

A Hometown Huddle for a Katrina Family

by Lynette Locke
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Everyone working together. That's a simple statement with tremendous meaning. And that's exactly what happened to bring about a miracle for the Katrina displaced Duplessis family. After the loss of everything that they owned, and at the mercy of federal and local agencies, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the catastrophe left by the hurricane, the Duplessis family put their lives in God's hands.

Helen Duplessis says that she stepped out on faith and the Lord led her to Baltimore. With husband and wife, Reynoud and Helen Duplessis at the lead, this family of six children left a ravaged New Orleans. But, they didn't choose Baltimore; Baltimore chose them. The Duplessis family ended up in the city because of a statement overheard from a volunteer. That person, Scott Adams from the Greater Gethsamene Church, was working in New Orleans with the victims. He simply said to them, "come to Baltimore," said Mrs Duplessis. They had no family or friends here, even though now they count a host of community as friends; and they left New Orleans at 3 o'clock in the morning on faith headed to Baltimore.

They lived on Preston, Washington and Jonquil Streets in East Baltimore while getting set for life in a totally unfamiliar place. The Duplessis' had no family or friends here, so the Sandtown Habitat for Humanity stepped in and stepped up to find permanent housing for the family.

"Baltimore took us in. When your hometown doesn't want you, where are you to go? The Baltimore community has just been great," said Mrs. Duplessis. "With the exception of a few people, I have the utmost respect for Baltimore and the hospitality it has showed us. It's been wonderful. It has taken some getting used to because the people here are a little bit different, but this is home now. If I go back to New Orleans, it will only be as a visitor," she said.

The Sandtown Winchester Habitat for Humanity totally rehabbed a home for the Duplessis family. And on a beautiful fall October day in the Mid-Atlantic, the Duplessis family received their keys to a completely renovated home in West Baltimore. The hallmark day was filled with smiles, tears, and gratitude from the family. The entire clan (five girls and one young man) were on hand to see the finished home located on Fulton Avenue. Helen Duplessis says that words cannot explain what this house means to her. "We get to have some normalcy in our lives again. And we are truly happy for that. We have back our little corner of the world. The Lord has brought me through everything and all that I have asked him for he has delivered. He delivered me from cancer and brought us through Katrina. This allows me to be a testimony and blessing to someone else."

Baltimore City Police Commissioner Leonard Hamm said of the event "finally Baltimore has it right. I have traveled around the country, and I tell everyone Baltimore is it. It's cooperation from all the agencies, partners and the community. It works."

Daniel Wilcox from the Baltimore Ravens, who was there along with teammate Adelus Thomas, echoed the commissioner's sentiments. "This is a joyful event, this is what life is about. I will always come out for things like this. We are Baltimore's team. This is where we live and we should help," Wilcox said. Additionally, the NFL presented the Duplessis family with a check to help the family really get started on the right foot here in the city. The NFL, through the Raven's organization, has been apart of this huge undertaking from the beginning with funding and volunteers including Ravens staff, players and cheerleaders.

Another major sponsor, The Garrison Forest School in Owings Mills made the decision early to get their hands in this process. Faculty picked the location of the house in September 2005 and that October they kicked-off the rehabilitation process. The Garrison Forrest School's students and faculty got their hands dirty by helping in the initial clean-up and rebuild by volunteering every Saturday.

The Duplessis family has a number of corporate and community partners to thank for their miracle home, including: Sandtown Habitat for Humanity; The Baltimore Ravens in cooperation with the United Way and M & T Bank; The Baltimore Police Department; City of Baltimore Department of Housing who donated the vacant house; The City of Baltimore Department of Recreation and Parks who donated landscaping; Constellation Energy Companies including BGE and BGE Home; Coppin State University; Downtown Locker Room; Enterprise Community Partners; Signode; Proctor and Gamble for Volunteers; The Home Depot who provided carpeting; Key Systems who provided electrical systems and volunteers, Unilever who donated a years worth of soap and detergent; Whirlpool who donated appliances; and pro bono services donated by Dr. John Wessner (HVAC system) and by Whiteford, Taylor and Preston.