Southern Serenity

Project Lazarus offers housing and wellness in New Orleans.

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Project Lazarus began 30 years ago as an AIDS hospice. Some of its buildings, located near the famed French Quarter in New Orleans, date back to the 1880s. But the services found at this transitional housing and wellness center are modern and forward-thinking.

Sure, the main focus is to help HIV-positive clients get back on their feet and enjoy independent, healthy lives. Project Lazarus has a total of 23 beds available for 6 to 12 months in two main facilities. They're always full. Clients fit a variety of demographics, though a growing number are young (18 or older) and African American, and most are also dealing with addiction and homelessness. While helping people get sober and on regular HIV treatment, Project Lazarus teaches them basic life skills through its Wellness University. What's more, folks in the local HIV community living off-site can participate in the substance abuse programs.

But that's not the most unique aspect of Project Lazarus. "Sustainability is very important to us," explains interim executive director Steve Rivera. "Our facilities director does a fabulous job of keeping us all abreast of what's new and useful." Such as? Becoming self-sufficient in hurricane season, gathering fresh eggs from their own chickens, and maintaining an organic vegetable garden that's watered with collected rainwater.

Clients pitch in with all the work. "They love it," Rivera says. "It promotes life and regeneration." And, he adds, it focuses their attention on other things besides drugs—which can be a challenge in a city that celebrates its decadence.
Project Lazarus, with its fountains, butterfly gardens and ponds, offers a safe haven. "Clients learn to search out serenity," Rivera says, "and to choose what supports the life they want."

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