

## Canadaville a blessing for Katrina evacuees

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SIMMESPORT, La. -- It has been described as a peculiar social experiment, dismissed as a tax write-off for a wealthy Canadian businessman and even been likened -- albeit jokingly -- to a modern-day plantation.

But for Joe Bramlett, a former New Orleans shipyard worker who was evacuated by helicopter out of the Lower Ninth Ward following hurricane Katrina, the modular home park known as Canadaville has been nothing short of a blessing.

"I don't have to worry about hearing gun shots in the night. I don't have to worry about nobody coming in my trailer. I can leave my door open and unlocked -- don't have to worry," says Bramlett. "That's what I like."

If Canadaville was a typical real estate venture, Bramlett's endorsement might appear on promotional brochures handed out to young families looking to escape the stress of inner-city life.

But this compact 49-home community - shaded by mature pecan trees on the edge of a vast sugar cane field - is the product of a grander imagination.

Canadian entrepreneur Frank Stronach, chairman of auto parts giant Magna International, built the village after being moved by the plight of New Orleanians who fled their homes when Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005.

Stronach's plan was to create a community where Katrina's victims could be given a chance to rebuild their lives away from the trifecta of dangers which makes starting over so difficult in New Orleans - poverty, crime and Mother Nature.

He purchased 365 hectares of land outside the corporate limits of Simmesport, a town of 2,300 that hugs the banks of the Atchafalaya River, about 240



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A view of the mobile home community known as "Canadaville" shows some of the trailers provided rent free to residents by Canadian entrepreneur Frank Stronach, the chairman of auto parts giant Magna International.

kilometres north of New Orleans. The community opened in early December 2005, just 10 weeks after the hurricane.

The first residents, including Bramlett, arrived from Palm Meadows, Fla., where Stronach had established an emergency shelter at a horse-racing facility he owns.

"Here was a man giving me a chance to start all over again. It was an easy decision to come," Bramlett says.

Though officially named Magnaville, residents favoured Canadaville and the name stuck.

"When I first saw it, I just started crying. It was so beautiful after where I had been," says Tonya Nelson, a 35-year-old single mother who shuttled between Arkansas, Colorado and Texas in the first months after she lost her home in Pass Christian, Miss.

"I'm a settler. I feel like this is the place I want to be."

The community's 190 residents live rent-free in spacious three bedroom homes. In exchange, they must sign a social contract requiring them to perform eight hours of community service, seek work or go to school.

Magna's initial investment was about \$7.5 million US and the company agreed to underwrite the project for a minimum five years.

At the time, one writer described the Canadian billionaire's vision as a "wild scheme." But almost two years later, Canadaville is set to grow rather than shrink. After experimenting with small-scale organic farming on a plot of land at the community's edge, Magna is set in 2008 to expand the operation to over 340 hectares.

It's a risky proposition.

Canadaville residents, most of whom have no agricultural background, will have the chance to try their hand at entrepreneurial micro-farming as a way to supplement their incomes.

Magna has also hired area farmers to oversee the larger operation, and the company is in talks with Whole Foods, America's largest chain of natural food supermarkets, to sell goods at stores in New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Houston.

"We are committed to having the farm being a successful business that can help sustain the community long term," says Shane Carmichael, Canadaville's project manager.

The community itself has a bucolic quality, and an air of permanence, at odds with its frantic creation. Each home has a paved driveway, with a front porch that looks over fresh-cut grass and neatly-trimmed shrubs. The Canadian flag flies alongside the Stars and Stripes. Behind the village office, residents tend to a small vegetable garden and watch over a handful of goats and chickens.

"We are on track to creating an environment that is safe and has some positive energy," says Carmichael. He insists there is no larger social agenda. "We are not trying to enrol or register anybody to say 'This is a better way.'"

Indeed, Canadaville has endured some ups and down. A few early residents found the culture shock too great and moved on.

Bramlett admits being unnerved by the abundance of rattlesnakes and water moccasins that slither through the deep grass on the edges of Canadaville. "I never seen as many snakes in my life as I have seen out here."

Some residents have struggled to find work in Simmesport, which suffered from high unemployment even before the influx of hurricane evacuees.

And then there's James 'Boo' Fontenot, Simmesport's mayor. Fontenot, a longstanding skeptic of Canadaville, has expressed concerns Magna will leave the residents to fend for themselves after five years, placing an added burden on his own community.

In June, two dozen Canadaville residents confronted Fontenot at a town meeting after he allegedly blamed them for a recent spike in crime. They printed T-shirts saying We Live in Canadaville and We Are Not Criminals.

"We weren't going to tolerate him making comments and slandering Canadaville," says Lisa Johnson, 45, a former New Orleans hotel manager.

Fontenot did not return calls from Canwest News Service, but has said he is willing to open a dialogue with Canadaville residents.

"I am being made out to be the villain in all of this, and I'm not," he said recently.

Other local leaders have been more welcoming.

"Canadaville is the best kept secret out of the storm," says local restaurant owner Tommy Maddie.

Maddie has hired several Canadaville residents, including Bramlett, and endorses Stronach's "hand up" philosophy.

"He knows that if you are determined to succeed, you can succeed."

Stronach has sought to improve relations by opening Canadaville's new recreational centre to all local residents. It features a baseball field with night lights and two open-air basketball courts. Magna also bought the town two new police cars.

Stronach has not said whether he'll continue to fund Canadaville after five years, but Magna says no one will get eviction notices.

"We will have a plan in place to get them working toward home ownership," says Carmichael.

With the future uncertain, Canadaville residents are already planning ahead.

"That's my goal, to save my money, put it all aside," says Bramlett. "If Magna decides 'five years is up and we have to go,' I'll be prepared."

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