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New Orleans

# Data

News Weekly

"The People's Paper"

Data Zone

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## Lemonade Day Success!

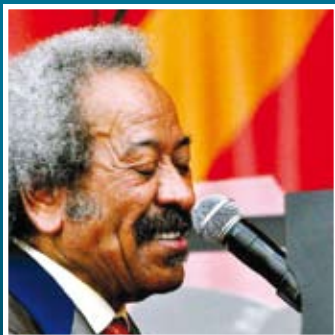
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# The Rethinkers

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A typical Rethink meeting is held in a circle

# The Rethinkers

## Giving Young People a Voice

*New Orleans Youth Activist the Subject of a Documentary to air on HBO*

By Edwin Buggage  
Photos by Colin M. Lenton

As we approach the seven year anniversary when a great American City was ravaged by destruction and where the world witnessed horrific images of people suffering and seeking refuge on top of their homes, the Superdome and Convention Center. Where floodwaters left the City a swampy place of people walking through

a sea of debris and during those grave days of turmoil and its aftermath many could not forecast what the future of New Orleans would look like. The City resembled a ghost town with few residents and an uncertain future. With the many problems facing the City and no shortage of finger pointing, today we fast forward and see an

**On the Cover:** Rethinkers begin to think about the importance of growing their own food and promoting school gardens. Today Rethink has its own garden at its office location in the ArtEgg building, 1000 South Broad.

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## DATA NEWS WEEKLY

P.O. Box 57347, New Orleans, LA 70157-7347 | Phone: (504) 821-7421 | Fax: (504) 821-7622  
editorial: datanewseditor@bellsouth.net | advertising: datanewsad@bellsouth.net

Terry B. Jones  
CEO/Publisher  
Glenn Jones  
VP Advertising  
& Marketing  
Cheryl Mainor  
Managing Editor  
Edwin Buggage  
Editor  
Calla Victoria  
Executive Assistant  
June Hazeur  
Accounting

**Contributors**  
Edwin Buggage  
Jenga Mwendo  
Colin M. Lenton  
Calla Victoria  
Kichea S. Burt

**Art Direction & Production**  
MainorMedia.com  
**Editorial Submissions**  
datanewseditor@bellsouth.net  
**Advertising Inquiries**  
datanewsad@bellsouth.net

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Rethinkers cut up during their first news conference on school food, called "A spork in the Road"

swers and solutions to education, one of the most pressing issues come from a surprising place; enter "Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools" or as they are more commonly known "Rethink."

"Rethinkers" are a group of students dreaming big about the changes they want in their schools and taking action to make those dreams a reality. The idea is simple: students are experts on their own school experiences and deserve a voice in education reform. "Rethinkers" are mostly middle schoolers, but also have high school interns and eight year old "prethinkers." "We're now in our sixth year of Rethinking New Orleans schools," says Jane Wholey as the Founder and Director of Rethink New Orleans. Before Hurricane Katrina she was a media consultant to grassroots organizations and after the storm she wanted to create something that could empower young people and give them a voice in reshaping New Orleans Schools. "I was thinking of something I could do and it struck me that the issue with the public schools was something that began to be on the minds of the people as one of the most pressing issues that was being debated at the time. And I noticed that of all the voices that were speaking on the issue a group that was absent was the children. So then I reached out to some of the organizations that I have worked with and we put on a summer program in 2006 and the kids loved it and it got a lot of positive attention."

Since its inception the program has continued to grow with hundreds of youth becoming involved. One of the first "Rethinkers" was Isaiah Simms, a young man whose distinct accent rings the rhythmic resonance that is unmistakably New Orleans, "I got involved right after Hurricane Katrina when the group first started, I was recommended by one of my teachers. Our initial thing was to revive students after the storm and then we started taking on some of the problems," he remarks continuing to address the issues they have taken on he says, "We've addressed having to bring back sports to the Recovery School District (RSD), the upkeep of our bathrooms and getting our schools to design a 21st Century green bathroom and cafeteria; we have also helped to get fresh local foods into the schools. We also started addressing issues of having metal detectors in schools. We are working on something called a resolution circle, to help students that are suspended or given detention to stay in school."

Jane Wholey have seen the Rethink grow and make an impact speaking with pride of Isaiah she says, "In the summer of 2006 a story was ran on the work the kids were doing on Nick News and you can see Isaiah as a spokesperson; and he also was quoted in a story done on the "The Rethinkers" in the Christian Science Monitor. He said something that was very incredible. He said when I came to Rethink the first summer I had a hole in my heart and by the end of



Rethink's first news conference on the subject of school food, called "A spork in the Road"

the summer it was closed." Speaking of his own evolution and since being a member of the "s" Isaiah says, "After Katrina, I felt it was bad, but good in the sense that this could be a new beginning for the schools and our City. Things needed to be rebuilt and it gave us an opportunity to have a voice. And as far as our input in the schools, we are the ones that were

on the ground and some of the things needed to be addressed. And working with Ms. Wholey we feel blessed that she has helped us to have a voice."

Looking back to 2006, when a band of pint-sized kids - "The Rethinkers" - stood outside a

drowned school to discuss their dreams for post-Katrina public education, who would have guessed they'd now be starring in their own HBO documentary? "The Great Cafeteria Takeover" that focuses on the widely lauded non-profit Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools (a.k.a. "The Rethinkers") and their pioneering, youth-driven work to improve school food and cafeterias. HBO's half-hour documentary about "The Rethinkers" is keyed to a national public health campaign called THE WEIGHT OF THE NATION that kicked off May 1. "The Great Cafeteria Takeover" will be cablecast on May 16 and again in September. The film follows "The Rethinkers" through months of a strategic drive to improve school food. It zeroes in on the development of the innovative "School Food Report Card," with which "Rethinkers" grade cafeterias, and their campaign to convince ARAMARK, a food service provider, to sign an agreement to

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## *The Joseph S. Clark Class of 1972*

### *40<sup>th</sup> Year*

## *Class Reunion*

*May 25-27, 2012*

*The Joseph S. Clark of 1972 is having its 40<sup>th</sup> Year Reunion Memorial Day Weekend (May 25-27, 2012). The activities include a social event on Friday May 25<sup>th</sup>, picnic on Saturday May 26<sup>th</sup> and a church service on Sunday May 27<sup>th</sup>.*

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# Master Gardener's Corner

## Xeriscaping for a care-free beautiful Garden



Bougainvillea

By MG Calla Victoria

Xeriscaping and xerogardening refers to landscaping and gardening in ways that reduce or eliminate the need for supplemental water from irrigation. In some western states xeriscaping equates to using a lot of pebbles in the landscape and not a lot of plant material. However you can have a low maintenance and beautiful garden with lots of color by just selecting the right plant materials.

Usually when we think of care-free plants we usually think of foliage plants like philodendrons, palms, cactus, and ornamental grasses. However, there are quite a few flowering plants that put on a spectacular show almost year round to keep your garden colorful and maintenance free. Bougainvilleas are festive climbers and come in a variety of colors from white, yellow, orange, pink, fuchsia, and scarlet. They are covered with delicate blooms called "paper flowers" almost year round in our climate. They thrive in full sun with dry soil. They are somewhat tender for the first year or so. If we get a hard freeze you will probably lose them. A good hint is to plant bougainvilleas where they can get some protection and that might solve the problem.

Another great climber is the Confederate Jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) which is in bloom right now and perfuming gardens all over town with an explosion of tiny white blossoms. Confederate jasmine blooms off and on throughout the year and basically needs no care outside of an occasional trim every now and then to keep it looking neat. They make wonderful hedges, groundcovers, and telephone pole collars. It just tickles my spirit when citizens take it upon themselves to beautify their neighborhoods with plantings around telephone poles.

Now groundcovers are definitely an alternative to mowing a lawn every week and all ground covers are drought tolerant so no watering is required. My ground cover of choice is the sweet potato vine in either purple or chartreuse, they make a beautiful cover, add a vibrant splash of color, they are aggressive growers, and if you chose to you can harvest some sweet potatoes. But for coverage and fragrance nothing beats sweet alyssum, *Lobularia maritima* (Brassicaceae). Usually considered a fall planting but in our climate the sweet alyssums provide year round beauty. I have some planted near my front door and whenever I open the door for someone they always ask, "What is causing that wonderful smell?" The sweet alyssum comes in white or pink but the white ones are fragrant.

Another plant that is excellent for color and toughness is the canna. In our climate it is happy, blooms almost year round, and does not need anything but the sun. Cannas are quite invasive so plant them where you can contain them or sink them in containers and

## Lemonade Day Success

Photos by Terry B. Jones

Future Business Leaders participated in Lemonade Day- New Orleans, organized to empower youth to become the business leaders, social advocates, volunteers, and forward thinking citizens of tomorrow.



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# Shoot Ya Best Shot!

## Jazz Fest Comes to a Close

Photos by Kichea S. Burt

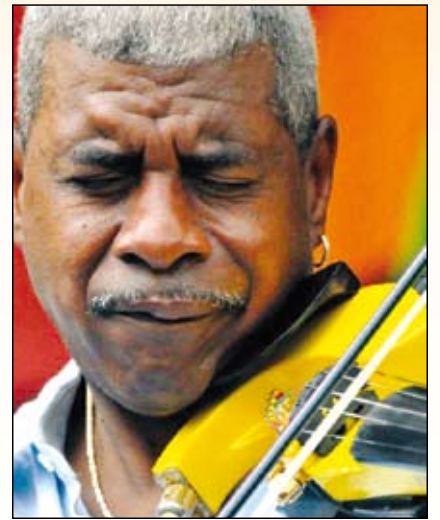
Another Jazz Fest has ended, but the memories are still here. Two weeks of fantastic performances by local and world renowned musicians, artists, fans and New Orleans magic combined for a successful and memorable occasion. Of course, Data was there!



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# 'Jungleland'

## A Personal Reflection by Jenga Mwendo

By Jenga Mwendo  
NNPA Columnist

The New York Times Magazine recently ran a story on my home, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, a place one of the most powerful newspapers in the world insensitively dubbed a "Jungleland." Contrary to the article, residents of this community are not reconciled to life in the wilderness and we don't live in an untamed mess of overgrowth or in a forgotten wasteland. We are not resigned to anything; we are fighting to revive our community.

While the article cites the city government's futile attempts to improve the neighborhood, it barely mentions the overall lack of government support before and after Hurricane Katrina and the hard work by committed citizens to improve the community. Yes, many parts of the Lower Ninth are overgrown and neglected, but what the article missed is that many are not. Moreover, the untold story is how city, state and federal government abandoned this community.

The Times probably had good intentions — document the bad situation so our community can get help. But while writing about broken people, vacant lots and weeds may be sexy journalism, the community needs the outside world to understand how implicit and unconscious bias caused by a history of racism pummeled us.

After Katrina, millions of dollars flowed into New Orleans, and the Lower Ninth was declared the glaring example of what needed rehabilitation. Yet, nearly seven years later, the French Quarter and other areas of tourism and affluence are sparkling, while few improvements have been made in the Lower Ninth. In fact, most of the decaying properties cited in the article are owned by the city of New Orleans, not the residents.

Each day, a tour bus cruises the neighborhood showing visitors hurricane damage and poor living conditions. So tour companies are making money off our tragedy and lack of support. The people? We have become mere spectacles dehumanized in the process.

We need the media to shine a spotlight on the fact that the city, state and federal governments



turned their backs on this community.

We haven't given up. Many local organizations and churches are working hard to revitalize the Lower Ninth. Unfortunately, the Times article mentions only Brad Pitt's Make It Right organization as the silver lining in the dark cloud that is the Lower Ninth. Churches and other groups may not offer the glitter, clout and financial resources of Brad Pitt, but they labor daily to improve the quality of life here. The Times article included more about the varieties of plant and animal life that have moved in than about the people and organizations fighting to rescue this community.

Before the Lower Ninth is judged, consider why it has become a vast wasteland. Before Katrina, nearly 15,000 people lived in this community, which had the highest homeownership rate in the city. The overwhelming majority of these owners were African-American. After the destruction, 75 percent of the residents didn't return because staying where they had fled was easier than the struggle and expense of returning to rebuild.

Those who did return discovered very little government support. Without nonprofits and thousands of volunteers, more of the Lower Ninth might actually be "Jungleland."

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to restoration is that this community had fewer resources before Katrina. Like other poor, African-American communities nationwide, it had suffered the results of structural racism. The color of

our skin had an impact on our schools, access to health care, employment opportunities, and housing and basic human rights. When resources were scarce to begin with, it's hard to recover after tragedy.

For instance, many Lower Ninth residents had no homeowners or flood insurance. The Road Home program, designed to help people rebuild, provided payments to homeowners based on pre-Katrina property values, not actual repair costs. So Whites who owned homes in affluent neighborhoods received payments that allowed them to rebuild, even though many of their homes incurred less damage than those of people in neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth.

A 2008 lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) alleged such discriminatory practices and was settled last year. HUD was to pay \$62 million to Louisiana hom-

owners, but disposition of that money is unclear.

In another setback, the city didn't allow Lower Ninth residents to come home and start rebuilding until nine months after other New Orleans citizens returned. Faced with increased uncertainty, chaos and financial burdens, people were forced to find work and resettle in their evacuation locations.

What few services were available also caused concern. The social safety net already had gaps but was completely shattered by Katrina. Elderly residents worried about where they could receive healthcare, parents didn't know where they would send their children to school and seven years later, the community has no grocery store. Clearly, the government didn't want us back because the original master rebuilding plan had the Lower Ninth slated to become green space.

Rebuilding our community may not be profitable, but it's right. African-American lives in the Lower Ninth are just as valuable as those of Whites in the French Quarter or Garden District.

Often overlooked is the role that structural racism played in destruction of our community. If the French Quarter had been in the same area as the Lower Ninth, the government wouldn't have allowed anything as potentially destructive as a barge to remain untethered with a storm coming. Levees would have been built to withstand a Category 4 hurricane so major tourist attractions wouldn't be jeopardized.

The French Quarter wasn't saved because it sits nine feet higher than the back section of the Lower Ninth but because of racism and classism. Black residents of the Lower Ninth were deemed expendable long before Katrina.

With a new mayor in office, there is at least hope for the future. We've had more street repairs in the Lower Ninth, but that's where it ends for now. I've heard promises and seen plans, but the community is naturally skeptical. We have become accustomed to broken promises. So we don't hold our breath. We don't get excited. We wait and see.

Jenga Mwendo appears courtesy of America's Wire Writers Group and is an urban-agriculture, community organizer in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and founder of the Backyard Gardeners Network, whose mission is to sustain and strengthen the community.

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## Gardening/Continued from page 4

in your landscape, otherwise they will be popping up all over the place. Lavender is a great plant that thrives in crappy soil, full sun, and dryness. Lavender gives off the most wonderful fragrance, makes lovely cut or dried flowers, and potpourri. Yes there is a variety of lavender that grows well in the soil here in New Orleans; it is called "Sweet" Lavender (*Lavendula angustifolia*). I have some flourishing in my garden that I planted about six months ago.

We cannot discuss fuzz-free plants without mentioning bromeliads. Most people think of bromeliads as house plants but there are some wonderful hardy landscape bromeliads. The *Alcantarea Imperialis* has stunning purple foliage, it grows 5 ft. x 5 ft., it will take a frost, and when it finally blooms it sends up a nine foot bloom spike. Plant it and forget it, the dew will take care of it for you.

The Double Knock out rose is a real crowd pleaser for xerogard-



dening. It provides year round blooms, dead-heading the spent blooms is not required because the bush is self-cleaning. They are disease-resistant, need full sun, and after it is established they need almost no watering.

Day lilies are great for color and variety in any landscape. They only need the sun and whatever moisture that drops from the

sky is enough to keep these little workhorses happy. Make sure that you purchase "re-blooming" day lilies for wonderful color from now until the fall. All of the plants recommended in this article are perennials meaning they will come back each year. So flank your front door with sweet alysum, fill your flower beds with re-blooming daylilies and cannas,

border your beds with sweet potato vine as ground covers, line your fences with confederate jasmine for privacy and fragrance; frame your doorway with bougainvilleas, line your walkway with double knock out roses, feature the *Alcantarea imperialis* bromeliad in a prominent location in partial shade, and plant lavender under a bedroom window for sweet dreams. Now you are xeriscaping baby, enjoying a beautiful gardening experience season after season without a lot of hard work.

Along with our new gardening section we will feature a lovely garden oasis each week, so if you think that your garden is all that and some Gerber daisies too and you would like to have it featured as "Data's Garden of the week," please send photos of you and your garden to: [datanewseditor@bellsouth.com](mailto:datanewseditor@bellsouth.com) Type Garden of the week in subject line and be sure to include a contact phone number.

## Cover Story/ Continued from page 3.

provide schools with fresh, locally grown food at least twice a week.

"It feels great that HBO has come to capture our story and put another face on the youth of New Orleans and show that all kids are not committing crime and being violent but are actually taking part in creating solutions to the problems of our community," says Isaiah who is a High School senior preparing for graduation from Miller McCoy Academy, an all-boys charter school that is graduating its first class with 100 percent of its students accepted into college. Isaiah plans to enter Louisiana State University in the fall to study Mechanical Engineering over the years in Rethink he has become a role model for other youth, "It is good that some of the younger "Rethinkers" are seeing that our work is being recognized and I hope it will continue to inspire them and grow our mission; and that kids from all over the country can see that they can make a difference."

Wholey says she's learned a lot from the young people in "The Rethinkers" and seen a level of resilience from the students in the face of adversity to be admired, again speaking highly of Isaiah she says, "His family after Katrina loss their home and was living in a trailer and his father unexpectedly died, this in addition to the storm

could have sent many people over the edge, but Isaiah became even more of a leader after that. I think in part he was able to deal with it better because he had a mother and strong grandparents and was involved in church. When his dad died he was one of four children. Isaiah had to assume a lot of responsibility and he stepped up to the plate, it was a very sad experience losing a parent at a young age, but it is something that can make or break you. He just really expanded and became a role model for his younger sister and brother and other kids at Rethink."

It is a sad fact that many young people fall through the cracks of society and become entrapped in lives of violence, crime and jail time, but Isaiah is a young man who is to be emulated and celebrated. Wholey says at an early age Isaiah was steered towards things that would lead to his success "He played sports and he wasn't delusional about thinking that he could be his only route to success he had a plan, he was very discipline and between football, Rethink and a family that was involved he has become a great young man." But while Isaiah is an example of the best; what can happen when a young person is nurtured unfortunately, sometimes this does not happen and is

a cause for alarm, a point not lost on Wholey, "I just wish that every child in the City was as fortunate as Isaiah, because so much of what happens to our young boys, I believe when it comes to them especially it takes a village to raise a child. And a lot of young people don't have that support, to get them through the dangerous time; this has to change where we make it our charge to save our youth and give them hope."

On young people entering into activism and advocacy Isaiah says, "There is no age limit, it is about young people who are serious about activism and changing New Orleans and changing the schools." Of his Rethink experience he says, "Rethink gave me a strong piece that many people lack and that is be able to stand up and fight against things that are wrong and be able to change them. Because a lot of people see things that are wrong, but don't know how or have the drive or the confidence to be the one to step up to the plate. There are a lot of problems but not offering solutions."

"In 2006 even though we didn't plan it Rethink became really deep therapy. I believe one of the best ways to bring someone out of a traumatic situation is to put them in a position to do something positive in relation to

it. And so the idea that these young people were to experience some power and success talking to the school system and how they envisioned new schools turned out to be really great therapy," says Wholey speaking of Rethink then and looking at it now and how it has grown and the mission that is evolving she says as a place to empower young people, "Today it is much more about being in a place where you are respected, and where you are challenged to think great thoughts and tell your truth to power. We give people a leadership development opportunity and support the need for nourishment for people to think great thoughts and act on them." On the students and Rethink and how it has shaped their purpose moving forward she says, "If we want young people to be civically engaged and be part of the conversation to make New Orleans a better place, we have to know it's worth it to hear their voices; and for that reason I think the very best investment we can make in the future of our City is to provide genuine opportunities for their voices to be heard with respect; and if you are able to prove that to a young person at an early age they will be hooked on civic engagement forever."

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