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By John Walsh

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By Larry Aylward

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Ask Roderick Rick who his new favorite actor is, and he’ll tell you Brad Pitt. In fact, Pitt is probably one of Rick’s favorite people these days, period.

“He’s a beautiful person,” says Rick, the 62-year-old first assistant golf course superintendent at Brechtel Memorial Park Municipal Golf Course in New Orleans.

It’s partially because of Pitt that Rick has a new roof over his head.

But Rick went through the closest thing to hell to get it. Let’s return to Aug. 29, 2005 — albeit reluctantly — for a minute. Hurricane Katrina hits and causes enough flooding to wipe out a good portion of Greater New Orleans. Rick, who lives in the city’s Lower 9th Ward, has his home destroyed by flooding after the Industrial Canal levee collapses nearby. The flooding demolishes the Lower 9th Ward, one of the hardest-hit areas.

Fortunately, Rick is not home when his house is destroyed. Unfortunately, Rick loses everything he owns in the flood except, literally, the clothes he’s wearing that day. His home and his personal possessions were washed away. Rick ends up living in a few different spots, including for more than a year in one of those tiny, white, drab FEMA trailers. There are worse places to be, indeed, but this is not the way Rick and his wife, Trescia, want to live.

Meanwhile, Pitt visits the Lower 9th Ward, and is taken aback by the destruction he sees. Pitt decides he wants to help. He goes to community meetings and listens to the needs of displaced residents of the Lower 9th Ward.

Pitt, working with local community leaders and others, establishes a not-for-profit organization, Make It Right, whose goal is to be a catalyst for redevelopment of the Lower 9th Ward. Make It Right enlists an environmental architecture firm to help design and build sustainable and environmentally sound homes in the area.

In December 2007, Pitt announces he will build 150 affordable homes as part of the project. He chips in $5 million to help the cause.

“We’re going to help to make it right with 150 sustainable, affordable houses — houses that stand out for their design both aesthetically and structurally, so these people can live in beautiful safe structures that respect their spirit and provide a good quality of life,” Pitt says.

Rick hears about the pilot program and is one of the first people to sign up for it. The first five eco-friendly homes are completed in November of last year. Guess who gets to move into one them?

“Would you like to come in?” Rick asks me when I visited his new home recently. “Love to,” I reply.

Rick beams with pride. He takes me through the lovely one-floor home that’s built on stilts 8 feet off the ground. I’m loving every minute of the tour because he’s loving every minute of giving it.

“This is the master bedroom,” he says. “Here’s the back porch.”

The house sits on the same spot as the old one, where Rick lived for 12 years. From the Continued on page 8
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Continued from page 6

front porch, there’s a spectacular view of downtown New Orleans to the left. There’s also a direct view — a haunting view to me — of the Industrial Canal levee, which sits only a few hundred yards from Rick’s home.

Rick is helping to pay for the house, but he received considerable financial assistance from Make It Right and Road Home, a program designed to provide compensation to Louisiana homeowners affected by Hurricanes Katrina. The house also features solar electric panels, a water-recycling system and thermal heat. And there are plenty of windows.

“We get a breeze in here you wouldn’t believe,” Rick says with a smile you wouldn’t believe.

It’s hard for me to understand what Rick went through to get to this point. Imagine losing everything you own. All the photos and trinkets, which might not have cost a lot of money, but were priceless as far as memories go. Your clothes. Your food. Everything.

I ask Rick how he endured. I tell him I’m not sure I could have. There was a lot of hurt, he says. He admits it’s hard for him to explain. “Things looked real bad after the storm,” he says softly.

But Rick is astounded how things turned out. “I ended up with this beautiful home,” he says. “I never thought it would turn out like this.”

The Lower 9th Ward, which some believed would never come back from the devastation, is still being cleaned up. There are reminders of Katrina’s destruction everywhere.

Up the street from Rick’s home sits a manmade gravesite for someone killed in the storm. Rick’s view from his back porch is a concrete slab where his neighbor’s house once stood. Concrete slabs are common in the Lower 9th Ward.

Rick’s home sticks out, but not at all like a sore thumb. It is, hopefully, a sign of more good things to come to the neighborhood.

The talk turns to Pitt, who visited Rick at his new home shortly after he moved into it. “He’s a down-to-earth person,” Rick says. “Thanks to him, I was able to purchase another house — a better house.”

Dustin Hoffman used to be my favorite actor. But like Rick, I think my new favorite actor is Brad Pitt.

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Jack’s Got Latshaw’s Back

While scrolling the grounds of Muirfield Village Golf Club one morning during The Memorial Tournament last month, I bumped into Paul B. Latshaw, the course’s director of grounds operations. Latshaw had an intense look in his eye as he slowly maneuvered his golf car through the crowds that had come to watch the PGA pros tune up for the next day’s opening round of the tournament in Columbus, Ohio.

After a short chat, Latshaw said matter of factly, “I’ve got to keep moving. I’ll see you later.” And he was on his way.

The intensity in Latshaw’s eyes was pure focus. It was obvious to me the certified superintendent was as dialed in to the tournament as much as Tiger Woods was the next four days to win it.

The Memorial Tournament, of course, is Jack Nicklaus’ baby. He founded the tournament and built the course it’s played on. So it’s no surprise Jack wants the course looking like a million bucks and playing like a million and a half. And that’s where Latshaw comes in.

During a press conference with Nicklaus the day before the opening round, when most of the questions asked were about Tiger, I asked Jack about his impressions of Latshaw. It seemed Nicklaus was anxious to talk about his superintendent, as he talked more about Latshaw than any other topic during the press conference. If Nicklaus’ answer was a performance review, Latshaw received the highest possible marks from his boss.

“He’s terrific. He has done just a wonderful job here,” Nicklaus said of Latshaw, who took the job almost six years ago.

Nicklaus joked (but with the utmost respect) that Latshaw “has his Master’s or Ph.D. in grass.”

“I don’t know what he has, but he keeps going back to school to get more education and keeps expanding...”