

'Coming back alive': Initiative beautifies this historically Black New Iberia neighborhood

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Seventy-one-year-old Daisy August beams when she speaks about her Rosier Street home in New Iberia's Lil' Brooklyn neighborhood, recently painted a cheerful Caribbean-style blue by the Lil' Brooklyn Neighborhood Initiative.

August was born in the home and her family are longtime homeowners in the historically Black neighborhood. August's home is one of roughly a half dozen houses the nonprofit community group has revitalized with fresh paint, plantings and service to enhance the neighborhood's image, home values and neighbors' pride.

The work is recapturing the spirit of the neighborhood, a place of compassion, neighborliness and generosity, where neighbors would gather when August was younger to host block parties and potluck fundraisers for residents down on their luck, she said.

"It looks like it's been reborn. It looks like a new home....It's like [the neighborhood project] is bringing everything back to life again. It's like [the neighborhood] was dormant, dead, and now it's coming back alive," August said.

The Lil' Brooklyn Neighborhood Initiative was the brainchild of Anne Darrah and Tammy DeBiasi. The two women, both retired, were connected by a mutual friend after they separately had the idea to beautify the neighborhood. Darrah is a retired graphic designer and DeBiasi has a background in grant writing, and both wanted to channel those skills into service.

Darrah has lived around the corner from Lil' Brooklyn for almost 34 years, and DeBiasi is a third generation resident of Henry Street, and passing the neighborhood each day the women dreamed of bright colors and an environment that reflected the neighborhood's rich history.

"I knew that people judged people just by driving by, and by seeing houses that were distressed, they might think less of them," Darrah said.

"The people are so great back here and nobody knows it....The area when it was distressed didn't demonstrate that. It didn't show that. They really deserve to be known for who they are and what they've accomplished and what they've given back," DeBiasi said.

The neighborhood, which DeBiasi said is the oldest historically Black neighborhood in New Iberia, was originally part of the slave quarters for the Duperier Plantation. Post Civil War, the land was subdivided and the streets that comprise Lil' Brooklyn — including Henry Street, Hortense Street, Johnson Alley and Rosier Street — became homes for Black families, many of which were passed down through families and created a long history of homeownership.

The neighborhood was a hub for jazz music, home to the Guy Fontenot Banner Orchestra and Band, and residents hosted top African American artists on tours during segregation, like Fats Domino, Ike and Tina Turner, and Sam Cooke, DeBiasi said.

The women, both White, were sensitive to the fact that they were outsiders stepping into a historically Black neighborhood to suggest changes, and that those changes had to be from a place of true support, neighborliness and alliance. It had to come from the heart, Darrah said.

They started small, first planting trees in the neighborhood, then sewing face masks and distributing them to neighbors while pitching the idea of the neighborhood initiative and getting feedback: What would you like to see? What do you want your neighborhood to be?

They also looked to the expertise of the Iberia African American Historical Society and founder Phebe Hayes, who facilitated relationships, offered guidance and helped coordinate fiscal elements of the project.

"There's always an element of trust when you come into an African American community. Can we trust that what's being done is not for show or for somebody to take advantage of a neighborhood, but for the good of the neighborhood?" 60-year-old Harold Alexander said.

Alexander, pastor of Church of Christ of Lafayette, is a member of the nonprofit's neighborhood board, which meets monthly to discuss existing work and brainstorm next steps. His wife was born and raised in Lil' Brooklyn, and the couple bought a home on Rosier Street 25 years ago to raise their children. Alexander was one of the neighborhood leaders the women approached early for buy-in, and he's been building buy-in among members of the community in the months since, he said.

The pastor said he's passionate about the initiative's educational opportunities, specifically the chance to teach young people about the process and importance of homeownership, and investing in your community. Alexander said he's been guiding young people in the community, especially young men, through the process of first-time homeownership, financing options and programs available to support first-time homeowners.

Alexander said the neighborhood previously suffered from a trend of young people moving away, partly, he believes, because they didn't understand the value of homeownership. That trend resulted in an increase in vacant properties and rental units in the neighborhood. Alexander said he's confident that trend is reversing.

The pastor is also pushing education a step further and encouraging neighbors to become involved with the initiative and the health of their community. It's not enough to own a home or live in a neighborhood — you need to be an active contributor to the community's well-being, he said.

Gabrielle Johnson, 44, said she's thrilled to get her five daughters involved in refreshing their rental home on Johnson Alley. Johnson and the Lil' Brooklyn Neighborhood Initiative will be transforming her residence from a faded pink to a vibrant peach and freshening up the yard. Johnson said she's excited to be part of positive growth in the neighborhood.

"I think it's super important for the community to step up because I think you appreciate it more when you're part of the change instead of the change just going on around you," she said.

Johnson said she moved back to the neighborhood almost six years ago. Her grandparents Jefferson and Helen Johnson, now deceased, lived on Rosier Street and were well known in the community, and other family members are scattered throughout Lil' Brooklyn's streets. Despite the close ties, Johnson said she and her family were researching buying a house elsewhere because of the neighborhood's drab feel.

"[The beautification work] has definitely changed my mind and made me want to stick around," she said.

The work began last summer with four homes on Henry Street, a popular thoroughfare strategically chosen to announce the project and drum up support in the neighborhood and broader community, Darrah said.

The nonprofit team is now bringing their bright and unifying Caribbean color palette to homes on Lil' Brooklyn's interior streets and expanding to additional projects, like the planting of a community garden and citrus orchard on Johnson Alley, Darrah and DeBiasi said.

The work was made possible through grant funding and donations of people's time, talents and funds. DeBiasi said the group received a paint grant from Benjamin Moore, with help from Bayou Paints in New Iberia, and a \$2,500 grant from Latter & Blum's Great Pumpkin Fund. Local residents have also begun donating materials; DeBiasi said she's currently stripping a home on Main Street of salvageable materials after the multi-story historic home was struck by lightning and the owner offered the neighborhood group first dibs on anything usable.

Reflecting on the last year, Darrah, DeBiasi and Alexander said the neighborhood nonprofit has sparked hope for everyone. In the midst of a national wave of reckoning around racism and race relations, it's been uplifting to have a meaningful outlet where people of all backgrounds can come together for a common cause, the pastor said.

"It's a good thing to see people of different colors get together, Black and White people get together, and do something positive and uplifting for our community," Alexander said.

"You can get very overwhelmed looking at stuff on the news. When you see a community come together, in spite of everything, and say, 'Hey, we know there are challenges, but we know we can do this together' -- that's rewarding," the pastor said.

Darrah and DeBiasi said new project ideas for the neighborhood are constantly brewing, like painted crosswalks that celebrate the neighborhood's jazz history, and they said they plan to keep pushing until every inch of the neighborhood shines.

While seeing the physical transformation is special, it's the conversations and lifelong friendships the women are building with Lil' Brooklyn's residents, especially its elders, that makes the project worthwhile, they said.

"It is the most fulfilling thing I believe I've ever done in my life," Darrah said.

"It's a true connection -- a heart to heart connection," DeBiasi said.