



## Businessman Launches Massive Rebuilding Project in Gentilly

by Kate Moran, The Times-Picayune  
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The founder of Barnes & Noble bookstores will spend \$20 million from his private foundation to build and renovate homes in devastated Gentilly, an initiative that will match and possibly exceed the investment Brad Pitt's charity has made in the Lower 9th Ward. Leonard Riggio and his wife, Louise, plan to begin by building 20 new houses in the Filmore section of Gentilly that will be donated to displaced homeowners. In return, those owners will surrender their flooded property to the Riggio Foundation to be rebuilt or torn down for the benefit of another marooned Gentilly resident. Project Home Again, as the effort will be called, should ultimately return about 100 households to the neighborhood, according to people familiar with the project. Gentilly had a high concentration of elderly residents before the storm, and neighborhood leaders said many did not have the wherewithal to repair flooded, slab-style houses. The Riggio initiative is only the latest example of how private philanthropy has connected storm victims with resources when the public sector could not. It began when Wal-Mart trucked supplies to the Gulf Coast before the federal government did and continued with Pitt and a partner, Steve Bing, who have each offered a \$5 million matching grant to rebuild homes in the 9th Ward. "It's a situation where the private sector, through its generosity, is stepping in to help people who were left behind by the Road Home and their insurance companies," said Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, whose district includes Gentilly. Riggio was traveling Wednesday and was not available for comment, said Mary Ellen Keating, a spokeswoman for Barnes & Noble. He will unveil details about the project at a news conference in Gentilly on Tuesday. The new houses will be built on a vacant piece of land bounded by St. Bernard Avenue, Mandolin Street, Owens Boulevard and Wellington Avenue. City property records show the Riggio Foundation bought land in that area in June for \$650,000. Designers have drawn up three templates for the houses, which will be elevated eight feet above ground and include parking spaces underneath, according to people involved in the project. The architects will also incorporate various "green" design elements, including thermal wraps that will make the houses inexpensive to heat and cool. Laurie Watt, communications director for the Gentilly Civic Improvement Association, said only a quarter of the residents in her neighborhood have managed to return home since Katrina. The area has a distinctly gap-toothed appearance. She said the project has the potential to energize development in the area. "New Orleanians have a strong sense of loyalty to home," Watt said. "I think this is going to be just terrific for those who are left out there and don't know what to do. The ripple effect could be tremendous." The Riggio Foundation has assets worth about \$78 million, according to its most recently available tax return. The foundation appears to donate primarily to charities in New York, where it is based, including the Dia Art Foundation. The 2005 tax return shows the foundation made several contributions of \$1 million but none above that amount. *Kate Moran can be reached at [kmoran@timespicayune.com](mailto:kmoran@timespicayune.com) or (504) 826-3491.*