The Rethinkers

Giving Young People a Voice
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Giving Young People a Voice
New Orleans Youth Activist the Subject of a Documentary to air on HBO

By Edwin Buggage
Photos by Colin M. Lenton

As we approach the seven year anniversary when a great American City was ravaged by destruction and where the world witnessed horrific images of people suffering and seeking refuge on top of their homes, the Superdome and Convention Center. Where floodwaters left the City a swamplike place of people walking through a sea of debris and during those grave days of turmoil and its aftermath many could not forecast what the future of New Orleans would look like. The City resembled a ghost town with few residents and an uncertain future.

With the many problems facing the City and no shortage of finger pointing, today we fast forward and see an-

On the Cover: Rethinkers begin to think about the importance of growing their own food and promoting school gardens. Today Rethink has its own garden at its office location in the ArtEgg building, 1000 South Broad.
The Joseph S. Clark Class of 1972
40th Year Class Reunion
May 25-27, 2012

The Joseph S. Clark of 1972 is having its 40th Year Reunion Memorial Day Weekend (May 25-27, 2012). The activities include a social event on Friday May 25th, picnic on Saturday May 26th and a church service on Sunday May 27th.

J. S. Clark Alumni and Friends of Clark are invited to celebrate with the Class of 1972. Please come out and celebrate with us our memorable past in this milestone occasion.

For more info please call 504-430-6002 or 504-975-2874 or visit us on Facebook at Joseph S. Clark c/o 1972.
Master Gardener’s Corner

Xeriscaping for a care-free beautiful Garden

By MG Calla Victoria

Xeriscaping and xerogardening refers to landscaping and gardening in ways that reduce or eliminate the need for supplemental water from irrigation. In some western states xeriscaping equates to using a lot of pebbles in the landscape and not a lot of plant material. However you can have a low maintenance and beautiful garden with lots of color by just selecting the right plant materials.

Usually when we think of care-free plants we usually think of foliage plants like philodendrons, palms, cactus, and ornamental grasses. However, there are quite a few flowering plants that put on a spectacular show almost year round to keep your garden colorful and maintenance free. Bougainvilleas are festive climbers and come in a variety of colors from white, yellow, orange, pink, fuchsia, and scarlet. They are covered with delicate blooms called “paper flowers” almost year round in our climate. They thrive in full sun with dry soil. They are somewhat tender for the first year or so. If we get a hard freeze you will probably lose them. A good hint is to plant bougainvilleas where they can get some protection and that might solve the problem.

Another great climber is the Confederate Jasmine (Trachelospermum Jasminoides) which is in bloom right now and perfuming gardens all over town with an explosion of tiny white blossoms. Confederate jasmine blooms off and on throughout the year and basically needs no care outside of an occasional trim every now and then to keep it looking neat. They make wonderful hedges, groundcovers, and telephone pole collars. It just tickles my spirit when citizens take it upon themselves to beautify their neighborhoods with plantings around telephones poles.

Now groundcovers are definitely an alternative to mowing a lawn every week and all ground covers are drought tolerant so no watering is required. My ground cover of choice is the sweet potato vine in either purple or chartreuse, they make a beautiful cover, add a vibrant splash of color, they are aggressive growers, and if you chose to you can harvest some sweet potatoes. But for coverage and fragrance nothing beats sweet alypressum, Lobularia maritima (Brassicaceae). Usually considered a fall planting but in our climate the sweet allympsums provide year round beauty. I have some planted near my front door and whenever I open the door for someone they always ask, “What is causing that wonderful smell?” The sweet allympsums comes in white or pink but the white ones are fragrant.

Another plant that is excellent for color and toughness is the canna. In our climate it is happy, blooms almost year round, and does not need anything but the sun. Cannas are quite invasive so plant them where you can contain them or sink them in containers and

Lemonade Day Success

Photos by Terry B. Jones

Future Business Leaders participated in Lemonade Day- New Orleans, organized to empower youth to become the business leaders, social advocates, volunteers, and forward thinking citizens of tomorrow.

If you have photos of parties or events you would like to run in DATA, please send to datanewsad@bellsouth.net for inclusion.
Jazz Fest Comes to a Close

Photos by Kichea S. Burt

Another Jazz Fest has ended, but the memories are still here. Two weeks of fantastic performances by local and world renowned musicians, artists, fans and New Orleans magic combined for a successful and memorable occasion. Of course, Data was there!
By Jenga Mwendo
NNPA Columnist

The New York Times Magazine recently ran a story on my home, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, a place one of the most powerful newspapers in the world insensitively dubbed a “Jungleland.” Contrary to the article, residents of this community are not reconciled to life in the wilderness and we don’t live in an untamed mess of overgrowth or in a forgotten wasteland. We are not resigned to anything; we are fighting to revive our community.

While the article cites the city government’s futile attempts to improve the neighborhood, it barely mentions the overall lack of government support before and after Hurricane Katrina and the hard work by committed citizens to improve the community. Yes, many parts of the Lower Ninth are overgrown and neglected, but what the article missed is that many are not. Moreover, the untold story is how city, state and federal government abandoned this community.

The Times probably had good intentions — document the bad situation so our community can get help. But while writing about the history of racism pummeled us, the article included more about the unattended mess in the Lower Ninth. In fact, the Times article mentions only Brad Pitt’s Make It Right organization as the silver lining in the dark cloud that is the Lower Ninth. Churches and other groups may not offer the glitter, clout and financial resources of Brad Pitt, but they labor daily to improve the quality of life here. The Times article included more about the varieties of plant and animal life that have moved in than about the people and organizations fighting to rescue this community.

Before the Lower Ninth is judged, consider why it has become a vast wasteland. After Katrina, nearly 15,000 people lived in the Lower Ninth. Churches and other groups may not offer the glitter, clout and financial resources of Brad Pitt, but they labor daily to improve the quality of life here. The Times article mentioned more about the varieties of plant and animal life that have moved in than about the people and organizations fighting to rescue this community.

Before the Lower Ninth is judged, consider why it has become a vast wasteland. After Katrina, nearly 15,000 people lived in this community, which had the overwhelming majority of these owners were African-American. After the destruction, 75 percent of the residents didn’t return because staying where they had fled was easier than the struggle and expense of returning to rebuild. Those who did return discovered very little government support. Without nonprofits and thousands of volunteers, more of the Lower Ninth might actually be “Jungleland.”

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to restoration is that this community had fewer resources before Katrina. Like other poor, African-American communities nationwide, it had suffered the results of structural racism. The color of our skin had an impact on our schools, access to health care, employment opportunities, and housing and basic human rights. When resources were scarce to begin with, it’s hard to recover after tragedy.

For instance, many Lower Ninth residents had no homeowners or flood insurance. The Road Home program, designed to help people rebuild, provided payments to homeowners based on pre-Katrina property values, not actual repair costs. So White homeowners whose homes in affluent neighborhoods received payments that allowed them to rebuild, even though many of their homes incurred less damage than those of people in neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth. A 2008 lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) alleged such discriminatory practices and was settled last year. HUD was to pay $62 million to Louisiana homeowners, but disposition of that money is unclear.

In another setback, the city didn’t allow Lower Ninth residents to come home and start rebuilding until nine months after other New Orleans citizens returned. Faced with increased uncertainty, chaos and financial burdens, people were forced to find work and resettle in their evacuation locations.

What few services were available also caused concern. The social safety net already had gaps but was completely shattered by Katrina. Elderly residents worried about where they could receive healthcare, parents didn’t know where they would send their children to school and seven years later, the community has no grocery store.

Clearly, the government didn’t want us back because the original master rebuilding plan had the Lower Ninth slated to become green space.

Rebuilding our community may not be profitable, but it’s right. African-American lives in the Lower Ninth are just as valuable as those of Whites in the French Quarter or Garden District.

Often overlooked is the role that structural racism played in destruction of our community. If the French Quarter had been in the same area as the Lower Ninth, the government wouldn’t have allowed anything as potentially destructive as a barge to remain untouched with a storm coming. Levees would have been built to withstand a Category 4 hurricane so major tourist attractions wouldn’t be jeopardized.

The French Quarter wasn’t saved because it sits nine feet higher than the back section of the Lower Ninth but because of racism and classism. Black residents of the Lower Ninth were deemed expendable long before Katrina.

With a new mayor in office, there is at least hope for the future. We’ve had more street repairs in the Lower Ninth, but that’s where it ends for now. We’ve heard promises and seen plans, but the community is naturally skeptical. We have become accustomed to broken promises. So we don’t hold our breath. We don’t get excited. We wait and see.

Jenga Mwendo appears courtesy of America’s Wire Writers Group and is an urban-agriculture, community organizer in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and founder of the Backyard Gardeners Network, whose mission is to sustain and strengthen the community.
in your landscape, otherwise they will be popping up all over the place. Lavender is a great plant that thrives in craggy soil, full sun, and dryness. Lavender gives off the most wonderful fragrance, makes lovely cut or dried flowers, and potpourri. Yes there is a variety of lavender that grows well in the soil here in New Orleans; it is called “Sweet” Lavender (Lavandula angustifolia). I have some flourishing in my garden that I planted about six months ago.

We cannot discuss fuzz-free plants without mentioning bromeliads. Most people think of bromeliads as house plants but they are a real crowd pleaser for xeriscaping. Most people think of the Alcantarea imperialis which is stunning purple foliage, it grows 5 ft. x 5 ft., it will take a frost, and when it finally blooms it sends up a nine foot bloom spike. Plant it and forget it, the dew will take care of it for you.

The Double Knock out rose is a real crowd pleaser for xeriscaping. It provides year round blooms, dead-heading the spent blooms is not required because the bush is self cleaning. They are disease-resistant, need full sun, and after it is established they need almost no watering. Day lilies are great for color and variety in any landscape. They only need the sun and whatever moisture that drops from the sky is enough to keep these little workhorses happy. Make sure that you purchase “re-blooming” day lilies for wonderful color from now until the fall. All of the plants recommended in this article are perennials meaning they will come back each year. So flank your front door with sweet alyssum, fill your flower beds with re-blooming daylilies and canna, border your beds with sweet potato vines as ground cover, line your fences with confederate jasmine for privacy and fragrance; frame your doorway with bougainvilleas, line your walkway with double knockout roses, feature the Alcantarea imperialis bromeliad in a prominent location in partial shade, and plant lavender under a bedroom window for sweet dreams. Now you are xeriscaping baby, enjoying a beautiful gardening experience season after season without a lot of hard work.

Along with our new gardening section we will feature a lovely garden oasis each week, so if you think that your garden is all that and some Gerber daisies too and you would like to have it featured as “Data’s Garden of the week,” please send photos of you and your garden to datanews@ladiatnews.com. Type Garden of the week in subject line and be sure to include a contact phone number.

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provide schools with fresh, locally grown food at least twice a week. “It feels great that HBO has come to capture our story and put another face on the youth of New Orleans and show that all kids are not committing crime and being violent but are actually taking part in creating solutions to the problems of our community,” says Isaiah who is a High School senior preparing for graduation from Matrix Academy which is an all boys charter school that is graduating its first class with 100 percent of its students accepted into college. Isaiah plans to enter Louisiana State University in the fall to study Mechanical Engineering over the years in Rethink he has become a role model for other youth, “It is good that some of the younger “Rethinkers” are seeing that our work is being recognized and I hope it will continue to inspire them and grow our mission; and that kids from all over the country can see that they can make a difference.”

Wholey says she’s learned a lot from the young people in “The Rethinkers” and seen a level of resilience from the students in the face of adversity to be admired, again speaking highly of Isaiah she says, “His family after Katrina lost their home and was living in a trailer and his father unexpectedly died, this in addition to the storm could have sent many people over the edge, but Isaiah became even more of a leader after that. I think in part he was able to deal with it better because he had a mother and strong grandparents and was involved in church. When his dad died he was one of four children. Isaiah had to assume a lot of responsibility and he stepped up to the plate, it was a very sad experience losing a parent at a young age, but it is something that can make or break you. He just really expanded and became a role model for his younger sister and brother and other kids at Rethink.”

It is a sad fact that many young people fall through the cracks of society and become entrapped in lives of violence, crime and jail time, but Isaiah is a young man who is to be emulated and celebrated. Wholey says at an early age Isaiah was steered towards things that would lead to his success “He played sports and he wasn’t delusional about thinking that he could be his only route to success he had a plan, he was very discipline and between football, Rethink and a family that was involved he has become a great young man.” But while Isaiah is an example of the best ways to bring someone out of a traumatic situation is to put them in a position to do something positive in relation to it. And so the idea that these young people were to experience some power and success talking to the school system and how they envisioned new schools turned out to really be great therapy,” says Wholey speaking of Rethink then and looking at it now and how it has grown and the mission is evolving she says as a place to empower young people, “Today it is much more to be considered a place where you are respected, and where you are challenged to think great thoughts and tell your truth to power. We give people a leadership development opportunity and support the need for nourishment for people to think great thoughts and act on them.” On the students and Rethink and how it has shaped their purpose moving forward she says, “If we want young people to be civically engaged and be part of the conversation to make New Orleans a better place, we have to know it’s worth to hear their voices, and for that reason I think the very best investment we can make in the future of our City is to provide genuine opportunities for their voices to be heard with respect; and if you are able to prove that to a young person at an early age they will be hooked on civic engagement forever.”
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