



## Holy Angels: Nurturing Community Strengths in New Orleans' Bywater

By Clarita Bourque, MSC

Holy Angels Congregational Center, located in downtown New Orleans, has always been a busy place! For many years, it was the site of the novitiate of the Louisiana Province of the Marianites and of Holy Angels Academy, a high school for girls. Today, the property houses an apartment complex for elderly low-income persons, Administrative Offices for the Congregation, and several local communities.

Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans in August 2005 caused extensive damage to the downtown area of the city. The Congregational Center was no exception with three of its buildings sustaining roof damage and flooding.

Life at the Center has changed in many ways since Katrina. Although Holy Angels was always a place of gathering for the Marianites, it has now become a mecca for countless groups who either lost their meeting places to the storm or were



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formed to address problems caused by the hurricane. On any given day, the facilities might accommodate the congregation of a small, impoverished church, the local neighborhood association, elected officials and their constituents, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) workers or various other planning groups. The thirteen Marianites who live at the site consider it a privilege to host these gatherings.



Although hurricane recovery efforts have made a definite impact on the neighborhood, the area is still without a large grocery store. There are numerous corner stores which are convenient but costly for the many neighborhood residents who live at or below the poverty line. So, when the sisters were contacted by a local group requesting space for a farmer's market in the yard of the complex, they responded with an enthusiastic "YES"!





The Sankofa Market made its official debut at Holy Angels in September of 2011. “Sankofa” comes from the Akan language of Ghana and translates literally to SAN (return), KO (go), FA (look, seek and take). In the Akan culture, the Sankofa represents the importance of respecting the wisdom of the past while planning and working for the future. The objectives of the agency organizing the market, the Sankofa Community Development Corporation, are to serve as a community anchor for the New Orleans Ninth Ward, empower the New Orleans community with information about and access to healthy local foods, stimulate economic activity, and provide health and wellness education resources.

Each Saturday, from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m., the market provides customers with a wide choice of fresh vegetables, dairy products, baked goods, condiments, fresh fruits and herbs. As an added incentive, SNAP Benefit/ food stamp shoppers who purchase at least \$10 worth of food products receive \$10 in “Veggie Dollars” with which they can purchase fruits and vegetables. The mobile health unit of the Daughters of Charity Clinic is often on hand to assist with health problems. Local musicians and artists entertain the shoppers. The New Orleans Public Library’s Book Mobile also sometimes makes an appearance.

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Sankofa publishes an attractive and informative e-blast each week. It contains recipes, names of vendors and other providers who will be on hand the following Saturday, photos from the previous week, and quotes from customers.

A few months ago, in order to accommodate more vendors and customers, the market moved three blocks up the street to a school yard. Needless to say, it is much missed at Holy Angels. It was an ideal way to encourage and support local farmers and merchants and build up our local economy.

Of course, the Marianites at Holy Angels still do their shopping at the market. When you've been in an area for 162 years as the Marianites have, you know a lot of people! The market is the perfect spot to run into folks, renew old acquaintances and meet new friends and neighbors, all while growing a resilient community.

