

## Senior housing at Terraces on Tulane replaces units lost in Hurricane Katrina

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By **Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune**



John McCusker/The Times-Picayune archive

The 200 Mid-City apartments at Terraces on Tulane were built for senior citizens as a replacement for Forest Towers East in eastern New Orleans.

Alice Blue, now 75, evacuated to Texas in 2005, the first of several moves she'd make before returning to New Orleans last month. Home is now **Terraces on Tulane**, a **Mid-City** apartment complex built for senior citizens as a replacement for Forest Towers East in eastern New Orleans, an elderly community that never reopened after **Hurricane Katrina**.

Before the storm, Blue liked to walk two or three miles a day, talking to neighbors and making one-item grocery runs just to get outdoors. But in Los Angeles, living near her sister and brother, she walked long distances to bus stops for buses that traveled routes she didn't know by instinct. "I didn't feel at ease," she said.

Blue and a group of other nimble gray-haired ladies spoke with joy about returning to New Orleans at Friday's opening ceremonies for Terraces on Tulane, a \$43 million structure with 200 apartments. From the building on **Tulane Avenue** near Carrollton Avenue, Blue can hoof it and ride buses without problem. "I was born and raised here. I can get around," she said confidently.



John McCusker/The Times-Picayune

Rosalie Ross is one of the first 46 residents of the \$43 million Terraces on Tulane.

A few men have moved into Terraces on Tulane since it started taking tenants last month. But most of the building's first 46 residents are women who lived together in Forest Towers East and have years of memories to relive together: the complex's annual Carnival celebration, a mock wedding they staged there, the three-yard king cake they baked and constructed.

It's difficult to tell how many displaced elders have returned to New Orleans since Katrina. Children who have returned to the city can be tracked through school enrollment and new households receiving mail. But the movement of displaced seniors may be harder to follow because they were often taken in by extended family and counted as part of a larger household. Those who provide services to the elderly report that their clients are returning but that they face barriers such as fewer social services and sometimes-spotty healthcare, with longtime standbys like Charity Hospital and Methodist Hospital in eastern New Orleans still shuttered.

### **Memories of Forest Towers East**

On Friday, the women at Terraces on Tulane were dressed and coiffed for the building's ribbon-cutting. They raved about the building's amenities and rents set at affordable rates, thanks to a federal housing subsidy provided to the building's owner, Volunteers of America.

Secretly, they were waiting for all the pomp and circumstance to be done, so that they could get back into their groove, said Barbara Sacrite, 74, as she sat with her old friends, Audrey Morris, 79, and Bernice Lewis, 84.

But the celebration gave them time to reflect. Morris had been thinking all day about her younger sister, Oletha McDowell, who lived on the floor above her in Forest Towers East but died last year. She didn't recover from Katrina, said Sacrite, as she named others whose health failed suddenly afterward: Mr. Pierce, Miss Margie, Miss Bloom, Hazel, and Mr. Bartholomew, a popular resident who had served as groom in the mock wedding and as a king of their Carnival.

Bartholomew also used to regularly DJ for the building's rollicking "oldie but goodie" night. He used to slice the melon on watermelon night. He took the ladies in his van to the dollar store, to Wal-Mart, the grocery.

"I hope somebody will be able to do some of those things with us," Morris said.

### **Services strained**

But Howard Rodgers III, head of the New Orleans Council on Aging, worries that services for seniors may be lacking for the foreseeable future. His agency has seen a steady stream of

seniors moving home, in large part because of complexes like Terraces on Tulane, he said. But his Meals on Wheels program already has a waiting list of 800. And because of state budget cuts, his agency isn't able to provide meals-on-site at Terraces on Tulane and other new buildings for the elderly that have requested their help, he said.

"We won't be able to serve the growing number of elderly returning to the city," Rodgers said, noting that this is especially hard for seniors who couldn't adapt elsewhere and returned to their hometown alone, without the extended families who used to fix them lunch and invite them over for dinner.

And while Terraces on Tulane has grab bars along its hallways and other design features meant to help its residents stay active, senior citizens may also have trouble moving around newly constructed apartment complexes that were not specifically built for the elderly. In May, the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center audited 22 newly built complexes and found that all of them were inaccessible in some way to people with physical disabilities, counter to Fair Housing Act requirements for new construction.

It's unclear how many elderly-specific apartments have been rebuilt since Katrina.

But the Catholic church has played a part in the return of nearly 2,500 senior citizens to the metropolitan area. Christopher Homes, the senior housing program of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, has reopened or rebuilt 1,300 apartments for low-income seniors in metropolitan New Orleans. Providence Community Housing, the church's housing arm, has added about 600 more in Orleans Parish. Along with other Catholic church partners, the agencies have also rebuilt, repaired or painted an additional 530 homes for senior citizens.

### **Federal subsidies**

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development plays a key role in rebuilding because it provides the monthly subsidies that cap low-income residents' rent at one-third of their household income. In 2005, HUD paid subsidies to the owners of 4,000 privately owned, publicly subsidized apartments, which made up roughly five percent of the city's pre-storm housing in complexes dedicated either to elderly or working-class residents.

When HUD last provided reports in mid-2008, its private partners had rebuilt or reopened about 800 of the units. But HUD could provide no current data about its other subsidized properties by presstime.

When Volunteers of America decided not to rebuild Forest Towers East, it worked with HUD to transfer the rental-subsidy contract to Terraces on Tulane, a location that developers found superior because of its proximity to the Tulane Avenue healthcare corridor and public transportation, said Victor Smeltz from Volunteers of America Greater New Orleans.

The ladies approve of the building's new site. "It's right in the heart of it," said Sacrite, an intrepid bus rider who long ago memorized the city's main public-transportation routes. And if she stays in, she can keep an eye on the action from her window, which overlooks the building's front gates.

"I know who's coming and going," Sacrite said.

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