



# And Then There

*(above) LightHouse kids Chris Baker, Se'Tavion Combs, Hosea Smally, and Terrell Bolden share a hug after being dropped off by the center's van. (right) LightHouse After-School Directors Xavier Small and Tella Henderson.*



**The LightHouse of Volunteers of America North Louisiana is a beacon of hope for inner-city children in Shreveport and Bossier City. The multifaceted program offers after-school care, mentoring and leadership training, counseling and case management, parenting classes and numerous other family resources.**

The name says it all. The Bottoms. That's what they used to call a section of Shreveport, Louisiana, that lays in the shadows of the downtown business district back in the mid-1980s. The usual suspects—drugs, juvenile delinquency and adolescent pregnancy—were hard to check. Then there was the problem of unemployment, shotgun houses and violent crime to boot.

A community name change meant to revitalize and uplift the neighborhood socially and economically met with mixed results. The new Ledbetter Heights still suffers from urban blight, but like a beacon to ships lost at sea, the Volunteers of America's LightHouse program is luring hundreds of Shreveport youths and families into its folds and churning out success stories the likes of which this Southern town has never seen.

The LightHouse is a virtual clearing-house of resources. It provides more than 500 children from Ledbetter Heights, greater Shreveport and neigh-

boring Bossier City with educational and recreational opportunities through after-school care at three standalone centers and six school-based sites. In addition, the LightHouse runs a summer enrichment program, youth mentoring, a teen leadership academy and a host of cultural and character-building service learning projects throughout the community.

In the spring of 2006, after an extensive study on best practices for helping families living in poverty, the LightHouse opened its Family Resource Center. The center aims to strengthen and empower area families with services such as GED preparation, resume writing, budgeting, computer literacy and parenting education. The center conducts family needs assessments to keep services offered in tune with services needed. Case managers work with families and link them with other available community resources. A staff counselor is on hand for individual, family and group sessions. The center also runs the "Diaper Closet" to provide struggling mothers with diapers and wipes for up to a year.

# Was *Light*

BY DEQUENDRE NEELEY-BERTRAND  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATHRYN GAIENNE



Volunteers of America of North Louisiana recently received a \$20,000 Volunteers of America/Annie E. Casey Family Strengthening Award in recognition of the superlative outcomes the LightHouse has achieved and in support of replicating the program throughout the organization. New TANF funding to the tune of \$300,000 has recently been awarded, allowing for some much needed expansion at two low-performing schools. The accolades from media, other local offices and members of the community continue to pour in, but the program's biggest and loudest cheerleaders are its participants: the employees, volunteers and families touched by the program.

Says Sondra Dixon, coordinator and general go-to person for the LightHouse, "I see miracles taking place every day: teens who had never even thought of an education beyond high school enrolling in college, elementary school children cheering as they wave their report cards in the air, a single mother who enjoyed a day of pampering provided by a local supporter, saying, 'I can't believe this is for me.' I could go on and on."

(below) *LightHouse Kid Kavonna Smally.*



### Bright Beginnings

The LightHouse started with a group of women in the early 1980s who were working in the Bottoms and just felt things should be better than they were, says Brandy McNeill, vice president of family, children, and senior services of Volunteers of America of North Louisiana. With space provided by a local church and the spiritual and leadership guidance of its interim pastor, Dr. Donald Webb, Volunteers of America assumed the program in 1985. At the time it was operating as a child development center, offering tutoring and mentoring programs. Today it is one of the local office's flagship programs.

"The LightHouse is so great because it has great roots," says McNeill. She referred to two of the program's first employees, Dr. Melissa Flournoy, whose work as executive director at the LightHouse served her well when she went on to serve as a Louisiana state representative, and Cedric Glover, a young activist who came aboard as center program director. Today, he stands elected as the first African American mayor of Shreveport. As

the saying goes around Ledbetter Heights, once a LightHouse kid, always a LightHouse kid. That's been the saving grace of more than a few.

"Crack cocaine had made its initial appearance in Shreveport," Mayor Glover tells *Spirit*. "There were lots of challenges. Young people were really stressed for positive and constructive things to do. I was certainly interested in being a part of something new and innovative to turn things around."

Under his direction, the program developed its after-school, weekend and summer enrichment components. Adult basic education, scouting and sporting events were also added.

"We were very successful," Glover says. "Young folks have gone on and managed to finish school, get good paying jobs, take care of their families and their responsibilities. Now they look me in the eye and say thank you for providing me with a better opportunity. Even a couple who've taken the wrong path, it's encouraging to hear them say 'I know there is a better way,' because of their involvement with the LightHouse."

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—Sondra Dixon, coordinator, The LightHouse, Volunteers of America of North Louisiana, Shreveport, Louisiana

His own LightHouse roots serving as inspiration, Glover campaigned and declared his objective as mayor to provide every Shreveport child with access to a quality after-school program.

“If we’re going to keep young people from getting involved in negative activities,” he says, “the crucial time of day is after school when they have left the school house, are at home, in the neighborhood or on the street. Instead of being at home alone . . . they need to be engaged with something, to have their cultural horizons broadened and expanded.”

### Shining Lights

Perhaps one of the most remarkable examples of that truth is Michael D. Jackson. He was 12 years old when friends told him about the LightHouse. He tagged along on a summer field trip and was hooked. His younger siblings soon joined him as official LightHouse kids. The neighborhood being what it was, he still routinely had to consciously resist the temptations of the streets.

He calls a single decision he made at age 16 his “renaissance moment” and credits the LightHouse with reinforcing the values that helped him make the right choice. It was a Friday night. He was hanging out with friends, 10 altogether. The group decided to hit a party in the city. Jackson knew the element that would be there and decided not to go—not the easiest decision for an adolescent, but because of it, he was around to enjoy his Saturday. An altercation broke out at the party, and someone was murdered. Six of his friends were implicated; they were arrested and are still in prison.

“I remember that night like it was yesterday,” Jackson recalls. “If I hadn’t made the decision not to go, my life would not be the same. I probably wouldn’t be here.”

Jackson went on to graduate from Grambling State University in 1999. He returned to the LightHouse as a coordinator of the after-school programs. He then went on to Southern University Law and received his JD in 2005. A case manager for Katrina Aid Today, Jackson is awaiting the results of his bar exam. His brother, also a Grambling alum, went on to obtain his master’s degree in public health from Tulane University and is planning to go to medical school.

“We were raised right in the shadows of downtown, and I didn’t know anything else but my neighborhood. . . I grew up in the midst of drugs, gangs, prostitution, anything negative—you name it,” Jackson says. “The LightHouse was a sight for sore eyes. God knew it was time for me. When I started going to the LightHouse, going on trips to the zoo, out of town, it got me so motivated. It taught me that, hey, there is more to the world than this little neighborhood. It gave me a reason to say, hey, I don’t wanna go this way. I wanna do something better.”

His story is one of many. Dr. Webb, for whom the LightHouse’s leadership academy is named, proudly boasts of the children he’s come in to contact over the years. The 81-year-old Wales-born scholar remembers them all by name.

“The two sisters, Lamertis O’Neal, captain in the U.S. Army and Erica O’Neal, a junior at Northwestern State University,” he goes as he rattles through memories of LightHouse graduates. “Another marvelous girl, Marian Claville, came through the system and got a degree in social work. C. J. Thomas, he came through and now he’s planning to be a dentist and has chosen to serve in Shreveport to be near his mother who is on dialysis. The list goes on and on.”

Dixon, whom McNeill says is the backbone of the LightHouse, keeps a book she calls “Live in Progress,” which

chronicles all the children who come into contact with the LightHouse. As an example of how extensive her archive is, McNeill shared how a police officer once brought a child who had missed the school bus into the LightHouse. The officer looked at Miss Dixon. She instantly recognized the officer as a LightHouse kid, and she told him who he was, brought out her notebook and began telling him some of the things he did as a child attending the LightHouse.



(above) *LightHouse Kid Korleontai Combs.*

“If we’re going to keep young people from getting involved in negative activities, the crucial time of day is after school when they have left the school house, are at home, in the neighborhood, or on the street.” —Cedric B. Glover, mayor, Shreveport, Louisiana



(above) *The LightHouse After School group at the Travis Street Center.* (right) *LightHouse Graduate C. J. Thomas.*

### Caring Touch

It’s said that people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. That is part of the attraction that keeps LightHouse youths and their families coming back. McNeill says every employee and volunteers of the LightHouse—about 60 full and part-time altogether—treat “every child with a lot of deference and with respect.” Parents know with certainty, “They are not going to be there to judge me.”

Courtney Dawson, whose five-year-old son attends the LightHouse, said the program has been helping her since her son was six months old.

“It’s been a big burden lifted,” she said of the Diaper Closet. “I was living from paycheck to paycheck. I’m a single

parent. I try to do the best that I can, but it’s hard. The LightHouse is really a blessing.”

Youths also know that the LightHouse is a passport beyond Ledbetter Heights, a place in which they will learn lessons that they can apply at home and meet people whose paths they might not otherwise cross. For example, the teen leadership academy last month was engaged in a study of the Holocaust. Dr. Webb’s family of origin happens to have adopted three children who were put on a train from Germany to escape the slaughter. Shreveport resident Rose Van Thym, a survivor, visited the teens October 12 and told the harrowing tale of her times in concentration camps before losing her father, mother and first husband at Auschwitz.

The students read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and watched the movies *Schindler’s List* and *Paper Clips*, which documented the project of a Tennessee after-school program that collected 6 million clips to symbolize the Jews who lost their lives. The leadership students at the LightHouse also heard a talk at a local Shreveport temple and participated in an essay contest with a theme of comparing Nazis to modern-day gangs.

“My exposure to different things made all the difference in the world,” says Jackson. “It is such a place of positivity. There’s so many people there that I owe my life to. God placed all these people in my life to cause me to be the person I am today. People say things move full circle. My circle continues moving, and Volunteers of America has been there all the way. I’m so proud of that.”



(above) *LightHouse Kids Angel and Shaleria Dominique.*

## Looking Ahead

As part of the Family Strengthening Award, the LightHouse has presented its programs to about a dozen other Volunteers of America local offices. Representatives interested in repeating North Louisiana's success saw demonstrations of LightHouse programs in action. They got down on the floor with family advocates who were showing neighborhood moms various activities they can do with their children as they develop. They also took note of the collaborations with community organizations and schools for assistance with transportation, use of space and programming.

"We are extremely willing to open up and share our experience," says McNeill.

Program staff members are also committed to continual improvement.

Along with assessments of families and students that ensure specific needs are being met, McNeill says the LightHouse is striving to increase its pool of mentors. In addition, the program is working to create new channels of parental involvement as a key ingredient to academic success.

To ensure its success perpetuates, Dr. Webb has bequeathed the LightHouse a special endowment. It benefits from the proceeds of his two published works, *The Best Year Yet: A Kaleidograph* and *Deep Calls to Deep: How Christ Empowers Lives of Service*, in which he explores the power of the church as a servant and chronicles Volunteers of America's ministry of service benefit the LightHouse.

He describes the LightHouse as "an oyster with a pearl in it." In the midst of its somewhat desolate surroundings, "you see these shining faces, children doing incredible things."

"I came to Volunteers of America late in life, and I am in a sense ending it in service," says Webb. "Volunteers of America is a true church, a very hardworking church and that was the intent—to be of service. This is what I understand Jesus was all about and that's partly why I am involved and why I so strongly support the LightHouse." ■

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# Security Management



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