

# this moldhouse

More tips for mending your broken home

## NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS REBUILD

By Renée Peck  
InsideOut editor

I wish I had known Denise Thornton back in October, when I started gutting and cleaning my Lakefront house.

Thornton is a one-stop repository of resources — she has lists of contractors, landscapers, plumbers, electricians. She knows the phone number for the District 5 Neighborhood Recovery Group, the Web address for online fast-tracking of building permits, the name of the head of Mosquito Control, and can give you a local flood map and your Base Flood Elevation.

She also has a handy supply of rakes, mowers, shovels, gloves, gardening tools, weed eaters, even a tractor — and lends them out freely.

While I was Googling online in an attempt to find a directory of licensed Louisiana mold remediators, she was collating lists of reputable local roofers and working phone numbers. Better yet, she went public.

In February, with a generous donation of seed money from former Hornets owner Ray Wooldridge, Thornton started Beacon of Hope, a non-profit grass-roots organization serving Lakewood North and Lakewood South, twin neighborhoods that straddle Interstate 10 and were both devastated by the 17th Street Canal breach.

The organization's guiding principle: If neighbors work together to rebuild and share resources, they will get things done faster and more efficiently.

"It creates a synergy in the neighborhood when there's one location you can go to for information," Thornton said. "I started collecting names of contractors, the Roto Rooter guy, figuring it would be easier if they were all working in one area. The sprinkler guy is doing the whole neighborhood."

The concept produced results

"Ninety percent of the neighborhood is gutted and cleaned," Thornton said. "Thirty-eight residents are actually living in the neighborhood, another 20 scheduled to move in this month. All of the city services — trash pickup, utilities, sewerage and water — are under control, and the area has all-new cable."

Thornton's posted hours at the Beacon, which is headquartered in her home at 5475 Bellaire Drive, are weekdays from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. But from the beginning, residents have drifted by all days, all hours.

"When I first opened the Beacon, people wanted to know, what do I do first? How do I get the power turned back on? Sometimes, they just wanted to come over and cry. I put up a hand-lettered sign in front of the house, and people just flocked here."

Much of what Thornton and her volunteers do is hands-on work — patrolling the neighborhood for blocked storm drains or broken streetlights, polling residents to see who is returning and who is not, asking those who haven't gutted their homes to do so.

"I'm boots on the ground," Thornton said.

Every Tuesday and Saturday, volunteers from the nearby Lakeview Christian Center work on neighborhood yards. "They clean from the front door to the street, removing debris, scrubbing away water marks, helping



Denise Thornton started the Beacon of Hope in her Lakewood South home in February. Now she hopes to clone the program throughout Lakeview.

### SPREADING THE HOPE

Beacon of Hope, a non-profit organization created to help rebuilding efforts in Lakewood North and Lakewood South, is bent on cloning its success. In June, a new Beacon of Hope was opened at 5701 Canal Blvd. for lower Lakeview residents. There, neighbors can get information on reliable workers and phone numbers for city services, or borrow tools and equipment.

Beacon founder Denise Thornton hopes it's the first of dozens of local home-based offshoots of the organization. She is sending out letters to block captains throughout the District 5 Neighborhood Recovery Group, which encompasses all of Lakeview, inviting each to open a Beacon of Hope in his or her home.

"The new Beacons will be the heartbeat of each neighborhood," Thornton said. "They will collect the data and provide the synergy."

Thornton hopes to establish a dozen or so "Super Beacons," or major clearinghouses for neighborhood rebuilding assistance. Smaller "mini Beacons" — as many as 30 or 40 — will provide backup and support to the bigger locales. She has created a manual for Beacon leaders, to help coordinate efforts in a uniform way and help get the offices started.

"What I'm doing is so rewarding," Thornton said. Better yet, in Lakewood South, "now people are eager to come home."

For more information on Beacon of Hope and its services, or on how to offer your home as a Beacon of Hope office, visit [www.lakewoodbeacon.org](http://www.lakewoodbeacon.org).

save the oaks," Thornton said. "And they are awesome. They thank us for letting them help rake yards."

Part of Thornton's mission is to match such volunteers with neighborhood projects. She has four people who do gutting, and a list of requests for them. After a team of high-school kids from New Jersey spent two days gutting area houses, they asked what else they could do from home. Thornton is hoping to put

them in charge of designing and maintaining a meditation garden on a snippet of public land.

These days, the Beacon's core concerns are shifting. Most residents have moved beyond gutting and are in the renovation stage. Instead of helping old-timers find contractors, Thornton is helping newcomers find houses to buy. She's focusing on getting the few remaining blighted houses cited and the populations of rats in those

homes exterminated. The Beacon Web site ([www.lakewoodbeacon.org](http://www.lakewoodbeacon.org)) maintains a map of the area that tracks rebuilding status house by house.

Lakewood South has a long way to go. But so do Lakeview and Gentilly, eastern New Orleans and the Lower 9th Ward. And perhaps if more people banded together to share information and resources in those areas, we would see more progress everywhere.

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