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**Gwen's Friendship House: Building Caring Relationships Between
Neighbors And Replacing Lost Community**

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Report

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Abstract

Gwen's Friendship House: Building Caring Relationships Between Neighbors And Replacing Lost Community

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Community Renewal International is a not profit group based in Shreveport, La. whose mission is to partnering with God and with each other to make our world a home where every child can grow up safe and loved. This report is the personal account from the photographer of a photojournalism project covering the organization. It includes the struggles of, stories from, and intention of the photographer.

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Chapter 1: Getting To Know Community Renewal International

Several years ago, my Mother's Chevy Suburban came home with an odd addition, a white, circular sticker with maroon lettering reading "We Care". My initial thought was, "great, Mom cares about something. I'm not sure what it is, but at least she cares." I eventually became curious enough to ask her about the sticker. She had become part of Shreveport Bossier Community Renewal's "We Care Team". She signed a card committing her to being a caring member of community and received that sticker and a sign for our yard, which never got installed.

Last August, my final year of grad school was beginning and, looking into my future; I realized I needed to find a topic for my Master's report. I started searching around Austin for interesting stories, organizations, and people. Topic selection is the hardest part of photojournalism, and I am still not very familiar with Austin, so my search did not produce any good leads. Truth be told, my heart is still back in my hometown of Shreveport, La., so when I had difficulty finding a topic in Austin, I turned my search to a city I care about deeply.

As I sat in front of my computer, browsing the Shreveport Times, Shreveport Craigslist, and Google, my mom's small sticker came to mind. I thought to myself, "you know, I have no idea what SBRC does. I wonder if that organization would be a good subject." I opened Google, typed in "Shreveport Bossier Community Renewal", and discovered that my Mom's sticker is now out of date. The organization had renamed itself Community Renewal International. I found this name change intriguing and set out to discover more about the organization.

Community Renewal International is a Shreveport, La. based non-profit with the mission of “partnering with God and with each other to make our world a home where every child can grow up safe and loved”, according to Lynn Bryan, CRI's Volunteer and Internship Coordinator. CRI creates caring communities using three strategies: the We Care Team, Friendship Houses, and Haven Houses. This three-tiered plan takes the entire city into account and assigns a level of relationship building to each strategy. The We Care Team is a citywide initiative that encourages residents to be more caring. Friendship Houses are homes, built by CRI, that serve as community centers in at-risk neighborhoods. They host after school programs, GED programs, and a variety of social activities. Haven Houses Leaders focus on the block they live on and facilitate caring relationships among neighbors. Common Haven House techniques include block parties, neighborhood cleaning days, and care baskets for sick or mourning neighbors.

Non-profit organizations produce good stories with loads of struggle, genuine people, and, frequently, happy endings, but the organization itself is rarely what piques the interest of a journalist. Community Renewal was different. This organization uses a unique vocabulary and aid-giving theory focused on building relationships and treating “clients” as equals. Additionally, CRI does not focus its efforts exclusively in neighborhoods that would traditionally be considered needy. The dream of the organization is to have every single person in Shreveport on the We Care Team, a Haven House on every single block, and no neighborhoods in bad enough shape to need a Friendship House.

Southern Trace, for example, is a Shreveport neighborhood that has a lot of

respect and living there signifies success. The neighborhood is located on an exclusive country club, and only the wealthy Shreveport elite lives there. In my early discussions with Russell Minor, Community Renewal's Director of Haven House, one of Southern Trace's Haven House Leaders was repeatedly mentioned as a shining star. It turns out that despite fancy toys, nice houses, and an amazing golf course, Southern Trace's residents weren't so good at community. The organization's focus on building a complete, caring city by building a caring community throughout is a story that needs to be told.

Doing a project on Community Renewal was going to be a challenging feat. I lived in Austin and Shreveport is a 6-hour drive from home. I was determined to tell Community Renewal's story and started exploring strategies to make it possible. I decided the best way to cover the story would be to shoot most of my content over Christmas break, and return to fill in gaps throughout the Spring semester. It was still September, and the last thing I wanted to do was make contact too early, begin a relationship, and have it fizzle out before I could start photographing, so I sat on my idea.

Fast-forward a few months to the week before Thanksgiving, just before my project really gets started. During one of my weekly phone calls with my mother, she asked me about my thesis, and if I have any ideas yet. I told her that I was interested in doing a project focused on Community Renewal. We talked a little bit about the project, and she, kindly of course, reminded me that I needed to get started actually working on it. I agreed, but still wanted to wait a few weeks. She had other plans and began working her way through Shreveport's good ol' boy network. A coworker of

hers is heavily involved with Community Renewal, so she pitched my project to him. The following night, I got a phone call informing me that I had a meeting with David Oliver, my mom's friend, over Thanksgiving break to discuss my project.

After a week of preparing a pitch to convince Mr. Oliver that my project is worthy of bringing to the people at Community Renewal, the meeting day rolls around. The meeting is scheduled to take place over lunch, and I meet my mom at her office, where we start looking for Mr. Oliver. He is nowhere to be found. We eventually reach him on his cell phone and discover that he is already at Community Renewal waiting for us. Suddenly the informal meeting I had prepared for turned into a life or death moment for my project. It was my opportunity to either get Community Renewal on board or find a new topic.

Slightly nervous, I walked into Community Renewal's offices for the first time and David Oliver introduced me to Jimmy Graves, CRI's Director of Development, and David Westerfield, the Director of Communication. People with the word "Director" in their title are usually important, so Mr. Oliver had clearly gotten me in with the right people. I cast aside my doubts and explained what drew me to CRI, what my project would involve, and how I planned to do it. Jimmy and David were excited about the project, got on board, and we agreed to talk more via email and get the project started as soon as possible. Success, finally.

And So It Begins

The Community Renewal staff meets weekly on Monday mornings at 9 a.m. The Monday of the week before Christmas, I arrived at the Community Renewal

offices around 8:45, took a deep breath, straightened my shirt, grabbed my camera, and headed inside. The work on my master's report had begun. Immediately inside the door stood Jimmy Graves, though at the time I couldn't remember if he was Jimmy or David, talking with two African-American women, both of whom were Community Coordinators, what CRI calls its staff members who live in the Friendship Houses. We talked for a few minutes before I excused myself, headed towards the coffee pot, and into the meeting room, where I took a seat.

Community Renewal is a relatively large organization with 9 Friendship Houses, hundreds of Haven Houses, and thousands of We Care Team members. As I sat waiting for the staff meeting to begin, I tried to pick which of the people in the room I would focus on.

“These kids. I wanted to kill every one of them this week”, Gwen Taylor, Cedar Grove's Community Coordinator, was talking to the group before the meeting started. “Let me tell you about what they did.”

“Gwen, we have a guest”, interrupted Gloria Millender, the Adult Renewal Academy Coordinator.

“Oh, I'm sorry” Gwen replied. A tight bulb went off in my head, and I was pretty sure I had found my main character. Her statements signified two things about her character. First, she wasn't particularly concerned about what other people thought, but was going to speak her mind, which is a terrific quality in a subject. Second, she knew her kids well enough to be able to joke about how terrible they were, while subtly showing that truthfully, she was proud of and cared deeply for them. I was drawn to her presence, and had a feeling special things were happening at

her Friendship House.

My first opportunity to put myself in Mrs. Gwen's good graces came immediately after that staff meeting. She pulled Michelle Walter, Cedar Grove's other Community Coordinator, over to the Christmas tree and instructed me to take their picture. I complied. "Now you make sure to make me look good," Gwen ordered.

"I'm not that good at Photoshop," I responded. Then I immediately froze. The quip came off easily, but I had also put myself in another do or die moment. Offending Mrs. Gwen so early would close the door to working with her. I waited for a response. She laughed. I sighed. She gave me a hug and told me it would be that she was sure it would like fine. I had a new friend and, possibly, a main character for my master's report.

The following week was filled with Christmas parties, with each of the nine Friendship Houses hosting one for the participants of it's after school program. My initial excitement about beginning to photograph my master's report quickly faded to boredom. Christmas parties, while fun to attend, are visually repetitive. By Wednesday, enthusiasm had faded, and I was going through the motions as a photographer.

My interest in Community Renewal is based in a desire to tell the story of the organization, but dealing with organizations can be difficult. CRI has a reputation to maintain, clients to protect, and a mission to achieve. My job as a journalist is to examine the image, question clients, and evaluate the mission. Navigating the conflict between my journalistic and Community Renewal's desire to control my story

was a delicate process of trust building. The foundation of my relationship with the CRI staff was laid during Christmas party week, and reflecting on the time I thought I was wasting revealed lessons that will affect how I work in the future.

Christmas Lessons:

Lesson #1: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

My handler at Community Renewal was David Westerfield, who previously worked as a reporter for the Shreveport Times for over twenty years. When I first met David, I thought his newspaper experience would be a great asset for my story. I assumed he understood how to tell a story, would be willing to help me out, and lead me to the most interesting areas of the organization. Initially, our working relationship was perfect, he told me when Christmas parties were and pointed me towards some less well-known activities. David was a great resource throughout the project, he was always willing to help and relayed information about everything that happened with Community Renewal, but our understandings of my project began to take different paths during my first week of work. My goal for that week was to find out who was the best for my project, and get started working solely with them. I needed to focus my project to be able to dig into the organization and tell its story. David, on the other hand, was trying to steer me towards a general overview of CRI's activities, where I would photograph everything that happens and produce a story with a wide scope, but little breadth.

My reaction to David's attempt to steer me away from my goal was to distance

myself from him, slightly. As my project focused I cut David out of the loop by dealing directly with my subjects and only talking to him every few days and giving him few details about my work. I took the time to listen to his advice on what to photograph, but rarely followed through on it, figuring that I knew better. This was a mistake. Looking back on my experiences, David wasn't trying to keep me from doing my project, but he was trying his best to help me achieve my goals, as he understood them. I believe the tension I felt in David's attempts to schedule my days was a direct result of my failure to communicate effectively. When initially discussing my project with David, I told him I wanted to be everywhere, all the time, so that's what he helped me to do. Early on, that is exactly what I wanted, and needed to do to build relationships with my subjects. As the project progressed, I forgot to mention that my goals were changing, and that he could now best help me by facilitating interactions with the neighborhood I had chosen to focus on.

Luckily, David is a smart, experienced journalist, so he eventually figured out that I was focusing on Cedar Grove. Due to my ineffective communication, he did not reach this conclusion until late in my project. Part of David's role as Director of Communication is to create videos of people telling their story of being helped by CRI. When I was home for Spring Break, David had an interview with one of Gwen's neighbors about life in Cedar Grove, and he invited me along. Had I been more open and informative, David could have focused his efforts to help me on Cedar Grove, and been an even more valuable asset throughout the project.

Lesson #2: If you work more than your subjects, they will like you.

My schedule during that first week was pretty hectic, including several 10-hour days with few breaks. 8 a.m. meant it was time to be in Cedar Grove for the Adult Renewal Academy, which wrapped up around 10 and I headed to the Community Renewal offices to talk with people and look for events to shoot. Lunch and an hour or two of photo editing followed. Club, frequently a Christmas party, started around 4, and, typically, I would find a second Christmas party that evening. If nothing else turned up, it was off to document the wrapping and organizing of hundreds of donated Christmas gifts. Russell Minor, had plenty going on the week, and filled my downtimes with Haven House activities.

On Wednesday, Russell had a Haven House leader orientation at Keller Williams Realty, where Chris Chandler, one of Russell's Haven House leaders, works. I arrived at the realty office at about the same time Russell pulled up, and we walked in together. Russell had hosted several orientations at the office before and headed directly to the conference room. When we got there, Chris Chandler was waiting, and Russell introduced me as the photojournalist who had been everywhere that week. This meeting was the first of many times that Russell would either introduce me as such or directly comment on my persistence. I did not realize it at the time, but Russell seemed to respect that I was always around and always working, and I believe it opened a number of doors for me throughout the project. A few days after the meeting at Keller Williams, Russell approached me with a proposition. The third Thursday of every month, he attends an early morning prayer breakfast in Cedar

Grove, and he wanted me to come photograph it. The breakfast happens at Margaret Myles' house on 76th street in Cedar Grove, and it would be my first opportunity to photograph inside someone's home. By simply hanging around and working hard, I had shown Russell that I was not only serious about my project, but also sincerely interested in Community Renewal. My dedication gave Russell the confidence to allow me into his life and photograph moments beyond his work life.

Lesson #3: Sometimes, No Means No

Thursday night, I walked into a suburban Shreveport home, and to my right were three large stacks of Christmas presents, hundreds of cards, and children's names and addresses. A short tour of the home revealed that between a garage packed with presents and a living room lined with them; nearly every child's name had at least one gift. Every year several members of the Community Renewal Staff spend December organizing a large gift giving campaign in their free time. They locate children who would otherwise not have Christmas, find volunteers willing to donate gifts, and unite the two. According to CRI staff, the newspaper and TV stations are kept from covering the event each year. The participants aren't looking for credit, but just want to be left alone make children happy.

I was given access to the nightly gift-wrapping and subsequent delivery under the condition that I not actually publish my photographs or video anywhere. This agreement renders my work basically useless. My goal as a photojournalist is to publish information in order to tell a story, so if someone doesn't want their story told, working with them is pointless. Reluctantly, I agreed to the stipulation. My thought

process was that, like Russell, they would see how hard I work, respect it and allow me to tell their story. I was wrong. Instead of getting great access to an interesting story that had been eluding the mainstream media, I spent hours working towards an unpublishable product. A few weeks after Christmas, I was in the Community Renewal offices, and saw my contact. I told her I really enjoyed documenting the gift giving campaign, showed her a few photos, and said that I couldn't wait to get the video edited. She was happy with the pictures, but took the opportunity to remind me about my agreement not to publish it.

There are two big lessons to be learned from my experience with the gift-givers. Most importantly, I should never agree to keep something out of print. Regardless of how promising it seems that a subject may change his or her mind, I need to maintain control of my product. This seems like a simple a straightforward lesson, but walking away from a subject is difficult in practice. Second, the reason I let myself fall into this trap was that I was not listening to my subjects. The gift-givers never gave me the slightest signal that it would ever be ok to publish their story, but I assumed they would allow me to. Not listening to my subject presents a larger problem than simply wasting time, and introduces the risk of a journalist's biggest fear: bias. Every time I head to an assignment, I bring my personal experiences, understandings, and assumptions to the table. My job as a journalist is to ignore them, and listen to how my subject understands the world around him. I imposed my assumption that every story needs to be told onto the gift-givers, and did not listen when I was told otherwise. This time my actions did not lead to a misrepresentation, the story was never published, but the experience is a sobering

reminder to constantly be checking my motivations and listening to my sources.

The week that I will always remember as one very long Christmas party eventually came to an end, and despite my eagerness to work on my thesis, I was forced into a two-week break. Community Renewal follows the public school schedule, and closes for two weeks around Christmas, when the local schools are on holiday. The long week had set me up well for the work needed once the break was over. I knew I wanted to focus on Gwen Taylor's Friendship House on 78th street in Cedar Grove, and the group there was willing to work with me. All I could do now is enjoy Christmas, and hit the ground running in two weeks.

Chapter 2: Cedar Grove and Gwen's Friendship House

During my weeklong crash course in life at Community Renewal, I had gotten the opportunity to sample seven of the organization's nine Friendship Houses, and confirmed my initial suspicion that they would provide access into the neighborhood. Each of them functions as a community center for its neighborhood. A Community Coordinator's approval would help me find my way into the community as a whole. Community Renewal uses the Allendale neighborhood as its example of a successful attempt at its model. They have not only built friendship houses and a network of Haven Houses, but also partnered with the Fuller Center for Housing to rebuild much of the neighborhood. The neighborhood looks and feels brand new, and initially I planned to work there. Focusing on Allendale presented two major problems. Most importantly, the neighborhood puts a coat of whitewash of Community Renewal's work. The houses are all new, the people are all happy, and it is one big community; none of which is representative of the organization's work. Since the neighborhood is so visually appealing, it is often used as the public face of the organization's efforts, creating the second problem. The Allendale community is used for media coverage and regularly sees volunteers come and go. I would have been treated like any other volunteer, and genuine access would have been difficult.

As previously mentioned, I felt a connection with Gwen Taylor early on, but a good relationship with her would have been useless if her community did not accept me. The 78th street Christmas party sealed the deal. After a few Youth Club Christmas parties, it is fairly easy to predict how the evening will go. First, everyone

eats a meal provided by some local restaurant. During the meal, the community coordinator patrols the room in an attempt to keep order. An activity, usually a game or craft, but occasionally a Bible story follows. Then the kids have some free time, and are given a gift on the way out. Gifts are given at the end as an incentive to get the kids to go home. Some of the parties are sponsored by outside groups, who gather off to the side while the kids have fun.

Gwen double booked her club's Christmas party with the Highland neighborhood's, which is only a problem if you are trying to photograph both. So I was about half an hour late to the beginning of hers. When I arrived a new game was just beginning. There was a large circle of chairs filled with an assortment of volunteers, CRI staff, and students; there were no divisions among the groups. The game involved everyone in the circle interacting; somehow, I missed the instructions and never figured them out, people would eventually be out, and then have to leave the circle. Inevitably, Mrs. Gwen got out, and had to leave the circle. Instead of maintaining order by quietly leaving the circle, Gwen jumped out of her chair, danced around the circle, and made a huge production of being put out of the game. When the game ended, it was time for gifts. Clearly, someone had told Gwen the gifts were supposed to be opened outside of the house, and she gave a half-hearted attempt to do so. None of kids listened, but instead opened their gifts, each received a watch, examined each other's bounty, and a few trades were made. Then it was Mrs. Gwen's turn. The youth club members wanted to get her a gift, and enlisted one of her volunteers to help make it happen. They ended up convincing a local jewelry store to donate a necklace for Mrs. Gwen by telling the store's manager everything she did for

them. In a single night, Gwen's club had welcomed me with an open, caring attitude, that drove my interest in the club and pumped my desire to tell its story.

The Friendship House's two regularly scheduled activities are Youth Club and the Adult Renewal Academy. The Youth Club is an after school program that provides a safe place for students to go after school. The regularly scheduled club activities include Bible study, homework time, snacks, and games. Club starts whenever the students make complete the trek from school to the Friendship House, usually somewhere around four, sometimes closer to 4:30 and lasts until about 5:30. The Adult Renewal Academy meets twice a week and provides an opportunity for students to work towards their GED, a high-school equivalency degree. Cedar Grove's ARA is taught by Carol Hamilton, a retired public school teacher on Tuesday and Thursday morning beginning at 8 and lasting until 10:30. The Academy teaches English and math skills to its students.

Youth Club:

My first visit to a real club meeting, by which I mean not a Christmas party, came when the students returned from break. I saw Mrs. Gwen that morning at the weekly staff meeting, and asked if I could attend her club that afternoon. She told me to be there around four. I arrived at ten to four, and walked in to the communal space where club is held. It was empty. I grabbed a seat and waited for someone to show up. I knew that Mrs. Gwen lived at the house and would surely be around shortly. She stuck her head in a few minutes later, appeared surprised to see me, and said, "oh, I forgot you were coming today. The kids should be here soon." Mrs. Gwen and I sat

and talked about her club, she bragged about her kids, and I talked about my project for a few minutes. Through the window, Mrs. Gwen noticed a group of teenagers approaching the house, “Here they come.”

The Caddo Parish School Board schedules high school finals for the week after Christmas break, so the kids begged Mrs. Gwen to let them forgo Bible study in favor of studying. She agreed. Textbooks, note cards, and pens emerged from backpacks and the room transformed into an, albeit somewhat noisy, study hall. The rest of the week progressed similarly; study halls with the occasional break for snack time, games, and some Bible study, Mrs. Gwen couldn't refrain from preaching for an entire week.

Other than finals week, club meetings follow a pretty set routine. During phase one, the kids arrive, sign in, and hang out. This is a pretty noisy time during which Mrs. Gwen inquires about home lives, neighborhood politics, or academic progress. Usually, this ends when Mrs. Gwen gets frustrated about something one of the kids tell her and begins Bible study.

Bible study is phase two and takes several forms. Gwen frequently turns to scripture to examine her kid's recent trials. For example, one day, Barbara, one of the high school students, came to club complaining about an ROTC instructor who had given her a hard time. Barbara had gotten her ears pierced over Christmas break, and had been punished for refusing to remove them when asked. Barbara felt the instructor had treated her unfairly and wanted to vent. Mrs. Gwen passed out Bibles, and took the opportunity to teach a lesson about obeying authority figures. If Mrs. Gwen doesn't feel particularly moved, or the kids are behaving that day, she also

enjoys testing how well they remember previous lessons. This study technique takes the form of a game where Mrs. Gwen asks questions and whoever answers correctly gets a point. At first, two points equaled a bag of M&Ms, though it soon became three points. The required number of points changes based on Mrs. Gwen's whims. Occasionally, Mrs. Gwen has some obligation in the house that briefly draws her away from club. During these times, the kids are left to study the Bible on their own. Depending on when Mrs. Gwen is pulled away, this self-sufficient Bible study takes two forms. Most commonly, the kids are given a starting place, being reading, and discuss as questions coming up. The discussion frequently stalls until Mrs. Gwen returns to answer a key question that is beyond the students' grasp. When Gwen gets pulled away before study begins, the students eventually grab Bibles, find their own starting place, and start reading. Bible study comes to an end either when Mrs. Gwen has said her peace, or as is more likely, when time dictates that she must work on making a snack so the kids get home at a reasonable hour. There is a short prayer thanking God for the study time and the impending snack, after which Bible time is concluded.

I like to call phase three snack/talk/study/game time, though the more appropriate name may be free time. During this phase of club, Mrs. Gwen, frequently surrounded by anxious teenagers trying to tell her about their day, works on fixing a snack for the ten or so club members. Most of the kids simply sit around and talk during this time, a few study, and sometimes a board game is broken out.

After approximately 30 minutes photographing Mrs. Gwen's youth club, I knew I was in for a challenge. Studying for school, reading scripture, and playing

board games share one common feature: a table. Club's activities take place around tables, which mean the group is frequently sitting in a circle, do a repetitive, non-visual task. My plan for this project had always been a web-based multimedia project. After a few days of photography, I felt like I had captured the essence of club to the extent a still camera was capable, so I began to reevaluate my reporting tactics. The real story of club is in how the students interact, the ways in which they study the Bible, and their topics of conversation. To tell this story, I needed video. I picked up the video camera, and told the story through words and actions, not just moments.

Adult Renewal Academy:

I walked into the Adult Renewal Academy for the first time at about 7:45 on a Tuesday morning. Bible study, which David Westerfield had forgotten to mention happens before class, was about to wrap up. After a short prayer, the group broke for coffee and orange juice. I grabbed a cup of coffee, and chatted with Abraham Gardner, 61, who I met at the Christmas party. He graduated high school in the 70s without being able to read. He was a member of ARA's inaugural class and now reads at the third grade level.

Carol Hamilton, known as Mrs. Carol by her students, called the class to order, and in a few minutes was standing in front of around eight eager pairs of eyes. Class time is bisected into two main subjects: English and math. On this day, English was first. Mrs. Carol started by asking the students what a synonym is. The students sputtered a few half-definitions and vague notions about synonyms until Mrs. Carol put them together by explaining that synonyms are two words that mean the same thing. Then she started down a list of the class's vocabulary words, calling them out

one at a time and asking for a synonym of each. The synonym game was followed by worksheets asking the students to underline, depending on the worksheet, nouns, verbs, or adjectives.

The class breaks into two groups, beginning and advanced, for math lessons. The beginning class works on basic arithmetic skills including addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and some basic word problems. A typical day in this group begins with Mrs. Carol passing out worksheets filled with addition or subtraction problems. Students work their way through the problems, frequently using fingers as a guide. A few students fly through the worksheets, but most struggle and require one-to-one help from the several volunteers who periodically attend. The advanced group is more reminiscent of a typical classroom. Students gather around a tiny white board to learn practical applications of the arithmetic skills taught in the basic class. The students in this group are armed with calculators, pencils, and notebooks. On my first day of class, they learned that $I = Prt$.

The open, welcoming arms I felt when first attending club were not present when I arrived at ARA, but I was met with a bit of resistance. Mrs. Carol did not know who I was or why I was there, so when I entered, she was skeptical. I introduced myself, and she accusatorially asked what I was doing there. After explaining my project and that I was Community Renewal approved, she agreed to let me stay and photograph. As a condition, she required me to introduce myself to the class and, as a college graduate, give the class advice on how to write well. I also experienced resistance from some of the students. I have a general policy when shooting to get permission from my subjects and respect the wishes of anyone who

does not want to be photographed. The only time I had someone refuse to participate in my Community Renewal project was when I asked this question at the Adult Renewal Academy. I had one student raise his hand, indicating he preferred not to have his picture taken, and several more gave me looks that indicated they were wary of my intentions, but didn't want to cause problems. Fortunately, I had stricken up a friendly relationship with Mr. Abraham, so I chose to focus my initial efforts on him. Mr. Abraham is a lively individual who is a long-time student and makes a great character for the project, anyway. As I began photographing Mr. Abraham, the other students saw my work, got to know me better, and eventually opened up. Laying the foundation with Mr. Abraham gave me an entrance into a fairly closed off group, so that I could tell the story of the hardworking students trying to better themselves through coursework at the Adult Renewal Academy.

Observations:

In my experiences working the Community Renewal International, I observed a number of themes that permeate the organization, whether office staff, Community Coordinators, volunteers, or neighborhood residents taken advantage of the services. These threads of life at Community Renewal guided my coverage of the organization. My major observations about the people at Community Renewal were that religion plays an important role in their lives, that the staff is full of caring people who go far beyond job requirements, and that they create a welcoming environment open to new comers.

My first official act while working with Community Renewal was to read

scripture from a Bible. CRI's weekly staff meeting takes place in their large conference room at the main office. Tables were arranged in the shape of a U, and in front of each seat was a Bible. After a prayer, the reading began. Each person read a verse or two, and we made it around the room twice before completing the reading. The rest of the weekly meeting is an odd hybrid of sharing, praying and praising God. The team takes turns sharing about the previous week, including both good and bad things that happened while working that week, but the stories are usually wrapped in either a praise of or prayer to God. Mrs. Gwen, for example, may praise God that one of her kids got invited to an exclusive summer camp, but pray for another who is struggling through a rough finals week. Every Community Renewal event begins and ends with a prayer, and in the Friendship House, during both club and ARA, Bible study and theology are frequent topics of conversation. The level to which religion seemed to affect the daily lives of people I was working with surprised me. While the organization is openly based in Christian theology, the members go far beyond putting on the face required by working at religious organization, and implement the organization's theology while carrying out their jobs.

Community Renewal uses a vocabulary of caring when it talks about rebuilding communities. There's the "We *Care* Team" that recruits *caring* individuals, Haven House Leaders who build *caring* relationships, and Friendship Houses that *care* for entire neighborhoods. The language the organization uses is more than a smart marketing strategy, but a comment on the culture fostered within the organization. I regularly saw the staff ignore or bend rules and/or norms in favor of caring for someone else. The CRI office Christmas party occurred while I was in

the offices early in my project. I was unaware that the party would include a gift exchange or that I would be expected to participate, so I did not bring a gift. The kind people at CRI had several extra gifts on hand, just in case people showed up without one to exchange. I was ordered to accept one of them and participate in the office gift exchange.

The caring attitude exhibited by Community Renewal's staff wasn't stuck at the top of the organization, but trickled down to all involved. Margaret Myles's prayer breakfast is the most memorable care-receiving experience I had while working with Community Renewal. Mrs. Margaret opens her home once a month to anyone willing to show up for the homemade breakfast she starts preparing around 4 a.m. When I arrived at her home, I was a little nervous about entering a stranger's home, but excited about a good breakfast. The Myles house faces Line Avenue, which is one of Shreveport's busiest streets, so it is customary to enter from the back door. I had a feeling this was the case, but didn't want to be rude and headed towards the front of the house. As soon as I passed the kitchen window, I heard a knock coming from inside. I looked up, and was directed towards the back. Upon entering the home, I was immediately greeted with a smile and a hug from Mrs. Margaret. I was welcomed as if I had been to the home a thousand times, no questions were asked, and, for once, my camera did not cause a disturbance.

I have worked with and observed a number of non-profit care-giving organizations, and Community Renewal International is unique among the groups I have experienced. In most organizations, there is a clear line between staff, client, and administration. The staff's job is to give the client what he or she needs. Needs

are met in very tangible terms, such as rent being paid, food distributed, or childcare given. Each service is given out according to regulations, measured for grant purposes, and part of the bureaucracy. Community Renewal bases its services in the desire to work with caring partners, instead of in a system that manages aid. This philosophical difference results in a breaking down of the staff-client barrier and a disruption of the delivery of measurable aid.

The concept of a staff is difficult to apply to two of the three strategies Community Renewal uses. The “We Care Team” is a group of individuals who simply commit to performing caring acts for the community. Beyond a one-time meeting, where an interested party fills out an interest card and receives a sticker and sign, there is no real interaction with CRI. Haven House leaders interact more with the staff, in that they receive training, periodic guidance and support, but their role is more similar with that of a staff member. The Haven House Leader’s goal is to deliver a sense of community to his or her block by getting to know the neighbors and host events to facilitate the growth of community. Community Coordinators are the only full-time CRI staff members who regularly interact with a group that could be considered clients in the traditional sense of the word. One main function of the Community Coordinator is running Youth Club, where students receive services on a regular basis. Despite a potential staff-client relationship, the Community Coordinator rarely treats the students as clients. The relationship is more motherly, with the Community Coordinator taking interest in the students and going out of her way to ensure their well-being. Multiple Community Coordinators, for example, talk about regularly taking trips to local schools so that they will know their students’

teachers and administrator, who can inform the Community Coordinator about the students' academic progress.

While I was working with Community Renewal, the administrative arm of the group was gearing up for a major grant application. The head of Hewlett Packard's corporate giving division asked Mack McCarter how much it would cost to fully realize his dreams for the next year. When McCarter provided a number, HP did not bat an eyebrow. The multimillion-dollar donation that McCarter had in mind required a bit of work for Community Renewal. HP wanted to see measurable results and hear quantifiable goals that would be achieved with the money. About the time I arrived CRI was restructuring its record keeping and stressing the record-keeping portion of the staff members' responsibility. The Community Coordinators were constantly reminded to keep track of attendance at club and to keep up with reporting it. The "We Care Team" and Haven House crews were tasked with recruiting more people, and reporting how many people had signed up for each role. Community Renewal chose to measure its success by how many people were participating in their programs instead of measuring specific ways in which people were being helped. Most aid-giving organizations measure aid-rendered directly. For example, the number of beds provided, the number of meals served, or the number of dollars doled out are common measures for success. Community Renewal is not organized around quantifiable goals, and I believe this fact frees staff members to focus on caring about people, instead of simply satisfying their needs. Since the organization is focused solely on getting people in the doors, the staff's goal is to get people coming back by building relationships.

Chapter 3: Wrapping Up The Project

Several weeks before heading to Shreveport to start working on my thesis, I sat in the photography lab at school trying to plan the project. The first question I needed to answer was what format my project would take. My options were an audio-slideshow, a documentary video, or a multimedia package. I am not a huge fan of making documentary video, so I struck that option and started weighing the between the two remaining options. Last fall, I took a multimedia journalism class in which we studied how journalism is moving to the web and how to use interactive features to expand a story's reach. During that class I sort of bought into the idea of multimedia journalism and the dynamic experiences possible using Flash to create a news package. On top of my interest in a new (to me, anyway) storytelling method, I really enjoyed the professor and had asked him to be the first reader on my report. I decided that I should create a news package using Adobe Flash.

The fundamental shift between traditional journalism and web-based multimedia packages is the way the storyline unfolds. Traditionally, the journalist crafts a story line that the reader follows from beginning to end. This is a linear progression with a beginning, middle, and end. An online news experience is a non-linear storytelling method. As a journalist, I can control how the viewer enters the package, but the homepage is only a portal to the rest of the package. Once a viewer leaves the homepage, the journey is defined by his or her interest. Each segment of the package tells it own small story, and users are free to consume the package all at once or in pieces. When finished, the pieces of the story add up to give a complete

understanding of the story, and are capable of telling a more dynamic story and a single set of images.

My first task in creating a package was to decide how to deal with the two media I had gathered during the reporting phase of my project. I felt that the photography worked well as a cohesive unit that told the story of a single space, the Friendship House in Cedar Grove, while the video dug deeper into the personal stories and activities that occurred in the space. The edited material broke into 6 separate stories, one slideshow and five video pieces. I chose to lead with the still images because they told the most complete story, and would make a viewer want to explore the rest of the story. The five remaining video clips can be accessed from the homepage, and offer additional information about Friendship House. The core of my design was set, there would be 6 pages featuring visual content with room for a few words of explanation and navigation.

My next task was to design the navigation. Since this is a visual project, I was not keen on the idea of using a standard text-based navigational menu. I wanted visual images to drive the project, so I chose to use pictures for the navigation. To do so, I took video screenshots from each of the five video segments, made them small, and placed all five of them under the main graphic. In my opinion, the images alone did not look enough like buttons to attract the average users mouse, so I laid one word description of each page over the button.

The final piece of the project's puzzle was to write the text for the 6 sections. The words for the project play a unique role because the story is really told through the visual elements of the project. There are two different types of text in the project.

The homepage has five short blurbs design to draw the viewer into the project. The text of these paragraphs succinctly describes the topic and explains its function. Each paragraph also highlights the title of the section, by enlarging it and changing its color, and links to the page. The video pages have room for about a hundred words of text. The video clips have a limited ability to explain context and give precise details, which is where the text comes in. It explains what the viewer sees in the video and gives it context. With all the major pieces in place, it was time to finalize the project. I came up with a title and added some trimming here and there, such a section titles, and the project was complete.

Conclusion:

Before embarking on this project, my photographic experience included newspaper experience, a few internships and work at college newspapers, some freelance portrait and event photography, and a couple long-term class projects. In my previous work, there had always been some sort of guiding force motivating me through it. Whether I was getting paid, had daily assignment deadlines, or had a professor breathing down my neck, there was always an external force that depended on me for the project. For my master's report I was the only one responsible. If I didn't finish, it was completely on me, and no professor was going to hassle me to work on it. This scenario gave me a feeling of doing real work, as opposed to simply working on a class project. As I was leaving Gwen's for the first time, I remember thinking to myself, "I feel like a real photojournalist. Is this what I am going to be doing for the rest of my life? I hope so"

Photojournalism is a great profession that gives me the opportunity to explore the city I live in and take an active role in the community. Journalism is in a state of flux right now, where the industry's business model is changing and daily practices are adapting to the Internet. Using both video and still photography for this project gave me the opportunity to dig deeply into the subject matter, and I am eagerly exploring other new media forms to tell stories.

Looking back on the work I have done for this project, I am very satisfied with the outcome. I think the project accurately reflects Community Renewal, enjoy the visual aspects, and I am proud of the design. More importantly, I feel like I have told a story that was important to me, important for Shreveport, and a story that needs to get out there. I have not simply done work to get a grade, but worked diligently to create the best piece of journalism I could.

Vita

Robert Youngblood grew up in Shreveport, La. where he attended Centenary College of Louisiana for undergraduate studies. He received a B.A. in communication and sociology. During the senior year, he did an internship at the Shreveport Times, after which he decided to pursue photojournalism as a career. This pursuit took him to Austin, Texas and the University of Texas. He enrolled in the photojournalism program at UT, and this report is the final project of that degree. He is currently looking for work as a staff photographer for a newspaper.

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This report was typed by Robert Curtis Youngblood.