

CASE STUDY

# 3

## **A Contagion of Caring, One Block at a Time** Community Renewal International Shreveport, Louisiana

*“Light, light, more light!” they tell us the dying Goethe cried.  
No. Warmth, warmth, more warmth! For we die of cold and not of darkness.  
It is not the night that kills, but the frost.  
~ Miguel de Unamuno, **The Tragic Sense of Life***

One of the most successful character initiatives in the country doesn't actually talk about character. Not up front, at least. Rather, the mission of a transformative organization based in Shreveport, Louisiana, is to revive neighborhoods and cities by restoring relationships—home by home, block by block.

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 she'd 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. “The people who came in to rent, they didn't have the same philosophy that the ones had when I first came,” says Miss Rosie. “They came with a different point of view.”

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 ecology 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. Many people were living with the psychic trauma of dead loved ones. Before long, every single business in Allendale had closed or moved away. Residents saw little future for themselves.

Meanwhile, the larger city of Shreveport seemed uninterested. Legally, segregation was over, but whites weren't touching 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.

A man named Mack McCarter saw all this and was dismayed. A Shreveport native and proud alum of Byrd High School, he'd gone off to become a civil-rights activist in the late 1960s before heading to Texas for seminary and the pastorate. When he returned to Shreveport in 1991, he was shocked by the state of things. A reader of historian Arnold Toynbee, McCarter realized he wasn't just seeing a city in a tailspin, he was watching a whole culture decline.

It kept McCarter up at night. He refused to accept that doom was inevitable. He knew he had to do something to stem the tide.

"If society is fundamentally relational," McCarter says, "then, from what I'd learned from thousands of hours of pastoral counseling, society could be healed." 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."

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.

McCarter thought an organization could coach people to develop healthy relationships. He sketched a set of simple rules:

- You must seek the other person's good just as you seek your own.
- Other people are never to be used as a means, but treasured for their own sake.
- Forgive all wounds to the mind, emotions, or spirit, whether slight or serious.

- Confess your own wounding actions, and seek forgiveness.
- Give the other person attention, aiming always to deepen and sustain the relationship.

The pastor stared hard at these principles and wondered what they would look like if applied to a whole city. 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.



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### **The power of personalism**

Mack 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 simply 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 “How do you do” 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. Everyone warmed to his attentiveness and good humor. “There was something about his speaking that sounded sincere,” Miss Rosie recalls.

After two years of consistent presence, McCarter created a training workshop for people interested in building stronger relationships with their neighbors. He knew that the insiders would have more legitimacy than he or any other well-intentioned white outsider could earn. Commissioned “Haven House leaders,” participants would be taught how to befriend others on their block. They would be responsible for organizing neighborhood gatherings, staying abreast of needs and crises within the community, and encouraging a spirit of openness and generosity.

“We’re remaking our city by making friends on our street,” said McCarter. That became the motto of the Haven House plan.

It was a modest beginning. But fast-forward 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 play outdoors, and grandmothers tend tomatoes in the “Allendale Garden of Hope & Love.” There are two residential community centers called Friendship Houses that provide tutoring, food, and character-building experiences for kids, high-school-equivalency test training, family support, and other help. The neighborhood’s self-image has improved, and property values have appreciated.

“The best thing that could happen to Allendale was seeing the people come together as a group,” states Lee Jeter. He’s a former marine who runs Shreveport’s chapter of the Fuller Center for Housing (created by the same couple who founded Habitat for Humanity, Millard and Linda Fuller), which builds and repairs houses in partnership with families in need. “People now say, ‘This is our community, and we’re going to take charge.’ If you can take a place that was in decline and decay like Allendale, and revitalize it from the inside, then...it can happen in any community in the United States.”

Allendale's revival has inspired replications in other parts of Shreveport, including Highland, Cedar Grove, Queensborough, and the Barksdale Annex in neighboring Bossier. One sees in each place the same striking improvements in safety, resident satisfaction, educational trajectories, and personal transformation. Some affluent pockets of Shreveport have also joined in, unlocking their doors and rediscovering the joys of knowing one's neighbors.

McCarter's goal is to "re-villagize the city," and it starts with a simple yet powerful principle: Make visible that which is already going on, namely, caring acts by caring individuals.

Community Renewal, the nonprofit that grew out of McCarter's core insight, created a "We Care" initiative that asks residents to sign cards where they describe one thing they're doing to help someone else. It might be taking communion to a disabled person from church. It might be something as simple as regularly sweeping debris off a neighbor's walkway. In exchange for filling out the card, you get a lapel pin, a bumper sticker, and a yard sign bearing the words We Care. It is a stamp of membership that is now recognized across the city—54,500 residents now consider themselves part of the We Care team—shared across boundaries of neighborhood, race, and economic circumstance.

This is a simple, affirming way to boost the better angels already at work in a community. The We Care signs bolster the ranks of doers who are generous and attuned to their neighbors. They serve as signals to help caring people learn of one another's existence, and connect. Over time, an organic, volunteer-driven caring network emerges, sparking unlikely friendships and enabling residents to feel like they belong to something greater than themselves.

"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. It's powerful."

Community Renewal's goal is to expand the number of people participating in the We Care initiative from the current 54,500 to 130,000. Already, the bumper stickers, lapel pins, and yard flags are very visible across this city of 300,000. It may sound soft, but in Shreveport, caring has become a unifying identity, shifting perceptions of a city known for

crime and segregation into a community increasingly knit together by shared goals, shared responsibilities, and mutual moral improvement.

“I met Mack and everything changed,” says Paige Hoffpauir, 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.”



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McCarter suggests that competent, compassionate, whole people don’t spring up on their own. They grow up out of relationships. “We won’t have strong individual character unless we have a community that’s conducive to it,” he says 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.”

Everyone who’s been involved in this intentional caring network testifies to incredible transformation on both personal and communal levels. People across the socioeconomic spectrum report a rediscovery of life purpose. Residents describe the game-changer it’s been to know and be known by one’s neighbors. And citizens at large feel empowered to contribute from their unique talents, to serve as hosts, bridge-builders, entrepreneurs, and community healers.

“It is important that people recognize that caring people outnumber those who are not,” McCarter says. “We want to make visible what is already real. Catastrophe will do that. It will strip off the veneer. 9/11 didn’t change people in New York City. It revealed them.”

## Villagize the city

A second big part of Community Renewal's strategy is the Haven House. It takes the We Care interest in "coordinated neighboring" and adds structure and accountability. Volunteers willing to make their home a Haven House 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. The effort could be thought of as a way of re-creating in a city the intimate knowledge and mutual responsibility of a small town.

Leaders are encouraged to creatively apply McCarter's "Rules of Relationships" to the needs of their own community. They get tips and training on how to overcome social fears, ideas for outreach, and a strong network of support. Haven House leaders meet monthly in groups of 20 with a coordinator to document progress in building relationships, share best practices, and solve problems.

"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 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.'"

Recruiting the right kind of Haven House leader is crucial. It needs to be someone who is already respected in the neighborhood, who is kind, open, and willing to be available when needs flare at an inconvenient time.

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."

The kind of extroversion that Community Renewal equips its Haven House leaders to encourage in their neighborhoods isn't for everyone.

With residents who are suspicious, the Haven House leader is trained to stay friendly but not push. The hope is that at some point one neighbor will develop a relationship with the skeptic next door and melt away barriers, little by little. The ultimate goal is to shift the neighborhood ecology away from radical privacy and autonomy and toward sharing and caring, so trust and goodwill become second nature.

“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.

Some Haven House leaders publish a block directory. Others find someone to create and distribute a monthly newsletter, with photos and information about people’s health, family updates, crime news, and community-wide events. Every leader makes it a priority to learn the names and occupations of all those on his or her block, and everyone is encouraged to research the history of the neighborhood. “There will be no better group of people that knows the passions, the desires, the hurts of the people across a city than Haven House at full scale,” says Kim Mitchell, director of Community Renewal’s lab for national replication.

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. “There’s not one way. We’re just providing a system and coordination.”

### *In loco parentis*

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.



There are more than 1,500 Haven House leaders creatively caring in Shreveport. Some sponsor caroling, others organize a car wash to buy school supplies, or make a block directory.

“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.’”

Now, “when they come up those stairs, I make sure that I look them in the face to see if their heads are slumped down and they’re kicking rocks, or if their heads are held up high and they’re running in here. If they’re running in here, we’re going to have a pretty good day. If their

head is hung down, that means we had trouble at home and we're going to have trouble today."

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 until someone picked them up. All that stuff. We start telling them that this is totally unacceptable behavior. That we have standards we expect of you (which, by the way, is what the parents should have been doing).

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 put a level of expectancy in these kids' minds, let them 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.

Emmitt and Sharpel try to widen the horizons of these young people. "Some of our kids had never been to the state capitol. I loaded them all in the van and we took them down to Government Plaza, walked around, prayed, and came back. I got permission to take them down to Space Center Houston a couple years ago. First time they'd ever left Shreveport. Last year at spring break, we took all the kids to San Antonio. On these trips, they're in a place they don't recognize, where they don't know anyone, and the only thing they have to latch onto is each other and the standard of excellence that we put on them."

Friendship House leaders like the Welches try to involve all those 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 other, shake hands, and talk about what's happening in and around Allendale.

"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."

### **Mutual reinforcement, and an ambition to scale**

From these three overlapping efforts—the We Care initiative, the Haven House network, and the Friendship Houses in the toughest neighborhoods—have grown all sorts of sub-initiatives. There is now the Adult Renewal Academy, which helps people earn their GED and find gainful employment, while honing their parenting skills and connecting themselves to a larger support network. There's a sewing apprenticeship program for women. There are summer camp offerings that allow kids from neighborhoods like Allendale to experience nature in Missouri.

A group of teenage women called Girl Pearls meets twice a month with a set of older female mentors who orchestrate candid discussions of self-esteem, abuse, race, sexuality, identity. One of the leaders was tired of seeing teenage pregnancies at the end of every summer, so she gave each girl a golden egg and made her responsible for a regimen of dressing and feeding it, carrying it everywhere, and putting it to sleep. It was an exercise in the responsibilities of parenting, and by the end "those girls were so tired of their eggs! They didn't want to see them again!"

Community Renewal answers two key questions for donors keen to advance character-forming conditions across the country. First, can social capital be repaired intentionally? 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.

The second question is: Can character formation happen in groups? We all know of individual character programs. But can you create a whole moral ecology in which it is easier to be good, which nurtures kindness, compassion, accountability, and personal responsibility?

Community Renewal is proving that you can. It gives people social roles (We Care member, Haven House leader, community coordinator,

Friendship House parent, etc.) that provide individuals with a sense of responsibility, dignity, belonging, and agency. It anoints norm-setters who hold up and enforce standards of locally acceptable behavior. It creates accountability mechanisms for people to keep refining their behavior. It decentralizes initiative and responsibility, so that most activity is intimate rather than impersonal—often limited to a couple dozen households. It creates positive feedback loops: Healthy community inspires wholesome habits, improved behavior, better people, better communities. And all this is not charity and dependency but local control and responsibility.

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 building and sustaining relationships over a long period of time doesn't readily align with expectations for shorter term, concrete outcomes that many foundations and corporate social responsibility teams now require. Paul Ellingstad, who guided some of Hewlett Packard's corporate philanthropy to Community Renewal, explains: "The benefits and the social value an organization like Community Renewal creates in the long run can't be reduced to a typical corporate dashboard of performance indicators and evaluated in the same way." He says that "Mack thinks and works to enable loving, caring communities that thrive across generations—not quarters."

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 had a training process. 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 \$2,635,583, 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 front a year's worth of operation in its hometown of Shawnee, Oklahoma. Three years in, Shawnee is far ahead of schedule.

"The essential challenge [of our time] is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole." These are the words of Peter Block, author of the 2008 book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. Insofar as this is right, what disciplines bring tools to measure isolation and self-interest, connectedness and caring? Could such measurements win the philanthropic support that Community Renewal and other transformative character efforts need? Better yet, could legitimate measurements of the "softer" substrate of a flourishing society help design a methodology that could be franchised or licensed, so the program isn't beholden to restricted grants? Or do donors simply need to pay more attention to the conditions that make for healthy relationships in the first place, forestalling measurement for practical (and principled) know-how?

For now Community Renewal is working on establishing a leadership institute to train social entrepreneurs from around the world in the model 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."