

# “It’s a God Thing”

By JEAN SAMMON

This is a story—a true story—about a tennis-playing Mom who turned into a neighborhood activist and is now helping to put shattered lives back together.

The story takes place in New Orleans, where all the homes in Connie Uddo’s neighborhood were flooded during Hurricane Katrina. Connie’s family moved five times in the next six months. When they finally moved back to their Lakeview home, they were the first family to return to the neighborhood.

Connie felt both blessed and cursed to be back: blessed because they had a home and most of their belongings, but cursed because they were the only ones living in the neighborhood. It felt like a war zone, with no life—not even birds or ants. If you can imagine living like this, you can probably imagine how depressed Connie was.

## Beacon of Hope

Connie was rescued from depression by a neighborhood meeting at her home, where she saw that she really wasn’t alone after all. She became involved in helping her neighbors recover their homes, and then she met a woman who was “ten steps ahead of her.” This woman used her home as a command center—a “Beacon of Hope”—to bring people together

to accomplish the many tasks involved in rebuilding a neighborhood.

Connie began to see miracles. Churches, schools and homes that had seemed impossible to restore because of damage and lack of funds were rebuilt and reopened by people in the community who wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. Connie felt called by God when a minister gave her the keys to a small building and said, “I’ve got to rebuild a church and a school. You can run a new center for the Episcopal diocese and I’ll help you when you need it.” She became the director of the St. Paul’s Homecoming Center, in partnership with Beacon of Hope, and conducted a “scavenger hunt” to find the resources that people needed: tree cutters, plumbers, electricians, roofers, painters, notary publics, mental health counselors, laundry facilities, and so on.

When government seemed unable to help, St. Paul’s Homecoming Center became a one-stop, one-form-to-fill-out place to connect residents with the

resources they needed to bring their neighborhood back.

## Making Them Whole

The work of the homeowner assistance program has evolved from helping people with basic reconstruction to enabling them to complete their journeys home. Bringing volunteers together with residents who are too exhausted and out of money to put the finishing touches on their home—restoring lawns and gardens, painting over the flood lines—brings new energy to residents and helps them feel whole.

Connie refers to their model for recovery as the Trinity Model, with three key components: faith groups that provide volunteers and funding; grassroots residents who know the needs; and neighborhood associations that provide leadership. She also says that “it’s a God thing” since she very clearly sees God’s involvement, referring to the people as the “hands and feet” of Christ. They have learned what can be accomplished when people of different faith denominations work together.

This “trinity” has also learned how to build mutually beneficial relationships with government agencies, and how to push for changes in laws that get in their way. NETWORK staff saw this recently when a delegation of Gulf Coast residents, including Connie, came to Washington to meet with congressional and administration officials to tell them how the federal government can help.

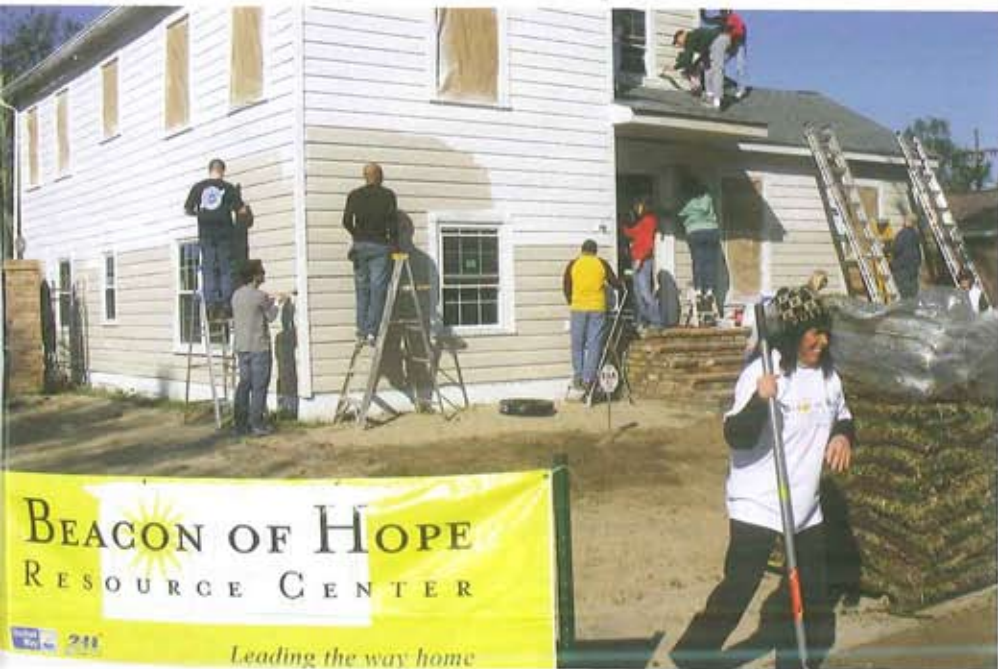
## The Work Continues

This is not the end of the story. There is much work yet to be done. St. Paul’s Homecoming Center is still looking for volunteers of any age or skill level. Anyone interested can contact Connie at 504-644-4125 or [uddo2911@hotmail.com](mailto:uddo2911@hotmail.com).

If you can’t volunteer in New Orleans, I hope you will still be as inspired as I am by the story of how God made a difference in Connie’s life, and how she is now making a difference in the lives of others.



Connie Uddo.



Beacon of Hope volunteers at work.