

On fire to help our youth

Written by Peter Finney Jr.

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New Orleans (November 13, 2014) - For generations, the 7th Ward of New Orleans has been home to the master craftsmen – the wrought-iron fabricators, plasterers, brick and stone masons and custom carpenters – responsible for maintaining and enhancing the unique architectural look of one of America’s few cities with a European soul.

These are the tradesmen (most are *men* of Catholic Creole descent) who built Corpus Christi and Epiphany parishes and who helped build each other’s 7th Ward homes on Saturdays by offering their labor for free, akin to Midwest barn-raising.

“That’s how the 7th Ward was built,” said historian Jonn E. Hankins, who has done research on New Orleans master craftsmen from the 1800s to the present. “This is unique to New Orleans. If you were a tradesman or your family was in the trades, you could pretty much get a house built in the 7th Ward for free.

There was no labor (charge); you just had to buy the materials. You worked five days for pay, and you worked one day for free. Your wife would cook red beans and rice or fry some fish, and the men would have a half-keg of beer. That’s what you did for each other.”



Apprentices nurtured

The decline in the number of 7th Ward families working in the master crafts – due in part to the graying of the trades – has triggered an idea for the New Orleans Master Crafts Guild to create an apprenticeship program for young adults to learn a high-demand craft that would pay excellent wages and also provide an influx of talented newcomers to keep the trades going.

The training program has caught the eye of the local Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), which is providing grant money to pay stipends to the apprentices while they learn on the job for six months. The grant probably will be renewed for another two years to get the program going.

The annual CCHD collection will be taken up at all Masses in the Archdiocese of New Orleans Nov. 22-23. Twenty-five percent of the collection remains in the archdiocese, and the archdiocese regularly gets back remaining money in the form of grants made to programs it recommends for funding, said local CCHD coordinator Tom Costanza.



“The great thing about the New Orleans Master Crafts Guild is that the young people are going to be under the mentorship of older craftsmen, and they will learn all those soft skills that they need to succeed,” Costanza said. “With all the construction opportunities coming up – like the new airport terminal – it’s a wonderful opportunity to do this preparation work to get people ready. This is our next generation, and there are booming job opportunities. This is an opportunity to impact generational poverty, and

that's how it's directly connected to the CCHD. It's poverty reduction. These are really good-paying jobs."

Jeff Poree, who runs a plastering company that employs about 40 people and regularly works magic inside the finest mansions of St. Charles Avenue and the Garden District, and Darryl Reeves, who operates Andrew's Welding and Blacksmith shop, are both 64 and grew up attending Epiphany Catholic School together. They are serving as the first two mentors in the apprenticeship program.

"I'm 64, and it's time to train other people," said Poree, smiling inside his Mid-City warehouse where craftsmen painstakingly restore 19th-century ceiling medallions, sometimes hand-crafting a missing piece and putting the jigsaw puzzle back together. "Four of the seven young guys who started with us last year are still here. This isn't for everybody. Once they find out it's hard work, some drop off."



Hard work pays off

But the ones who stay have transportable skills that can more than put food on the table. Poree is teaching the secrets of high-end plastering the way he learned it from a pair of masters, Eugene Ganier and Ronald Gillard, and from his father Calvin Poree. Another icon of a disappearing breed – master plasterer Herbert “Wizard” Gettridge – died Oct. 31 at age 91. He once used a boatswain’s chair to reach the nose-bleed ceilings of the Plaza Tower. “If you had a tough job, you called the Wizard,” Hankins said.

Poree said from the age of 9 – as the eldest child in the family – he would accompany his father on Saturdays to plastering jobs. He eventually picked up the trowel and did work with his father inside the old Pontchartrain Hotel.

“I turned around one day and my father was staring up and watching me and smoking a cigarette,” Poree recalled. “When I got off the scaffold, I told him, ‘Gosh, I can’t believe I did that.’ He told me, ‘So now you get it.’ He was admiring the handiwork. There’s always a demand for a good, skilled craftsman. You can go anywhere in the world with a trade and make a living.”

Tricks of the trade

Reeves’ blacksmith shop has a coal-and-air-fired forge that can heat metal up to 2,100 degrees, where it can then be molded on a curved anvil with specially designed mauls. For the last several months, Reeves has taught Don Le, 23, the tricks of the trade, especially how to take a heated piece of “mild steel,” which has the flexibility to curve perfectly to become part of a wrought-iron fence.

Among the projects on Reeves’ resume is the iron gate at the Cabildo, which he replicated from original blueprints; the entrance gate to the Chalmette Cemetery and the metal and glass door leading into the National Shrine of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos.

Reeves’ grandfather was a blacksmith from Donaldsonville. He was so talented he was able to purchase property between two old sugar plantations. “He was a heckuva blacksmith,” Reeves said. “Either that or a heckuva talker.”

Reeves had learned to weld before entering the military, and he was looking for a long-term job when someone asked if he could create metal “strap hinges” for shutters.

“I could buy a 20-foot flat of steel for \$20, and I could take 16 or 17 inches of that and make a hinge and get paid \$45,” Reeves said. “You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that this was something you could make money doing. If you have a trade, it can’t be taken away from you. You can go anywhere in the world and take care of yourself and your family.”

Le said the biggest challenge of his apprenticeship has been making thin, metal, ornamental leaves, but he’s advanced to the stage where he can crank those out with ease.

“They’ve got to earn my respect,” Reeves said.





Corpus Christi-Epiphany ties

The New Orleans Master Crafts Guild will have a home in the new community center that will be built at the former Corpus Christi School building. Groundbreaking for the renovated structure will be Dec. 1. The center will feature an exhibit on the history of master craftsmen who built the 7th Ward.

“We are absolutely interested in getting young people to learn these trades and to be able to earn a decent living and support their families,” said Hamilton Jones, who has helped Corpus Christi-Epiphany Parish plan the best use for the new community center. “The second reason is to continue the legacy of these crafts, because they are in danger of becoming a dying art as plaster gets replaced with cheap building materials and cheap labor.”

While starting with plastering and iron-working, the guild hopes to expand the mentorship program to other trades and also give the small businesses assistance in handling the financial paperwork necessary to compete for larger jobs.

Other programs funded by CCHD include:

The Micah Project’s pre-trial diversion program to reduce Louisiana’s prison population and promote sentencing reform;

Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, to reduce suspensions in state schools, which directly correlate to imprisonment rates. Suspensions were down from 80,000 to 70,000 last year, Costanza said.

Crescent City Community Land Trust, which is planning to build a supermarket in the lower 9th Ward, where there are few grocery stores.

The CCHD collection will be taken up in the Archdiocese of New Orleans Nov. 22-23 at all Masses. For more information, contact Tom Costanza at 596-3097 or tcostanza@ccano.org.

Peter Finney Jr. can be reached at pfinney@clarionherald.org.

- See more at: <http://clarionherald.info/clarion/index.php/news/latest-news/155-breaking-news/3919-on-fire-to-help-our-youth#sthash.GDHUx1SP.dpuf>