



portrait of an artist: wendell pierce

art imitates life for a son of new orleans

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[news](#)

Wendell Pierce, actor, producer, and activist, is on set shooting "Lay the Favorite" with Bruce Willis and Vince Vaughn. He talks about his mom.

He reveals the details of her cross-city ambulance ride from her home in Pontchartrain Park, near east New Orleans, through the throngs of Mardi Gras celebrants lined up to witness the Bacchus and Endymion Krewes roll on St. Charles Avenue in Uptown. "The ambulance got to St. Charles Avenue and could not cross over to get to Touro Hospital." Methodist Hospital, located just a few minutes from Mrs. Pierce's home, is [still awaiting restoration](#) after Hurricane Katrina.



Pierce pauses. "Can you imagine the people we may have already lost because they couldn't cross over the Uptown side of St. Charles Avenue due to congestion or parades or anything like that to get to the hospital? We have almost 250,000 people who do not have a hospital in their neighborhoods, from Elysian Fields all the way east. That is criminal."

It's been nearly six years since Katrina, and the storm still rages.

"Billions of federal tax dollars were sent for the recovery of New Orleans, and they haven't been used, or prohibitions have been placed on the funds so they can't be used. That's political, and not best practices. I've been diplomatic about it all this time, but now it's getting to the point when I have to speak out."

Slogging through a quagmire of local and state bureaucracy is nothing new to residents of New Orleans or the other fine people of Louisiana. But no longer can the rest of the U.S. population shake their heads. In the first half of 2011, EF5 tornados, massive flooding, and scorching wildfires have devastated multiple states, resulting in nearly 1,000 deaths and billions of dollars in damage. The Red Cross has sent volunteers to 25 major natural disasters so far this year. As neighbors, as taxpayers, the burdens of rebuilding stricken areas affect all of us.

So Pierce's message to other communities putting lives back together is simple. "Make sure the city and the state establish programs so recovery money is out on the street before it goes back to

Washington."

Pierce doesn't tiptoe around a rickety soapbox. As chairman of the Pontchartrain Park Community Development Corporation (PPCDC), he stands tall, representing the neighborhood where he grew up. His mother was a teacher. His father, a World War II veteran, was a maintenance engineer. Shortly after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Pierces were able to cultivate the American dream.

"During segregation in New Orleans, if you were black, you could only go to the parks on Wednesdays, on 'Negro Day'. You'd be arrested any other day." says Pierce. "Civil rights leaders fought for more access to recreational areas, so the city set aside 210 acres that were separate but equal, which is Pontchartrain Park, the first place where African-Americans could purchase homes during the post-war suburban expansion. It featured ranch homes, a world-class golf course, baseball fields, and tennis courts. Out of something ugly came something beautiful; a destination neighborhood." It was the first subdivision of its kind in America, and has been considered for the National Registry of Historic Places.

Pierce says the neighborhood is "an incubator of talent", including Grammy award-winning jazz musician and film composer Terence Blanchard; former mayors of New Orleans Ernest "Dutch" Morial and Marc Morial, who is currently the national president of the Urban League; and Lisa Jackson, President Obama's director of the Environmental Protection Agency.

And Wendell Pierce. A Julliard-trained actor with a lengthy list of memorable roles, including Detective Bunk Moreland in the HBO series "The Wire", William Bradford in the TV series "Numb3rs", and Slick in the movie *Life Support*. He's signed on to portray the legendary B.B. King in a new film, and is also the host of [Jazz at Lincoln Center Radio](#).

But New Orleans holds his heart, just as it does for his character, trombonist Antoine Batiste, in Pierce's latest series, "Tremé". Now in its second season on HBO, this acclaimed drama is what Pierce considers to be the best example of art imitating life; the story of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. Not only the cultural touchstones of gumbo and second lines, street buskers and Mardi Gras Indians, but also a lack of services and increased crime, misplaced innocent prisoners and misappropriation of funds.

"The struggles of the characters on Tremé", says Pierce, "reflect my struggle to rebuild Pontchartrain Park. The role of art is to hold up a megaphone so we collectively can understand who we are, where we've been, and where we hope to go. What thoughts are to the individual, art is the form for the society as a whole. When you think about where you're going and what's important to you. That's why the word 'activism' comes from 'acting'."

Pontchartrain Park had the slowest rate of return after Hurricane

Katrina, second only to the Lower Ninth Ward. Pierce says it simply didn't make sense to him. After all, the neighborhood had:

- *97% homeownership, with most mortgages paid off in the 1980s.
- *Retired white-collar professionals, such as teachers, doctors, and lawyers.
- *People who lived there for a decade or more.
- *Less than 10% poverty.
- *Practically non-existent crime.

The primary reason people didn't return? Pierce says it's because of what he considers the greatest crime in recent history: Insurance companies were allowed to not pay on homeowners' policies. People who once fought segregation simply didn't have the wherewithal and the persistence as senior citizens to frontline the recovery battle.

Which is why Pierce teamed up with childhood friend Troy Henry, who developed the Unified New Orleans Plan immediately after the storm, to form the PPCDC, and challenged other members of his generation to help restore the community. In 2008, the corporation signed an agreement with the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA), a state agency that redistributes properties from the Road Home process to the PPCDC to establish a 21st century neighborhood.

Pierce is proud of the geothermal and solar energy in the PPCDC homes, designed to help homeowners spend an average of \$700 a year in utility costs. "How are you going to get people to move back to a disaster zone unless you incentivize it in some way?" Pierce says. "These and other upgrades have to make the neighborhood better than it was before." The PPCDC is a citizen- and resident-initiated development corporation, in which all the profits from the developers' fees go to the Neighborhood Development Corporation, and create a self-sustaining endowment to further initiatives in the community, similar to those found in the award-winning [Beacon Hill Village in Boston](#).

The neighborhood's historic Joseph Bartholomew Golf Course is under renovation; the playgrounds and fields restored; and there is solid support from local contractors and banks. The community has two model homes, and 12 actual homes underway. Another 45 people are in contract, and an additional 200 families are pre-qualified.

At first, the efforts of the PPCDC garnered a lot of attention. Agreements with other influential agencies and full disclosure of plans and benefits allowed the organization to move quickly through the line of subsidy enlistment. Spike Lee featured the neighborhood in his documentary "When the Levees Broke", and on the 5th anniversary of Katrina CNN aired "New Orleans Rising", which highlighted the impassioned efforts of Pierce and the PPCDC.

"We've had a lot of folks help us along the way," Pierce says, "and yet we sit here, waiting for the government to honor its end of it. The

city is still holding soft second financing that our families are waiting on to move into their homes. The state is saying 'you can't use money that was sent for recovery for new construction.' "

This is when Pierce becomes even more adamant. "Let me say that again. Governor Jindal and the state say that money sent to Louisiana for the recovery of New Orleans cannot be used for new construction. And we're also part of the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, which provides gap financing of up to \$55,000 that people can access. But we're still waiting for the government to put that program out. It's literally a matter of writing commitment letters to be used at closing. But that hasn't been done."

The deficiencies continue to spiral. Pierce explains there isn't a government program building scaled residential housing. Other groups such as Make It Right and Project Home Again are similar to the PPCDC, trying to reestablish homeownership within the city. Between the three organizations, Pierce estimates about 800 homes can be built.

50,000 homes in New Orleans were lost due to Hurricane Katrina and failed levees. 20,000 blighted properties remain.

"This is when you start to lose patience. Time is running out. We've done everything the government has asked us to do: create a program around the subsidies, show demand, show design, show that you can build a platform, and reinforce that platform," Pierce says. "\$30 million sent down from the federal government is available through NORA, but we can't get the city to program it out. There are sunset dates on these funds, and the money is going to be sent back to the federal government."

Pierce says he understands that New Orleans government, once inefficient and incompetent, now has an administration that is trying to take the necessary steps to make it more functional. But programs are sitting dormant in the interim. "While they're getting things in order in City Hall, which is going to take time, you have to concurrently make sure those programs are moving forward. Even if you have to do it in staged rollouts. Do 15 houses. We've proposed to them to do our first 15 homes as a pilot program to work out any snags in the logistics. You don't have to trigger the entire \$52 million. Do the first 15 homes, about a \$1.5 million investment, to see how the program works. It has to be a priority."

As long as the [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program](#) cannot be used for new construction, money will be returned to the federal government. Pierce says it's a \$750 million fund, but only \$20 million has been used because of restrictions, and \$450 million was sent back in February of 2010. "We've had almost \$3 billion sent here by the federal government for the recovery of New Orleans, unencumbered, no restrictions. And we have a governor who has put restrictions on that money because he's trying to redirect that money to political allies in other parts of the state. And he would rather redirect the

money than allow it to be used in New Orleans."

If the funds aren't released, everything falls apart. Pontchartrain Park, an influential and celebrated community for 55 years, will fade into the landscape.

"Too many people fought, too many people died, to give us an opportunity to participate in the middle-class American lifestyle," says Pierce. "The people of my parents' generation left a blueprint of exercising your right of self-determination. It would be a dishonor, yet alone a disservice, to what they created if we allowed it to go away."

*Learn more about the efforts of the [Pontchartrain Park Community Development Corporation](#).

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