

# Marrero Picayune

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## Home ownership dreams come true

*Families are given a hand-up in Gretna*

By **Sandra Laborie**  
Contributing writer

Early in 2006, Volunteers of America had planned the construction of 11 homes in Gretna on Palfrey Street, between Van Trump and Porter. It was called the Gretna Square Development Project.

Four of the houses were completed and sold just as the unexpected happened, and Hurricane Katrina devastated our area. The plans for the remainder of the project were put on hold — until now.

The Affordable Homeownership Program is once again offering a chance for qualified low-income families to own their own home. The three-bedroom,

two-bath homes are all about 1,424 square feet and are within walking distance of schools, shopping and transportation.

"The seven new modular homes are finished and all but one already have sales pending," said Mark Boucree, housing director of the Volunteers of America. "There are no more houses being planned for Jefferson Parish at this time. Our next project will be in the New Orleans area."

The opportunity to buy their first home has changed the lives of two local women. Chiquita Jones and Tawanda Gray had both dreamed of being homeowners. For Jones that dream became a reality through the Gretna Square Development Project.

In early 2005 she applied to buy one of the new homes being



Chiquita Jones signs her paperwork to become a new homeowner in Gretna.

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Jim LeBlanc, president/CEO of Volunteers of America, stands with new homeowner Iawanda Gray.

## Agencies team up as Jeff homes built

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This assistance does not have to be paid back as long as the buyers live in their house for at least 10 years.

However, several months after the hurricane, Jones was able to get in touch with Boucree, and picked up where she had left off. Today she is a proud homeowner.

Gray's sister was the first homeowner in their family. Inspired by her sister's purchase, Gray looked into the program being offered by the VOA. Taking the opportunity being offered, today both Gray and her sister are now homeowners. Gray says that being able to buy her own home will have a lasting impact on her family for generations to come.

The homes cost between \$111,000 and \$113,000. Eligibility for the program is based on income and family size. Participants must be first-time homebuyers and must take part in a certified homebuyers training program. They do not have to be citizens of Jefferson Parish.

Families who qualify are also eligible for help with down payments, financing and other costs of assistance. This project is made possible by a commitment from the Jefferson Parish Council, which has offered grants to offset development cost and to assist homebuyers. Participants of the program are also eligible for up to \$20,000 in assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, issued through the Jefferson Parish office of Community Development.

This assistance does not have to be paid back as long as the buyers live in their house for at least 10 years.

The housing development by the Partnership of Renaissance Neighborhood Development was a collaboration that was formed by the Volunteers of America of Gretna and New Orleans, and Volunteers of America National Services, the city of Gretna, the Jefferson Parish Office of Community Development and the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office.

The Sheriff's Office had bought the land many years ago with plans to build a new radio tower there. However, the tower was never built and the office has since sold the property to the housing program.

After showing that this concept of modular homes works, the Renaissance Neighborhood Development expects to use the same application as a means of bringing homeowners back to neighborhoods in areas of Orleans Parish that were destroyed by Katrina. The next area targeted for new modular homes through this program will be in the Gentilly area.

"We should be starting to build in the fall or winter and expect the houses to be ready for purchase near the end of spring," Boucree said.

For more information about the project, call Boucree at 504.228.5042.

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