



## **New Orleanian Credits Alpha Kappa Alpha's Kindness for New Hope and New Home**

Lugenia Raphell still vividly recalls the horror of being uprooted nearly two years ago, when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. With her ailing mother in tow, Raphell, a customer service representative for Gulf Coast Bank & Trust, was forced to leave her job and her home and head to Memphis for an unknown fate.

But, the kindness of strangers—especially members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority—helped her weather the storm. Through their love, she is on the path to a new life, in a new home, with her mother safe and protected.

Recalling the saga, she says when the hurricane hit, she and her mother quickly retreated. "We heard the warning and just got on the road to dodge the storm. It was scary," she remembers.

Compounding her problems, she had a car accident in Memphis. While on the shoulder of the road, moaning her fate, a lady pulled over. Noticing that the car had Louisiana plates, she figured that the driver was escaping the hurricane. So, she asked Raphell if she needed help.

"She was so friendly and kind," recalls Raphell. "She was my first blessing."

She was Terri Oliver, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Living up to the Sorority's ideal to provide service, Oliver took Raphell under her wing and referred her to a friend who had rental property in Memphis. This friend, Carolyn Goodwin, enlisted her family and another friend, Everna Andrews, to help. They stepped up and allowed Raphell and her mother to live there rent free—an act that humbled Raphell and restored her faith in mankind.

After a few months, the bank alerted Raphell that the branch where she worked, which had been felled by Katrina, was back and running and that she should return to work.

Delighted with this development, in November 2005, Lugenia, or "Geni" as she prefers to be called, returned to New Orleans...to a nightmare.

"My house was completely destroyed, along with all of my personal possessions," she painfully recalls. "To make matters worse, I was underinsured for this type of loss, so I was unable to cover my losses. Life looked very bleak."

She lived in an apartment while trying to piece together her life. Her mother, who is ailing, has been beset by illness since Katrina ravaged New Orleans. Geni believes her woes are rooted in the stress caused by being displaced.

Knowing that she was without a home, the bank president's wife alerted her that Habitat for Humanity was building homes. There was a catch: someone or some entity had to sponsor and underwrite the costs to have the homes constructed.

On a hope and a prayer, she applied.

At the same time, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority was seeking ways it could impact the city of New Orleans.

Under its international president, Barbara A. McKinzie, the Sorority's new program theme focuses on economics. ESP, which stands for Economics, Service and Partnership, paralleled the need of New Orleanians like Raphell. President McKinzie put this under the International Program Committee, which is chaired by Loann Honesty King. A partnership with Habitat for Humanity fulfilled all three ESP components. Inspired by a resolve to make a difference, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Genworth Financial joined forces.

This represents a milestone, as New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity revealed that Alpha Kappa Alpha is the first sorority or fraternity to sponsor a home. For AKAs, this type of milestone is not unusual, as the Sorority has scored many firsts in its nearly 100-year history, which will be celebrated next year.

With the funding assured, Habitat for Humanity followed procedure in its selection. Next on the eligibility list for a home was Geni Raphell.

The call to her was met with jubilation.

"I was so excited, so blessed, so overwhelmed," she declares. "My prayers had been answered, thanks to Alpha Kappa Alpha."

On June 16, 2007, the wall for the house was raised in a gala celebration held at the site in the Hollygrove Community in Orleans Parish. It is a three bedroom, one bathroom home, set on 1,100 square feet. It has central air, a laundry room with washer/dryer hookups and a roomy front porch.

The ceremonial wall-raising was attended by Tari Bradford, director of the Sorority's South Central Region, which encompasses New Orleans; Ranika Sanchez, second vice president; and Alpha Kappa Alpha members from four New Orleans area chapters (Alpha Beta Omega, Omicron Lambda Omega, Rho Pi Omega and Eta Theta of Loyola University, which Sanchez attends). Dr. Gloria Love and Sorority members Chimene Grant Connor, a New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity board member, and Dr. Conchetta White Fulton helped facilitate the event.

At the height of the celebration, Geni performed the ceremonial rite of hammering the first nail into the structure.

"It was so exhilarating," she recalls, "I was filled with joy!"

AKA members Bradford and Sanchez spoke of how this initiative parallels the Sorority's service and economic mission and vision as articulated by president McKinzie.

It was a moving and stirring ceremony, where Alpha Kappa Alpha women, clad in pink-and-green overalls, also assisted with the hammering and nailing of the new structure.

It will be a perfect place for Geni's mother, who is eagerly looking forward to living in the new home. And, Raphell confides that, since a home was identified and with the promise of a stable life on the horizon, her mother's illness has subsided.

On Tuesday, July 17, 2007, International President Barbara A. McKinzie led an Alpha Kappa Alpha delegation to the official dedication.

For Geni, the home represents the culmination of a dream and the beginning of a new life that would not have been possible without the kindness of Alpha Kappa Alpha.

"I am filled with gratitude and inspired by the warmth, the generosity and the kindness of Alpha Kappa Alpha," she declared. "I will forever be indebted to the Sorority for giving us stability with this new home and for allowing my mother and me to begin life in a new house with new hope."

*Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority is America's first Greek-letter organization founded in 1908 by, and for, Black college women. Headquartered in Chicago, IL, it is one of the world's leading service organizations. The Sorority serves all mankind through a nucleus of more than 200,000 women in over 975 chapters in the U.S., the Caribbean, Canada, Germany, Korea, Japan and Africa. The Sorority commemorates its Centennial in 1908 with a birthday celebration in January at its founding home—Howard University—and with its Centennial Conference in July, where more than 20,000 members are expected to converge for this 100-year milestone.*

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