

Fifth Ward CRC

Utilizing Technology to Accelerate Community Development

BY BRIDGETT REED

Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation (Fifth Ward CRC), a steward of change since 1989, is strategically deploying technology to accelerate community development in 5th Ward, one of Houston's inner-city communities that long has been plagued with lack of investment.

For 15 years, Fifth Ward CRC has been a catalytic organization, improving the lives of residents and

owners in a three-block area of 5th Ward, a \$15,000 Sears investment. The resident participants included a mix of new and long-time homeowners living in older-stock homes and new homes built by Fifth Ward CRC.

Home maintenance is a primary focus of Fifth Ward CRC's postpurchase counseling. Together with financial training, the counseling assists

families in maintaining their homes financially and physically, and thereby encourages them to make needed improvements, develop budgets, plan for improvements and growth, and prevent foreclosure at all costs.

'i-community' Project

The Sears event came six months after Hewlett-Packard Company announced a \$3 million grant to create an "i-community" with Fifth Ward CRC in Houston, the first of its kind in the United States. i-communities are an HP initiative that uses information and communication technology to promote economic and social development, while also providing a platform for testing solution innovations for emerging

markets. Other i-communities are in India and South Africa.

According to Perry Busby, Houston i-community project manager, "The overarching goal of the i-community is to create a technological infrastructure that will supplement the community's current development strengths, while also acting as a catalyst for change in how this community interfaces with the wider world.

"To say that this project is about exposing individuals to computers would be an oversimplifi-



Students at Phoenix Outreach Youth Center build reading and math skills with a software education library.

PHOTOS COURTESY FIFTH WARD CRC

businesses and garnering reinvestment for its community. Considering most area houses are 50 years old or older, it has worked to build a community one block at a time, including approximately 250 housing units developed in the past 10 years.

Linking home ownership and home maintenance, Fifth Ward CRC hosted the Houston event of the Sears American Dream Campaign. Sears product repair services technicians conducted free home-maintenance assessments for 15 home-



Among those saluting the Sears American Dream Campaign are Kathy Flanagan Payton (third from left), Fifth Ward president and CEO; Harvey Clemons Jr. (fifth from left), Fifth Ward board chair; Tony Davis (fourth from right), Sears district general manager; and Gary Wolfe (third from right), director, Neighborhood Reinvestment's Rocky Mountain District.

cation. Every facet of this project focuses on equipping and empowering individuals to become self-sufficient in a 'techno-centric' society."

The Houston i-community is based on five areas of concentration that were identified during a comprehensive visioning session on developing and enhancing technology programs and activities. The concentrations are education and job training, job creation, economic development, community building, and public safety.

"Technology is an accelerant and the tool by which we achieve the dreams of 5th Ward more efficiently," said Kathy Flanagan-Payton, president and CEO of Fifth Ward CRC.

Over three years, the Houston i-community is set to launch approximately seven technology access points (TAPs), contribute to the development of the Fifth Ward Technology Center, create a Fifth Ward Community Technology and Communication Portal, and award technology grants to community service provider organizations.

By December 31, 2003, the Houston i-community opened two Quick Starts – the designation given to community service provider organizations that currently have a programmatic and technology infrastructure in place and whose goals are encompassed as a component of the Houston i-community Strategic Plan:

- Phoenix Outreach: Students have access to

online reference material and fundamental reading and mathematics computer-based training software.

- Pleasant Hill Village: Senior citizens have access to online prescriptions and online banking.

Fifth Ward CRC seizes each day as an opportunity to make 5th Ward a community of choice – a beautiful and better place to live, work, and play. The Houston i-community, through its technology focus, is a means to do just that for community development in 5th Ward. ■

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A Sears technician replaces siding on a resident's home.

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