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“Building Communities: Lessons from the Gulf Coast”
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Good evening. And thank you so very much for the warm welcome! I’m delighted to be back home, in Seattle, with all of you in this magnificent setting.

I wish to thank Colleen Willoughby for inviting me to be here, and her outstanding staff for their kind support. And I want to acknowledge our newly minted Chairman of Enterprise Community Partners, the distinguished former Seattle Mayor, Norman B. Rice.

My colleagues from the Enterprise Seattle office who are here this evening: Kollin Min and Valerie Pate. And Pat Magnuson, who directs our national program to end homelessness, is with us from Enterprise’s New York office.

I understand that my friend, Maggie Walker, who serves on your Board of Directors, will be moderating the upcoming Q&A session.

But as much as I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you this evening, I’m looking forward to hearing from you.

The Washington Women’s Foundation takes a uniquely thoughtful approach to philanthropy. I admire and applaud your commitment to learning – and to sharing information about important social issues with the growing community that is the Washington Women’s Foundation.

Building communities is the theme of my remarks this evening. It’s something to which I’ve devoted my life.

I believe that there has never been a more urgent – and hopeful – time for building communities. Because today, in this moment, we can take what we have learned about changing the world, and invest our collective attention and energy into building a better global community – one that is more just, healthier and sustainable.

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I went to the Gulf Coast a month after the disaster hit. There was never any question that Enterprise would play a role in the region’s recovery. But we questioned the value we could bring in the face of daunting challenges. Chief among them were the magnitude of the disaster and the region’s dearth of community development infrastructure.

But we remained. And thanks to wonderful support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and so many others, we have opened a permanent office there, with dedicated staff who have put their lives on hold and moved to New Orleans.

We continue cultivating partners and sharing what we know. And we're committed to erasing deep gaps in opportunities, capacity and resources. Some say our determination and tenacity in the region capture the spirit and vision of Enterprise's founder, Jim Rouse, the late urban planner and developer.

Jim Rouse's entrée into community building began when three idealistic young women sought his financial support to repair two dilapidated, drug-infested apartment buildings in the nation's capital. Despite Jim's skepticism, the women prevailed. They went on to restore seven more buildings in their neighborhood, formed a nonprofit group, and guided budding community-based organizations in other states.

Inspired by their success, Jim and Patty Rouse founded Enterprise in 1982. Over the past quarter century, Enterprise has helped to build more than 225,000 affordable homes nationwide – and invested \$8 billion in turning communities of last resort into desirable communities of choice.

Four years ago, we launched Green Communities, an initiative to build healthy, energy-efficient and environmentally responsive housing. We've introduced – and the industry has embraced – new standards that are making green and affordable one and the same. We've also surpassed our goals. More than that, we are working with leaders in the environmental community to bring social equity into the discussion about sustainability.

Yet no matter how large or powerful your community, your organization, foundation or corporation, change takes root within each of us, as individuals. But it does not end there.

We teach ourselves so we can shape the values of our family. From our families, we bring those values to our community, our country and, ultimately, the world.

But the learning starts on the personal level. That inner knowledge and awareness help us remain grounded. With them, we can always find our way back to our center, our core beliefs and conviction – even in the darkest, most despair-filled moments.

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That philosophical framework permeates my own Asian culture and heritage.

In 1969, I took those tenets with me when I left my home and family in Hong Kong at the age of 18 to study at the University of Wisconsin, at Madison.

I was deemed the brainy one among my five siblings. And I was also a dutiful daughter. So I heeded my father's urging to study computer science. Math came easily to me, so

computers seemed as good and as practical a path as any. But midway through my freshman year, logic and reason gave way to unrest and uncertainty as the student movement took shape and gained momentum.

In April 1970, the campus celebrated the very first Earth Day. For the first time, I grasped the notion that I was a global citizen. It was a pivotal discovery for a young woman searching for a sense of place and belonging. And I began to question whether I was cut out for a life in the computer lab when my heart and my spirit yearned to be in the streets with the people, working for change.

Earth Day was a milestone on my coming-of-age journey.

Another watershed occurred two years later, when a napalm attack in Vietnam produced a horrifying image of a 9-year-old girl, crying and running naked through the streets of her village. Many of you are no doubt familiar with it.

I still remember walking through the student lounge and seeing that photo on the cover of *Time* magazine. It made me so angry – and so certain that this was no time for me to be communicating with machines.

My parents were not pleased with my decision to switch my major to sociology. But they supported me and understood my difficulty reconciling what I was feeling as a foreign student in a country that was waging war against a familiar part of my world.

The struggle to help end the war consumed me.

I was still finding my voice. But I knew that I wanted to be part of the struggle for change.

When I shared that dream with one of my professors, he advised me to leave the utopian campus town of Madison, Wisconsin, and to take on some of the inequalities and hardships in Chicago's low-income communities.

At the University of Chicago, my advisor was a former Black Panther under whose guidance we studied the works of Malcolm X and Saul Alinsky. But studying social change proved far less instructive than volunteering in the communities of Chicago.

On weekends, I taught English to Chinese immigrants working in factories. And to parents less interested in grammar and vocabulary than in learning how to ask their boss for a day off to go to the doctor, or to meet with their child's teacher. Some of the immigrants I met were young like me. Others were older. All of them took me in, knowing that my home and my own family were thousands of miles away. The bond was so deep that even before graduating, I decided that I would not return to home to Hong Kong. Instead, I would stay in the United States, where I had found a family and a community to call home.

Teaching English and helping the immigrants find their voice opened my eyes. I realized that there were people who woke up each day and lived their lives without any glimmer of hope, or choice, or opportunity. And while I didn't share their life circumstances, our fates intertwined. And their struggle became my struggle.

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After completing my graduate studies, I worked as a health educator on Chicago's Southside. But I continued volunteering and organizing in Chinatown. Working through the local school, I brought together Chinese, Latino and African-American parents whose children – bright, capable children – were disproportionately placed in special-education classes in the absence of some very basic preparation and tutoring.

These mothers didn't complain about their jobs or the hardship in their lives. But mess with their children, and they fought back. Hard. And in their struggle, this diverse group of women became their own best allies. For the first time, I saw the power of these working women – as protectors of their families; as advocates for, and guardians of, their communities.

My path turned eastward in 1979. After marrying a fellow organizer, we moved to New York City, where he had family. My husband's grandmother had worked in Chinatown all her life as a seamstress. She lived in a rundown tenement, in a tiny apartment with a bathtub in the living room.

We joined a group of volunteers called Asian Americans for Equality, or AAFE, as it's commonly known. We worked on housing and other civil rights issues in New York's Chinatown and Lower East Side. It was a rich and energizing time.

We organized legal clinics and rent strikes, holding slumlords accountable for repairs. Yet every winter, three or four major electrical fires forced residents to flee these old and neglected tenement buildings. Sometimes, in the dead of a winter night, residents would be stranded on the streets, shivering in the bitter cold, with barefoot children grabbed from their beds. AAFE would be on site, working with the Red Cross, and the police and fire departments, to translate and help stabilize families and move them into emergency housing.

Eventually, we realized that we needed to do more. We needed to build homes, and from these homes, hope and community.

In 1984, I became AAFE's founding executive director, and, partnering with Enterprise, we gained the skills and resources necessary to start developing housing.

To date, AAFE has leveraged the financing to build or renovate more than 500 affordable apartments in Chinatown, on the Lower East Side and throughout New York City. They are running community lending and counseling programs for first time homebuyers, and small businesses. After 9/11, AAFE organized a Rebuild Chinatown campaign to bring focus to the harsh impact of the tragedy on the economic and emotional psyche of the surrounding immigrant neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan.

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Across the United States, stories abound of committed people saving battered neighborhoods. Transforming broken schools. And giving hardworking people a chance to build a better future.

Nowhere in this nation is that effort more urgent than in the Gulf Coast.

I was among the senior leadership that Enterprise deployed to the region in the days and weeks following Hurricane Katrina. Being on the ground, seeing the massive destruction and displacement, I recalled the families burnt out of their Chinatown apartments, having lost everything – including an anchor to their community.

Enterprise has committed \$200 million to help develop 10,000 affordable homes across the Gulf Coast. By the close of 2007, we had provided grants and loans toward nearly 2,500 homes underway or completed in New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Just to share some highlights of our work, in New Orleans, to date we've invested over \$40 million to repair and renovate 500 affordable apartments for seniors and families. Another 300 homes will break ground at the end of March.

Also in New Orleans, we're working with our local partners to transform a former public housing site in the historic Treme neighborhood.

Just as we transformed the public housing communities of Holly Park, Rainier Vista and High Point right here in Seattle, the new community of Lafitte in New Orleans will offer 1,500 new homes and apartments to people with a range of incomes, from seniors living on Social Security, to working families, to first-time and market-rate homebuyers.

Lafitte will also offer a range of community services and amenities, such as after-school programs, health centers, job training and small business development. Enterprise and our partners have hosted town hall meetings and mailed periodic updates to ensure that residents have an informed voice in the rebuilding process – and the opportunity to come home to the revitalized community.

Earlier this year, we closed the first loan made possible through the \$47 million Louisiana Loan Fund. The \$3 million loan will help provide quality homes for residents

of Central City, Louisiana, who work in the office support, restaurant and hospitality industries.

Enterprise led the creation of the Loan Fund through a partnership of public, philanthropic and private funders. It will provide vital, below-market-rate financing to help develop 4,500 new houses and apartments in some of the region's most devastated communities.

Clearly, this is important progress in a region where things still move all too slowly. But the numbers and the dollar amounts could not do justice to the region's humanity – something that Chris Rose, a reporter for the *Times-Picayune*, captured so powerfully in his moving collection of essays titled, *One Dead in Attic: After Katrina*.

In his essay “Who We Are,” Rose writes: “When you meet us now, and look into our eyes, you will see the saddest story ever told. Our hearts are broken into a thousand pieces. But don't pity us. We're gonna make it. We're resilient.... That is our promise.”

Enterprise saw that resilience, in community after community, all along the Gulf Coast.

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Of course, we also saw the unprecedented physical damage left behind by the hurricanes – damage totaling some \$67 billion. 265,000 homes were damaged or destroyed in Louisiana and Mississippi. Nearly half of those destroyed were home to very low-income families – people earning less than \$25,000. Close to 1.2 million people were displaced.

But quickly, we turned our sadness and compassion into advocacy and action.

We led a pilot project to help develop clean-up protocols and provide technical guidance to support the urgent removal of mold and other harmful toxins. Our Healthy Housing manuals and videos reached five million people.

We tapped into our national network to secure emergency housing. These children – Sylvester, Ronald and Kenneth – were evacuated from their grandmother's rooftop in New Orleans. The boys are pictured here at an apartment complex in Houston, where Enterprise provided shelter and support services for 200 families. In total, Enterprise provided housing and services to 1,500 Gulf Coast evacuees.

Enterprise met with, and heard stories of loss and despair from residents like Valina Henry. We deployed our best talent to the region to share timely information and expertise. We offered Enterprise as a proven, valued partner on the long road to recovery. And we sought out the most capable partners and gained the trust of local leaders.

We brainstormed with housing authorities to help create homeowner-assistance and rebuilding models in Mississippi.

In Louisiana, we partnered with elected officials and served as advisor to the Louisiana Recovery Authority to develop a comprehensive \$10 billion housing rebuilding plan.

We urged members of Congress to form the right policy solutions.

Working with local partners, Enterprise is helping support large-scale housing production, such as the redevelopment of the Lafitte public housing complex in New Orleans. Enterprise's comprehensive rebuilding approach promises to create a vibrant, sustainable neighborhood with housing opportunities for people with a range of backgrounds – and a wide array of services to help individuals and families achieve financial stability and enjoy greater quality of life.

Across the region, construction is beginning to get underway and people are starting to come home. People like Yvonne Fields. Children like Alexis Payne. And people who have dedicated their lives to community building, like Fred Johnson. And Donna Maurice, in Pass Christian, Miss.

I want to leave you with a hopeful notion that occurred to me during one of many trips from New Orleans to Biloxi, Mississippi, on Highway 90. I will never forget the scenes of devastation and nothingness that stretched for miles and miles. Yet in the middle of this barren landscape, I recalled what a colleague had told me about the region's live oaks – native live oak trees that can live for 800 years and more. Many of these sturdy, canopy-like trees had withstood the hurricanes.

You see, these live oak trees live in colonies, or communities, with wide canopies and even wider and deeper root systems. And because the trees' roots are intertwined, the ones whose trunks have toppled will be held and supported by the roots of the neighboring oaks in their community. They will be sustained until they have a chance to grow new shoots – and in time, regain their strength and majestic splendor.

These live oaks are symbols of hope in the Gulf Coast. Rooted in strength and supported by community. Just like the people of the region.

Thank you.