesized, they can move their communities to higher levels of well-being.

Walking the streets
McCarter set out to test his hypothesis in Allendale—which had by then become the poorest and most dangerous neighborhood in Shreveport. Every Saturday morning, McCarter would drive to Allendale, park his car, and walk the blocks. He didn’t come with an agenda; he came with curiosity, and the sentiment was reciprocated. Who was this tall white man who extended hugs with warm winks and self-deprecating jokes? Why did he keep returning every weekend?

Allendale’s children were the first to leap over the sidewalk shyness, following McCarter in a pied-piper parade. Parents began to observe warily, cracking open their windows and stepping onto porches to see who this visitor was. Awkward conversations began, followed by tentative steps toward familiarity and friendship.

“I was suspicious of Mack at first,” recalls Miss Rosie. “I didn’t want him to know me. I didn’t want to be let down. I had been disappointed by other people who claimed they wanted to do something for Allendale, yet accomplished nothing.”

But McCarter kept showing up. He and his wife joined Allendale’s Baptist church, the two white faces in the pews. Neighborhood residents started to sit out on their front porches at the hours when they knew the couple would come strolling. Even the drug dealers were disarmed by his guileless nature. “There was something about his speaking that sounded sincere,” Miss Rosie recalls.

Two years on, McCarter created a training workshop for people interested in building stronger relationships with their neighbors. Commissioned “Haven House leaders,” these neighbors would be taught how to befriend others on their block. They would be responsible for organizing community gatherings, staying abreast of needs and crises, and encouraging a spirit of openness and generosity.

“We’re remaking our city by making friends on our street,” said McCarter.

Two decades, and major crime in Allendale is down 60 percent, the drug dealers are gone, former gang leaders have become block coordinators, and neighbors stroll comfortably from one house to the next. Kids

Miss Rosie was looking for a neighborhood where people will “look out for each other.”
mack mccarter started community renewal by walking the streets of allendale every saturday morning.

“seeing the familiar we care sign in a yard on the opposite side of town changes the whole psychological dimension of how you might otherwise feel in an alien environment,” says mccarter. “there is now a commonality that runs from the retired university president to somebody walking the street in allendale. they share a mutual concern and commitment.”

“i met mack and everything changed,” says paige hoffpaur, a leader in southern trace, a gated community and the wealthiest, whitest neighborhood in shreveport. “when i was drawn into community renewal’s work, i realized i was the charity. i used to be a person who had no time to talk to people. if it didn’t directly benefit me, and quickly, i saw no reason for relationship-building or any of that. but when i started walking with community renewal, absorbed the paradigm, and started acting on some of the steps, i began to get unlocked.”

“we won’t have strong individual character unless we have a community that’s conducive to it,” says mccarter firmly. “the cancer is disconnection. we need reconnection. our job at community renewal is not to create yet another nonprofit to deliver services. rather, our job is to build a platform of mutually enhancing relationships, relationships that draw out each individual’s best, and to nourish that living platform for all of us.”

creating havens

the haven house aspect of community renewal’s strategy takes the we care interest in “coordinated neighboring” and adds structure and accountability. volunteers can be trained to make their home a designated haven house, and serve as hubs for the mutual care of 20 other residences on their street. they bring neighbors together through simple initiatives like block parties, taking meals to sick neighbors, helping find lost pets, mowing yards, sending birthday cards, picking up newspapers for each other, or just offering a sympathetic ear. it’s a way to re-create in a city the intimate knowledge and mutual responsibility of a small town—as mccarter puts it, to “re-villagize the city.”

“how do we get people to do this?” one haven house leader asks rhetorically. “well, you have to give a vision. remind people what it used to be like. for instance, i sometimes say something like, ‘when i grew up, we all knew each other.’ people respond, ‘yeah, that’s right.’ i say, ‘nobody on my street, when i grew up, had a burglar alarm. if somebody had

people in allendale now say, “this is our community, and we’re going to take charge.”
said they were installing a burglar alarm we would have thought they were crazy. Or hiding gold.’ People nod. ‘Now, we set our burglar alarms without even thinking about it. That is disintegration at its base level.’ People are in tune with you at that point. And then I say, ‘So how do we solve this? The only way is to get reconnected.’”

There are strict prohibitions against any agenda other than building friendships. Haven House leaders aren’t allowed to put up political yard signs. Fundraising is a no-no. “I don’t care if it’s heart disease or cancer research,” McCarter says, “we are radical on these things. We’ve had years of lack of trust, so how do we overcome that? There are certain things we have to do and not do.”

“You begin to understand that when we know our neighbors, it’s a lot more fun to live where you live,” says a Haven House leader who’s been at it for eight years. “It’s also safer. And easier. If you have a toilet that’s overflowing and you don’t know what to do, you can call next door. Or if you lose your dog. When we know people, we reach out.”

There are now more than 1,500 trained Haven House block leaders in greater Shreveport. Each does something a little different. Some sponsor neighborhood caroling or cookie exchanges during the holiday season. One organized a youth car wash to buy school supplies for students in Allendale. Another gathered the neighborhood’s elderly residents for regular blood-pressure measuring and walks. Some have coordinated with the police to start a Neighborhood Watch. Others ask local businesses to sponsor them with garbage bags, gloves, and pick-up sticks for quarterly neighborhood clean-ups.

One Haven House leader invited the youth on her block to interview senior adults. Then a picnic was held where older residents taught the children bygone games like Kick the Can, Jacks and Marbles, and Hopscotch. “There are a million different and inventive ways to meet our neighbors,” says Haven House coordinator Russell Minor. “We’re just providing a system and coordination.”

Focused on love
Community Renewal’s third strategy is the Friendship House. Volunteer contractors and contributing partners build houses with a large common room and a big front porch, each in a low-income, high-crime area. Trained staff and their families live in these Friendship Houses and work with local children and adults, providing educational assistance, mentoring, life skills, conflict resolution, parent training, and family support. Ten Friendship Houses currently operate, and they have already served more than 3,500 children.

Walk up to the Allendale Friendship House today, and you’ll find the neighborhood kids participating in a local drill team led by husband and wife Emmitt and Sharpel Welch, the resident house counselors. The kids are uniformed and march in formation, singing and chanting. They reel off the books of the Bible in unison, looks of steely concentration in their eyes. After years in the Army, the Welches know how to build discipline and concentration. But it took them a while to fuel local participation.

“When I first got to Allendale,” recalls Emmitt, “I was meeting 17-year-old kids who couldn’t look at a clock on the wall and tell you what time it was. Who didn’t know how to tie a shoe. I was blown away. At first I was looking at them like something strange out of a horror movie, and they were looking at me basically the same way. Word on the street was that I was a narcotics agent. They were showing up and eating my pizza, but they were told by their peers: ‘Don’t give Emmitt any information.’ They weren’t even telling me their names.”

Then “something strange happened. You know, when love is given out, love has got to come back in. These kids began to come around. The parents were peeping through the windows into the Friendship House. They began to put the message out, ‘This guy is for real.’”

Welch explains that “we put conditions in their lives. We tell them there are standards. Little things as well as big things. We tell them they are responsible for cleaning up around this place. They are responsible for being nice and courteous to one another. The first year I was here, we spent most of our time at the principal’s office, down at the sheriff’s office. Dealing with alcohol. Going to juvenile hall and taking handcuffs off the kids who were locked up until someone picked them up. All that stuff. We start telling them that this is totally unacceptable behavior.”

Meanwhile, “We offered a welding program. Activities to keep them busy. Guess what started happening? The grades started coming up. We stopped going to the principal’s office. Nobody had cared enough to tell these kids that there is a standard we must live by.” But if you let kids know “what you expect out of them, if you give them a hug and let them know you’re proud of them, these kids will go 110 percent for you.”

Friendship House leaders like the Welches try to involve everyone in a community that’s willing to be part of coaxing and encouraging the young. Once a month, they have a family night where everyone in the neighborhood is invited to a large barbecue. Folks get to know each
“Some people say we’re substitute parents,” says Emmitt. “I call it standing in the gap, doing whatever is necessary to keep this thing together. I tell the kids when they come in here, it doesn’t matter if your last name is Jones, Jackson, or Williams. We’re all family. We’re not going to attack each other. We’re going to love each other, and we’re going to do the very best we can. If we don’t love them, and if we don’t reach out to them, some of these kids are going to grow up to be monsters. But if you just keep rubbing on a jagged edge, it’s going to become smooth after a while. It’s a process, but we’re getting it done.”

Regrowing connections

The message of studies like Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone is that social capital just grows up naturally and is hard to replace once stripped away. But Community Renewal suggests that links among neighbors can be regrown, even in the face of corrosive factors like gangs, drugs, economic pressure, and racial baggage. We all know about character programs that stress individual growth. We also know of programs that have done major damage by trying to change individual behavior through group mechanisms. Community Renewal seems to be a rare alternative.

Many donors have given to Community Renewal, though few have made sustained investments over the long haul. It’s been hard for the group to communicate its successes. “How do you quantify love?” muses Floyd Morris, who helped steer some Robert Wood Johnson Foundation money to Community Renewal when he was a program officer. “How do you put that down in words and not have people look at you as some idealistic kook?”

The organization’s focus on relationships doesn’t easily support the kind of concrete proofs of performance that many foundations now require. Paul Ellingstad, who has guided some of Hewlett Packard’s corporate philanthropy to Community Renewal, agrees. “I’m the first to hold up my hand that the benefit of an organization like Community Renewal can’t be reduced to a dashboard of performance indicators,” he says. “Mack definitely has the long game in mind.”

Morris, who now leads an organization in Trenton, New Jersey, called Children’s Futures, reports that when he first encountered Community Renewal back in the mid-1990s, “I couldn’t believe something like this actually existed. I started reading about the process of relationship, and connection, and people coming together to build social capital. There was one section that talked about a Friendship House being built in the most difficult area of Shreveport, with that home being used for job training, after-school programs, family training, neighbor to neighbor. It all resonated.”

He went down to Louisiana to see it in the flesh. “They were connecting people with people they trusted, institutions they trusted. They had an ability to dialogue around issues like drug use and crime. It was and is the soft stuff, but it’s what makes the world go ‘round.” The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation first fronted $400,000 and ultimately provided $2.6 million, much of it aimed at building up the research capacity of Community Renewal so that expansion would eventually be possible.

In 2000, architect and city planner Kim Mitchell began experimenting with the potential of the Community Renewal model to transform cities. In 2014, after a successful 40-year career, Mitchell retired from his firm to become the founding director of the Center for Community Renewal. Its role is to create and track data streams demonstrating effects, as well as to map out strategies for expanding the Shreveport model to other places. Currently nine U.S. cities are in various phases of replicating the model, and this ambition has begun to attract potential donors. In 2015, the Avedis Foundation studied Shreveport’s results and invested $1 million to support a year’s worth of operation in its home town of Shawnee, Oklahoma. Three years in, Shawnee is far ahead of schedule. In tandem, Community Renewal is developing a leadership institute to train social entrepreneurs from around the world and send them to places as far-flung as Cameroon and Minneapolis, Abilene and Washington, D.C.

“Caring alone cannot heal our nation,” says McCarter. “But caring together can.”