



# The Dirty Dozen

How a group of former sorority sisters found peace, purpose, and carpentry skills in New Orleans BY AIMEE LEE BALL

**IPAD EXTRA** To watch the women build a house, download the Reader's Digest magazine app from the iTunes Store.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TAMARA REYNOLDS

**T**

hey are 12 middle-aged women whose hands are more accustomed to French manicures than heavy construction. But here they go again, gripping saws and spackling knives, power drills and nail guns. For the fifth year in a row, the women (and a growing group of supporters) have descended on New Orleans to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, helping to build houses and redress the ravages of Hurricane Katrina. Last December, the Dirty Dozen, as we'll call them, were hard at work in the still-recovering Upper Ninth Ward, dig-



**FROM LEFT:** Cheryl Josephs Zaccaro, Carolyn Brown Cox, Debbie Brown Britt, Janis Dropkin Smythe, Marilyn Zwick Storch, Sondra Daum Berman, Judith Fagin, Carolyn Macow Leatherwood, Sharon Graber Purcel, Amy Goldberger, Linda Lewis-Moors, Rachelle Galanti Parker (kneeling)

ging out the foundation for a sidewalk fronting a new house and climbing ladders to install soffits in the roof. They joked about measurements that sounded like a Starbucks order: "I need ten and five eighths half-vented," someone shouted, and the response came back: "Nonfat?"

At the week's end, the women exchanged their mud-splattered clothes for clean outfits and made their annual pilgrimage to meet with the family who live in the first house they had helped build: Kewanda Baxter, 35, and her three children, who had lost their home in the hurricane but who had, with amazing grace and strength, endured. Every year since Katrina, there has been a festive get-together with 20-year-old Dominique, 17-year-old Jeremy, 13-year-old Rodney, and their mother. Surrounded by his 12 guardian angels in a local restaurant that night, Rodney beamed. "It feels like my birthday," he said.

Who are these women? They are middle-class mothers, wives, career women, and sorority sisters, now sixty-somethings who happened to see a photo and bio of the Baxters tacked to a board in a yard during their first stint with Habitat in 2006. "I was a single mom for ten years," says Carolyn Brown Cox, a social worker and an actress in Seattle, remembering her emotional reaction. "I just felt like a kindred spirit to this woman. I know what it's like to go to the grocery store and tell your kids that you can't afford soda or candy."

The family coordinator at Habi-



**At work in New Orleans, foreground from left: sisters Sondra Berman, Judith Fagin, and Sherry Flashman.**

tat arranged for Cox to speak with Kewanda Baxter, who didn't quite know what to think. "I was kind of shocked. I told her, 'You don't have to send me any money, but my kids aren't doing too well in school. It would help to have a computer.' And then I just thought, If it happens, it happens."

Baxter was stunned when a new PC was delivered. Then the women arranged tutoring to help with the children's schooling, which had been disrupted in the aftermath of the storm. That was followed by the uniforms required by the kids' new charter school. "Kewanda only asked for two sets of clothing for the kids," says Cox. "She gets every drop out of every nickel." But even more important than the financial aid was, and is, the emotional support.

"Nobody ever told me I was doing a

great job before," says Baxter. "When I feel like I'm not doing so well, I call or write them. They're my friends, and they're my strength. They tell me: Take a deep breath, take a bath."

**Hurricane Katrina** actually presented a kind of meteorological bookend for some of the former Sigma Delta Tau sisters. Forty years earlier, they had arrived in New Orleans as freshmen at H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College (then the women's school at Tulane University), just as Hurricane Betsy ripped through the city, earning the nickname Billion Dollar Betsy for the amount of damage left in her wake. They slept in dorms with no electricity and helped clear Betsy's detritus from the campus. Close friendships were formed in an era of bouffant hairdos and war

protests; after college, there were occasional updates about marriages, children, divorces. But over the years, their lives and careers spread out across the four corners of the country: Sondra Daum Berman became a financial advisor in Florida; Marilyn Zwick Storch did marketing for hospitals in Illinois; Janis Dropkin Smythe produced commercial music in New York. In time, most of them lost touch with one another.

Until Katrina. Cheryl Josephs Zaccaro, a retired occupational therapist from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, hooked up with Habitat first. She slept in a trailer with other volunteers, building low-cost houses, a job for which she had no prior training. Zaccaro began

e-mailing her sorority sisters, asking, “Is this something we want to do?” From Texas and Pennsylvania and Georgia, the answers came back: yes, yes, yes! Everyone had sent checks to the relief organizations, but it didn’t seem like enough.

Zaccaro returned to Habitat with her sisters ten months later—an act of extraordinary selflessness, since she’d just completed chemotherapy for breast cancer. “But I kept thinking, I get to go home,” she says, “while all these people were still homeless, still dealing with the mess.” And after hearing the story of Baxter and her children, the group determined to get involved in an even more personal way.

**When Hurricane Katrina** hit in August 2005, the Baxters were forced to evacuate their ground-floor apartment with only the clothes on their backs. Two days later, they took refuge, along with thousands of others, in the Convention Center as the floodwaters rolled down Canal Street. For several days, there was no food except for what had been looted from abandoned stores. “I didn’t eat, but I took vitamins and made sure the kids ate,” says Baxter. “One day somebody gave me a tomato. After three days, the Louisiana National Guard came in with water and those rations in packs.”

The family began a two-month odyssey through Arkansas and Texas. Eventually, Baxter rented a car and drove back to her traumatized city

in return for 350 hours of “sweat equity.” It was pure serendipity that the women from Tulane were assigned to work on the new Baxter home and fell in love with the family.

The women helped out with the teenagers’ immediate needs—football uniforms for the boys, a calculator for math class, high school graduation photos for Dominique. “We’re just plugging up holes in the dike so Kewanda can keep her boat afloat,” says Cox. “It’s women helping women.”

A highlight of each trip to New Orleans is a celebratory dinner—party of 16, tables pushed together, with so much hugging that it’s hard to actually eat. Baxter always brings a little gift for everyone; this year, it was a photograph of the newest family member,



Cheryl Zaccaro with Dominique’s baby, D’Jai Blackburn, and Kewanda Baxter.

**“WE WERE GIRLS WHEN WE MET,” SAYS SMYTHE, “AND WHEN WE REUNITE, WE ARE THOSE GIRLS AGAIN.”**

to find that the only possessions she could salvage from her ruined home were three track medals Dominique had won in school. Baxter returned to her job as a custodian with the city’s building services, and her office helped arrange housing, first on a cruise ship docked in the Mississippi River, next in a FEMA trailer that turned out to have toxic levels of formaldehyde. Then she heard about the opportunity for an interest-free mortgage from Habitat for Humanity

Dominique’s baby girl, D’Jai Blackburn. Baxter herself became a mother at age 14, and the women quietly acknowledge their disappointment that this cycle of early pregnancy continues, but they are determined to help Dominique realize her ambitions. Last summer, she became the first in her family to graduate from high school, and Smythe and Cox flew to New Orleans for the ceremony. Dominique now says she’d like to be a medical assistant. Baxter attends classes for a high



At the Baxter home, from left: Dominique Baxter, Cheryl Zaccaro, Carolyn Cox, Kewanda Baxter, Janis Smythe, and Jeremy and Rodney Baxter.

school equivalency diploma, despite the overwhelming responsibilities of keeping up house payments and caring for her family, including her new granddaughter. She had never been interested in reading, but the women encouraged her and sent books; now she carries a book everywhere she goes and loves to discuss her new interests. “I haven’t figured out what I’m good at yet,” she says. “That’s why I like to talk to these women.”

The Baxters’ new house was furnished with the help of the Red Cross

and FEMA, so the Tulane women decided that one of their priorities would be maintaining the family’s truck, which is a lifeline for them: On a typical day, Baxter drives to work at city hall, picks up the boys for tutoring after school, drives Dominique to her job, brings the boys home, and then gets her daughter at 11 p.m. or later. When all four tires on the truck went bald, the group bought four new steel-belted radials. Then, a week before Dominique was due to give birth, the truck’s motor gave out. “I was hysteri-

cal,” says Baxter. “The hospital was 30 minutes away.” The Tulane group arranged for a monthlong car rental and recently helped finance a gently used smoky-gray Volkswagen Passat.

**The Dirty Dozen** have their own share of middle-aged problems, but for one week a year, they put aside personal concerns to do whatever is asked of them in New Orleans. “Most of the women in our group are currently in or have been in leadership roles,” says Linda Lewis-Moors, a hospital

administrator from Norwich, New York. “But they are all willing followers and strong team members when that’s what is called for.”

For Carolyn Macow Leatherwood, a former CPA from Houston, it’s the work itself that becomes more meaningful each year. “We moan and groan about minor issues in our lives, but seeing people struggling here, and then seeing an opportunity to fix things, is amazing.”

For all 12 of the Dirty Dozen, the annual pilgrimage has become something of a magical time machine. “We were girls together, meeting the world for the first time,” says Smythe. “And here we are 40-plus years later, women who have lived those lives with triumphs and tragedies. No one has been spared, and I’m not sure any of it turned out quite as we’d planned. But when we reunite, we are those girls again.” ■

## DO MORE

The following organizations welcome volunteers and donations to help rebuild New Orleans.

**Habitat for Humanity**  
[habitat-nola.org](http://habitat-nola.org)  
 504-861-4121

**Rebuilding Together**  
[rebuildingtogether.org](http://rebuildingtogether.org)  
 800-473-4229

**St. Bernard Project**  
[stbernardproject.org](http://stbernardproject.org)  
 504-277-6831