

# Katrina-ravaged church receives Extreme Makeover

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NEW ORLEANS (BP)—When ABC network television's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* producers brainstormed about the 2008 season finale, their thoughts turned to New Orleans.

On *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, a family—in this case, the Noah's Ark Missionary Baptist Church family—receives a new or renovated home at no cost.

The family—in this case, Pastor Willie Walker, his wife, Veronica, and their three children—is sent on vacation for a week.

*Extreme Makeover* star Ty Pennington shows Pastor Willie Walker and his wife, Veronica, the fully stocked kitchen that came with the rebuilt church.

[Watch the video.](#)

Volunteers—working 24 hours a day for about 130 hours—build and furnish the new home with donated services and material, from architectural drawings and drywall to nails and even pictures on the walls.

This is the first church building to receive *Extreme Makeover's* attention.

More than 100 homes to date have received an *Extreme Makeover* from the program, which started airing in 2003. While all of them have been for

“deserving” people or situations, the idea for the New Orleans finale was to bring the nation together to honor its heroes, said Diane Korman, senior producer of the show.

*Extreme Makeover* projects depend on local builders who volunteer their time, but “all the builders in town were already busy,” Korman said. “We called builder friends from previous shows to help out. It took an entire nation to pull this off.”

Noah’s Ark Missionary Baptist Church is a Southern Baptist congregation that lies in a low-rent counterpoint to the nearby high-dollar Garden District of New Orleans, not far from the French Quarter. The three-pronged *Extreme Makeover* effort in New Orleans also included a home for a Westwego family of volunteer firefighters and a Ninth Ward community center.

The show receives about 3,000 letters a week from people identifying themselves or others whose home would be worthy of an *Extreme Makeover*, but Korman said they received hundreds of letters about Willie Walker. The barrage of letters for one person got the producers’ attention, she said. So did the pastor’s story, she added.

“He’s more than a hero; he’s heroic,” Korman said.

The sole remaining deacon at Noah’s Ark Missionary Baptist Church calls Willie Walker a “24-hour (a day) pastor.”

### **Always helping people**

“Even before Katrina, he was always helping people,” said Giovanni Morris. “People would donate food and pastor would take it right to the people he knew were needing it. Pastor did a lot of that.”

Walker had been trying to get a free medical clinic started since 2001 and

regularly provided pastoral counseling “straight out of the Bible” for engaged couples, marriages in difficulty and people struggling with addictions, Morris said. Walker was leading two mid-week Bible studies in addition to Sunday morning worship for perhaps 60 people on any given week, though the total membership was closer to 150.

Then came Katrina.

On Aug. 28, 2005, Walker preached Sunday morning and then weathered the storm with his family in their Kenner home. The Category 4 hurricane keelhailed the city about breakfast time Monday. Walker’s wife and family left Tuesday to stay with relatives in Zachary, near Baton Rouge. Early Wednesday morning, after buying supplies at a Wal-Mart, Walker became an informal first responder. He’d find someone with a boat and lead them to people he knew as a local pastor needed help.

“After about six days of nonstop rescues, Rev. Willie Walker finally made his way to Noah’s Ark Church,” Douglas Brinkley wrote in *The Great Deluge*, a book about Hurricane Katrina. “Water had virtually washed away his files and library. Nothing much was left of the interior. ... His church was nonexistent, except in his heart.”

### **Two-and-a-half years later**

It’s been two-and-a-half years since Katrina. Little had been done on the building after it was gutted by Southern Baptist volunteers because meeting peoples’ needs trumped construction work. The congregation, which grew to about 20 in recent months—a third of its pre-Katrina attendance—met for services at a Methodist church, and Walker continued his ministry to those who had stayed through—and those who returned after—the storm.

“When we heard the story of Rev. Walker and all he had gone through and done for the city of New Orleans, we wanted to come down here and give

him something back,” said David Hall, president of DelTec Homes of North Carolina, the lead builder for the project, which involved 18 builders and their crews, plus about 500 volunteers from across the nation.

“This man is a hero and his family are heroes.... To do this for him is a blessing for us. What he did during the storm was unbelievable.”

What the builders did during the week was unbelievable as well, observers said.

First task: demolish the original structure, which was nothing more than a “shotgun double” house converted in the 1970s by founding pastor Miller Norman into a worship center.

The biggest challenges included setting pilings into concrete 35 feet deep and constructing a 72-foot-long handicap access ramp. The extreme ramp length was necessitated by the height of the building and federal slope regulations: The base flood elevation in that part of New Orleans is 18 inches above sea level. Noah’s Ark was built three feet above sea level, and the flooring was set at five feet above sea level, said Ben Poss, DelTec’s director of engineering.

“In case of an actual flood, they should be OK,” Poss said.

Coordinating a television shooting schedule with the round-the-clock work of 18 builders and their crews, plus volunteers, presented another challenge.

### **Challenges met**

But 106 hours later, an enormous bus stood in front of the church, and a long black limousine rolled to a stop on the other side. Walker bounded out of the car, followed by his wife and children.

Walker and *Extreme Makeover* star Ty Pennington talked briefly but little

could be heard of the conversation, except one sentence from Walker that was picked up by the boom mikes overhead: “Whatever God wants to do, we’re happy.”

The restless crowd, knowing how the show works, began chanting: “Move that bus. Move that bus.” They did, and at his first sight of the new Noah’s Ark, Walker doubled over, completely overcome. Speechless, he struggled just to catch his breath.

It was left to Veronica Walker, her hand rubbing Willie’s back in support, to speak to the cameras: “We’re so grateful, from the bottom of our hearts.”

“You’ve seen the outside,” Pennington said. “Would you like to see the inside?”

He led the Walker family up the stairs—then back down again to make sure the stairstepping had been properly filmed by the ABC film crew. Once they stepped through the hammered metal and wrought iron double doors into the worship center, the Walkers had 20 minutes alone with the film crew before church members and volunteers joined them for a worship service headlined by Irma Thomas, known locally as a “queen of soul.”

The public got to see the new building for the first time when *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* aired its season finale May 18.