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First Make It Right homes complete

10/9/2008, 6:26 p.m. CDT

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The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The first homes in Brad Pitt's Make It Right rebuilding project are complete, and some three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, grandmother Gloria Guy was on hand to give the actor a big hug.

Pitt, his partner Angelina Jolie and their family of six children toured the hard-hit Lower 9th Ward privately this week to see the homes close up. The couple bought a home in New Orleans about a year after Katrina struck and became involved in raising funds and launching the project to rebuild the city's hardest-hit neighborhood.

"Honey, this is like heaven on earth," Guy, 68, said from the porch of her Make It Right house painted a vivid mango yellow. She and five of her 22 grandchildren will be moving in later this month.

Guy is one of the first homeowners to get one of the 150 Make It Right homes that are to be built where levees broke after Katrina, unleashing floodwaters that knocked homes off their foundations.

Now her new home is set on concrete pilings eight feet above ground. Never mind that it's surrounded by empty, grass-covered lots, some with only concrete steps leading to where a house used to stand. She couldn't be more happy.

"I thank God for Brad Pitt," she said, adding she spotted the actor when he made his rounds of the neighborhood on Monday and again Tuesday. "I gave him a big hug, and I told him how much I appreciate all that he's done for me and my family."

Guy's house is one of six that are finished or nearing completion by workers putting up a final coat of paint on one house and last touches on others.

The homes cost an average \$150,000 each and are going up on property owned by local residents who still own their lots and are able to pay the insurance and taxes. Monthly payments are based on the applicants' income, subsidized by funds raised by Pitt's foundation.

Guy, a retired professional baker, smiled broadly as she walked through her home Thursday.

"I love this kitchen," she said, opening maple cabinet doors and stroking the new refrigerator. "I love to cook, and this kitchen has everything I need."

She said she would plant vegetables and herbs in a garden out back and make a favorite dish of spicy red beans and rice when she moves in.

A few houses down, resident Gertrude LeBlanc relaxed on her front porch swing, observing all the activity. Dozens of journalists swarmed Guy's home as workers painted another Make It Right home nearby.

"I've waited a long time for my neighbors to start coming home," she said.

LeBlanc, 72, was among the first to return, adding the neighborhood has been a lonely place to live since Katrina. Fewer than a third of the neighborhood's residents have moved back.

For two years, LeBlanc lived in a federally issued trailer set up on the lot where her house used to stand. For the past six months, she has been living in her rebuilt home, constructed with the help of volunteers.

LeBlanc started the rebuilding process before Pitt and Make It Right entered the scene. Her home is only about 2 feet above ground and doesn't have solar panels and other environmentally friendly features the Pitt homes have.

"I feel like a toy among skyscrapers," she said with a chuckle. "But that's OK. I'm getting my neighbors back."

The Make It Right homes stand in striking contrast to the Creole cottage and shotgun-style homes typically found in New Orleans neighborhoods. Besides being built high off the ground, they are of contemporary design, with sharper roof pitches.

Still, architect Steven Binger, who designed Guy's four-bedroom three-bathroom house, said he hopes the new styles will get adopted elsewhere as the city rebuilds.

Besides solar panels, they include energy-saving appliances and toilets and faucets designed to conserve water. They also have tankless water heaters donated by **Noritz**.

"The New Orleans concept is there," Binger said. "There's a big street culture here in New Orleans that's important to residents. They want steps big enough to sit on, porches big enough to swing on, and we processed all that when we came up with these designs."