

# COMMUNITY RENEWAL INTERNATIONAL

"Moving from our  
Seats to the Streets"



**National Conference on Citizenship**  
*Connecting People. Strengthening Our Country.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sally T. Prouty, Interim CEO, National Conference on Citizenship

In 1994, Mack McCarter, founder of Community Renewal International (CRI), was warned by local police not to go into Allendale, a community in Shreveport, Louisiana. The area was viewed by law enforcement as the most dangerous part of the city.

Despite the warning, Mack arrived in Allendale with a mission: To capitalize on the caring and ability of local residents to make their community a place where every child is safe and loved. In 2016, over 20 years after Mack brought CRI to the city of Shreveport, that same police department documented a 52% reduction in violent crime in areas where CRI is operational.

**In the most dangerous area surrounding a CRI Friendship House, a home built in vulnerable neighborhoods and lived in by CRI staff that help transform their neighborhood into places of safety and hope, a 65% reduction in crime has been realized.**

**Utilizing CRI methodology developed by Mack McCarter and his team – directly addressing the issue of social isolation - residents transform their community. Trained Haven House leaders unite neighbors on their block turning neighborhoods into safe havens of friendship and support. “We care” signs dot lawns and flower gardens, individuals of all ages flock to Friendship Houses, caring relationships are enhanced, and residents access the support they need to experience success.**

After a visit to Shreveport, Ed Morrison, from Purdue’s Center for Regional Development, noted that the prevailing approach to poverty is to see it as a set of largely unconnected problems that somehow can be fixed. At the federal level we have a proliferation of strategies to deal with weak schools, poor health, dilapidated housing and absence of jobs. He says none of these work very well because they are addressing symptoms and suggests that **it is necessary to build community first before moving to higher levels of prosperity.** He suggests that Community Renewal International is a model of how communities can be renewed.

According to Mack McCarter:

*“Community Renewal International connects caring people – changing lives, revitalizing communities, transforming the world.”*

**With 50,000+ members of a “we care” team and hundreds of volunteers, CRI is an amazing example of civic engagement producing dramatic results in community. Understanding that this transformation has occurred absent government funding, one wonders what could happen with significant investment.**

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) engaged Owen Ortolani to spend time in Shreveport documenting what has and is happening there, across the United States, and in tribal areas of West-Central Africa. This is Owen’s report.



## **“FROM OUR SEATS TO THE STREETS”**

Owen Ortolani, Juris Doctor/M.B.A. candidate at the University of Buffalo, State University of New York

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Established in 1994 in Shreveport, LA, a city with a robust history of segregation, Community Renewal International (CRI) was formed with a mission to create caring networks of its city's citizens. These networks of people focus on positive relationships that cross cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic barriers. By focusing on positive relationships, it can become possible to rebuild society.

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Society, as defined by the historian Arnold Toynbee in his third volume of *A Study of History*, is “a system of relationships.” By studying twenty-eight civilizations of earth's history, Toynbee recognized that the vital ingredient for each and every civilization is the interpersonal relationships. Mack McCarter and the CRI team viewed society in a state of decay. Without rejuvenation of that society, our civilization would be on a path to ultimate destruction, much like the other twenty-seven civilizations.

Before founding CRI, Director Mack McCarter left his hometown of Shreveport on pastoral duties in West Texas for 18 years. Upon returning in 1991, McCarter noticed that he had not seen much progress in his city's society. Like many American cities, drugs, gangs, violence, and all around mistrust was intense. One thing was certain – not everyone in crime ridden communities was content with the status quo. In many circumstances, people do not know how to escape the violence that their communities bring to them. The problems greatly overshadowed the loving and caring of people that McCarter and the CRI team knew existed in Shreveport and in every city from Oakland, CA to Camden, NJ.

McCarter's desire for a positive and caring society compelled him into a mission to reestablish the world into a “home” where every single person can be loved. A member of the CRI team tells a story about how as a young boy his father passed away. In this story, he explains how crucial it was for him to have role models in his neighborhood to help him stay on the straight and narrow. He credits his SEC football career and successful dental practice in part to the mentoring and positive relationships he had with people in his community. As an adult, he has seen that the world is no longer the way it used to be. Neighbors do not keep children accountable when they act out, they do not openly interact with each other, and they are more interested in the negative news stories than the positive stories of caring people that do not make headlines.

To begin addressing the problems McCarter observed, he joined an African American congregation in Shreveport. His message: “Go from the seats to the streets.” The problem he had was that he did not know what to do once the people hit the streets. He surmised that by applying micro principles to a macro system, he could reverse the decay in society. McCarter knew two things were certain, “Love Works. Love Wins.” The micro principle was just that. By being caring towards people, loving relationships will follow. The macro system is Community Renewal and its three initiatives, a fitting method of rapidly growing the network of relationships.

When he first began his mission to build relationships, he went to the most dangerous street of row houses in Shreveport. An area of slums ridden with gangs, drugs, and shootings, Mack wanted to put his message of love to the test. Deciding that Saturday mornings around 10am was the safest time to go, he got in his car and drove down to the neighborhood. Several young African American children ran up to him and jumped in his arms. He picked them up and then began knocking on doors with a simple message. He said, “Hi, I'm Mack McCarter and there's a group of us that think if we can be friends, we can rebuild this city.” Originally met with closed doors, very few were open to letting this white, well dressed stranger into their lives. As he explains, even if doors were open, they were not open very far. This did not discourage him. He kept going back every Saturday at the same time. Within three months, people on that street were sitting on their front porches at 10am waiting for their friend Mack to come visit them. At that time, McCarter knew his message of friendship had the ability to be successful.

Emphasizing the importance of the village in a society, with its foundational element being mutually enhancing relationships, CRI uses the term “revillagization” to describe its work. The goal, to make caring visible again. To fulfill this mission, CRI has established three main initiatives: 1.) Renewal Team, 2.) Haven House, and 3.) Friendship House.

## RENEWAL TEAM

Renewal Team is the simplest and most widespread initiative that CRI has developed. In fostering a visibly caring community, CRI has developed an “I Care” card that allows residents to become members of Renewal Team. In order to join, all they have to do is fill out the postcard with their contact information and finish the statement, “I am helping another by: \_\_\_\_.” The card comes with a car decal and a lapel pin for the new team member to wear that says “We Care.” At the bottom of the card is a box where the new team member can opt into having a “We Care” yard sign put on their front lawn. By making visible what is already real, CRI does not ask that anyone act differently – they merely offer an avenue in which people can demonstrate the caring that they already participate in. CRI determined that communities do not need to wait for a catastrophe to reveal the good people do.



The Renewal Team exceeds 50,000 people to date. These 50,000 mostly reside in the Shreveport, LA area, but also span across the world. The decal, pin, and sign serve to increase awareness of a caring community in times where news stories focus on natural disasters, violence, and general unrest. The “We Care” material assists in expanding the footprint of the Renewal Team by evoking questions about what “We Care” is about. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the decals, pins, and signs, foster social, psychological, and emotional connections. If two strangers encounter each other and recognize the other is wearing her “We Care” pin, there is immediately a connection between the two people.

This initiative has flourished in all parts of the metro region, from the richest suburbs with lush green lawns, to the poorest inner-city neighborhoods with burnt out lawns and trash strewn about, and everywhere in between. Renewal Team and the “We Care” message has helped to bridge the gap between the socioeconomic boundaries. While driving through Shreveport, one is just as likely to see a “We Care” sign at a trendy coffee house as they are to see it out in front of a blighted house in the neediest community.

CRI’s goal of putting caring partners together is culminated in its annual rally. Every year, CRI recruits all members of the Renewal Team who signed the “I Care” card to meet in the city center. This gathering has been an important event to show just how big the network is to remind its members as well as public officials that Community Renewal is an organization that stands for love and friendship and is a force that is truly taking over the entirety of the city.



## HAVEN HOUSE

CRI's second and the most important initiative in advancing the "revillagization" is Haven House. Focusing on a small geographic region, or neighborhood, CRI's Haven House initiative has been successful in providing a platform in which relationships can be created and grown with people living on the same block. The Haven House motto is, "We are dedicated to remaking our city by making friends on our street." Haven House requires just that of its leaders, to make friends on their street. With 7.5 billion people in the world there is plenty of diversity. To bring people together, Haven House Leaders focus on and celebrate the commonalities between people.

The Haven House initiative entails CRI recruiting a leader to represent each block or neighborhood. Haven House Leaders are tasked with meeting their neighbors. CRI compels the leaders to become ambassadors for the neighborhood they live in by doing simple tasks such as checking in with their neighbors, as any friend would. This along with the hosting of the occasional get together for neighbors ensures that the Haven House Leaders end up creating relationships and that the neighbors intermingle in a way in which they normally would not, amongst themselves. This initiative has taken off in Shreveport, with CRI currently having over 1,500 volunteer Haven House Leaders, each with their own block represented.

A Haven House Leader described a situation in which there was a shooting next door to her home. A 21-year-old boy was shot eight times and survived. She swore that without her relationship to CRI and the Haven House initiative that she would have been compelled to stay in her home and to not leave for fear of being shot herself. Instead, because of what she learned from CRI and the mission of Haven House, she walked around the street handing out doughnuts to her neighbors. At this point, this person was not exceedingly familiar with their neighbors as she was fairly new to Haven House, but in a moment of tragedy, she acted contrary to instinct and started making positive relationships with the people she had walked past every other day.



## FRIENDSHIP HOUSE

The third major initiative is the most aggressive. Friendship House is an initiative that calls for people to move into high crime/high poverty areas. Under this program, Community Renewal has mapped the most crime ridden areas into thirty block micro-sections. Within each zone, CRI constructs (or retrofits) two homes with living quarters for the Community Coordinator's family and a community gathering room for activities open to the participants. One home is dedicated to children (K-5) and the other house serves youth. Both houses focus on, amongst other things, learning experiences that bring people together for the purpose of improving their own lives and the life of their community.

Each home is staffed with full time CRI staff. CRI recruits a Community Coordinator and their family to move into the neighborhood. To make it fiscally viable for CRI, part of the Community Coordinator's compensation is their housing. The Community Coordinator's job is not only to be the Haven House for their neighborhood, but also take it one step further. As Mack had determined at the founding of Community Renewal, the way to gain the trust and respect of adults is to serve the children. With activities such as afterschool programs to swimming lessons, the Friendship House often becomes a safe hangout location for children. Mornings for Community Coordinators involves making visits to neighbors while the children are in school, asking about family and being there to listen to people. Afternoons are usually dedicated to afterschool programs and evenings are reserved for family time, unless there is a community event that everyone is going to. Community Renewal currently sponsors five neighborhood zones with Friendship Houses with over 3,000 children and teens having been served.

A successful program that has spawned through Friendship House in Shreveport's Cedar Grove neighborhood but that is not one of CRI's three main initiatives is the Adult Renewal Academy (ARA). Starting in 2003, there are over 110 graduates of the ARA. This next step program does not focus on serving the children, but emphasizes renewal and restoration through adults. As of 2017, because of the success in Cedar Grove, ARA has expanded to all five of the targeted neighborhoods. These programs offer G.E.D. classes, job training classes, and on site counselors for the students. Many adult students enter below a fifth-grade education level and span the age of seventeen to seventy years old. Meeting two mornings a week, the program can take from six months to years to complete for some students. The biggest draw is the family atmosphere that is offered. For prideful people who have been left behind by the education system, an atmosphere where there is no judgment and mutually caring relationships between the students and the instructors is paramount. It allows them to solely focus on learning absent embarrassment.

In areas that have Friendship Houses, the Shreveport Police Department has reported that felony crime has fallen an average of 52%, with all forms of crime falling a monstrous 54%. In the most dangerous neighborhood surrounding a Friendship House, a 65% reduction has been realized.

## PARTNERSHIP

Over the years, Renewal Team members (companies and individuals) have partnered with CRI to sponsor children. The parties join to bring children from Friendship Houses to events and fairs that they would otherwise be unable to attend. These partnerships not only allow for the children to enjoy the events, but for the other attendees, it is evident to them that Community Renewal is active and making a difference in these kids' lives.

Every year, through its Friendship Houses, Community Renewal takes kids out of town to a Six Flags amusement park and the teens to Kids Across America camp. These trips are an amazing opportunity for most of these kids since they are not otherwise given the opportunity to leave their city. Though they are such sought after opportunities, they do not come without any work. The trips are rewards. CRI requires that for the youth to go to Six Flags they must maintain good grades, behavior, and attendance in school. The teens, on the other hand, are required to go the extra mile. Teens are required to also participate in a service project in the community so that they learn what it is like to give back. These events have proven to be great motivators for the CRI children.

## SUCCESS IN ALLENDALE

One area in Shreveport that has greatly benefitted from the presence of Community Renewal is its Allendale neighborhood. One of its residents who has lived there from the time when it was a busy neighborhood has seen it slowly decay into one of the most devastated neighborhoods in Shreveport that most people wanted to leave. One day, after the woman's house had its windows shot out, she was crying on her porch when a man from CRI walked up to her and said, "Good morning, we're here from Community Renewal and we are here to help you."

Allendale now has a Friendship House and there are countless Renewal Team signs in most front yards. The woman has since become a Haven House Leader in that neighborhood, which with the assistance of Community Renewal has seen a drastic decrease in crime and is now a more welcoming place with a flourishing community garden. The neighbors have gathered around this Haven House Leader and recognize her influence in its revitalization. Her principal piece of advice for other Haven House Leaders was that even if they live in a nice neighborhood, not to let their guard down. She insisted that citizens and partners in caring need to continue fighting for the type of neighborhood they want and as soon as it starts to decline that they must start acting or else it will become an area with little hope.

Allendale is a leading example of how the three initiatives of CRI have worked together to create a more caring and loving community for its residents. After telling the story of her shot out windows, the woman's smile was infectious with the renewed hope that she has for her neighborhood. She credits the work of Community Renewal International as the saving grace for her neighborhood. The successful application has not been limited to Shreveport. Chapters in Abilene and Fort Worth, TX, Minneapolis, MN, Oklahoma's Pottawatomie County, Cameroon, Africa and the early stages of CRI in Washington, D.C. Additional projects are underway on university and community college campuses.



### Creating Caring Positive Relationships in Your Community

Community Renewal people exist in your community. You just cannot yet see them. By following the methods that Community Renewal has spearheaded and had so much success with, this model has the ability to succeed in communities across the United States and around the world. For more information about Community Renewal International, its initiatives, or starting a local chapter please visit the website, [www.communityrenewal.us](http://www.communityrenewal.us) or contact the Director of the Center for Community Renewal, Kim Mitchell at [kimmitchell@communityrenewal.us](mailto:kimmitchell@communityrenewal.us) or (318) 425-3222.



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