

Roots of Renewal promotes social change in Central City

BY ALEXA CHRISTIANSON
STAFF REPORTER

New Orleans' Central City neighborhood has been on the minds of Tulane graduates Brendan Lyman, Amy Fottrell and Thomas O'Brien since they were undergraduates. Today, they look to spark social change in the city through their nonprofit organization Roots of Renewal.

Roots of Renewal works to garner resources to connect formerly incarcerated young men in Central City with job skills and social services to effectively reintegrate into society.

Less than three miles from Tulane's campus, there is a visible and severe socioeconomic disparity from the rest of Uptown New Orleans. Central City is a historic neighborhood, in existence for over 100 years and formerly home to jazz legend Professor Longhair, who is essentially responsible for the existence of Tipitina's, a popular music venue in New Orleans.

Central City, however, has the city's highest rate of incarceration. Half of the black males in the neighborhood will be disenfranchised due to time spent in prison, leaving them excluded from the job market and in need of major social services, such as healthcare, when they return.

"These people can't get jobs and they can't get benefits, and there's so many things you can't do when you've been incarcerated," Roots of Renewal's Executive Director Amy Fottrell said.

Lyman, Roots of Renewal's director of public policy relations and communications, was still an undergraduate with Fottrell and other staff members when they brought together their ideas to promote community development in New Orleans.

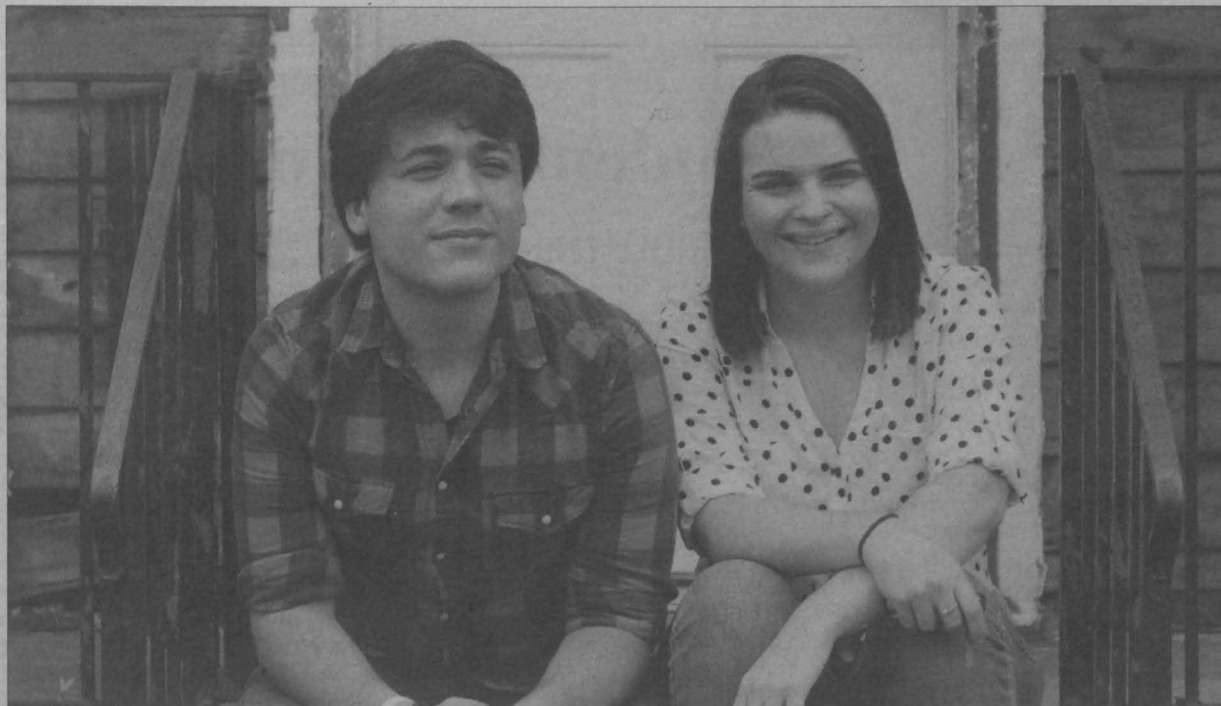
Fottrell credited her participation in Outreach Tulane, a day dedicated to service in New Orleans communities, during her freshman year with providing her experiences that inspired her to connect with the residents of Central City.

"I met one individual ... we just got talking about the neighborhood of Central City and about all the housing problems they're suffering with there, and the crime problems," Fottrell said. "I started thinking about these issues in a more holistic way because it was this one neighborhood dealing with these specific issues together."

Roots of Renewal is on the verge of launching its Brick by Brick project, a central platform for its mission. The organization purchased a house in Central City and will employ young men recently released from prison between the ages of 18 and 24 to help restore it. The house needs major renovations, with peeling walls, exposed and rotting floorboards and vegetation growing on the inside. Upon completion, Roots of Renewal plans to rent out the house as affordable housing for residents.

Staff members are conducting the first of interviews for potential clients that they will employ to work on the house: The team hopes to have its final employee count by October.

"Even if our program starts out with only six employees, that's six more people that have job training, access to social services and income," said junior Lilith Winkler-Schor, who is taking a semester off from school and working as



PHOTOS BY MIA NGUYEN | CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Above: Roots of Renewal founders Brendan Lyman and Amy Fottrell sit on the steps of the house purchased for the Brick by Brick project. Below: Former prisoners will help renovate the run-down house in Central City.

Roots of Renewal's program director. "That's two families that will have housing they can afford. That's a whole street that has one less abandoned house that used to be filled with squatters doing drugs. It means the kids on that street will see less crime around their home as they grow up."

Crime is a major issue surrounding Central City. Drug trading spots are found on central street corners. Lyman and Fottrell found several needles and a bullet in the house upon its purchase.

"[We need] better law enforcement," Central City resident Fortune K. Burnett said.

Central City residents recognize the need to diminish these harmful influences in their neighborhood, resulting in a largely positive acceptance of Roots of Renewal's presence and work in their community.

"I don't mind it; I think they're doing a great job," Burnett said. "I don't have a problem with it, not at all. To be truthful, it needs fixing."

Roots of Renewal is placing particular emphasis on partnering with other community organizations in New Orleans that can provide additional and vital social services to the young men employed by Roots of Renewal.

"A lot of [the participants] come out of prison and don't have housing, don't have a car, don't have health insurance and don't have a therapist," Fottrell said. "There's all sorts of things that people need immediately upon release and we're not capable of providing all of those things."

Additionally, Roots of Renewal has found national renown: Hillary Clinton commended Roots of Renewal in a speech for the Clinton Global Initiative University Con-



ference, and The New York Times mentioned Roots of Renewal in an op-ed about the Resolution Project, in which Roots of Renewal won a \$7500 prize and new relationships with business and nonprofit mentors from around the country.

Roots of Renewal, as only a single nonprofit organization in a post-Katrina city booming with eager nonprofits, knows that its ability to cause immediate change may or may not be limited, but the group remains optimistic.

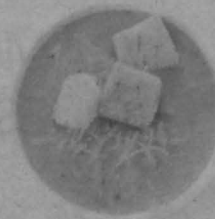
"Part of the reason we took the approach we did is because we want to make a difference in individuals' lives, and if you make enough difference in an individual's life, you make a difference in a block, then you make a difference in the neighborhood, then you make a difference in the city," Lyman said.

Both Brendan Lyman and Thomas O'Brien formerly held positions on The Hullabaloo as undergraduates.

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