



## Building Resilience: Investing In Futures in Wharton County



As Wharton County resident, Steve B, recounted it: “In town the water was knee deep. The muddy flood waters went in houses through windows, and after the water receded, the mud had to be raked out with hoes and shovels. The streets and yards were nothing but mud caked caverns.”<sup>1</sup> The flood left Steve and many of his friends practically homeless and jobless, as their small farms were destroyed. As they started to get back on their feet, another flood came

just a few years later.

That disaster was the flood of 1900, but the description could just as well have referred to the historic flooding caused in Wharton by Hurricane Harvey, followed two years later by rising waters caused by severe summer storms.

In Wharton County, where Week of Compassion is working to help families get back into their homes, flooding is a regular part of the area’s history, as are the stories of families who have weathered the storms. Families across the county can trace their roots in the area back generations, often inhabiting the same plots of land, even the same homes for generations.

Some neighborhoods in Wharton trace their history back more than 160 years. Along the bank of the Colorado River is the historic Freedman’s Town, settled by newly emancipated slaves during the period of Reconstruction. During the early 20th century, black neighborhoods extended west, on land nestled between Caney Creek and the Colorado River. Because the land is extremely flood prone, it was considered less desirable for segregated white neighborhoods, which instead expanded to the north and east, away from the river and floodplain.

Over the years, these historically and predominantly black neighborhoods in Wharton have experienced damaging floods again and again. Yet alongside the struggle, they have maintained a sense of community and pride for their land and their history.

So, when Hurricane Harvey caused the catastrophic floods of 2017, damaging nearly all of the homes in Wharton’s West End, local leaders recognized a necessity and an opportunity. They needed to invest in recovery in such a way that would maintain the social ties of the community, protect against future storms, and revitalize the West End as a thriving part of Wharton.

Out of an existing local foundation, The Wharton West End Initiative (WWEI) was born, with four objectives: “(1) To offer safe, affordable and resilient (flood-proof) housing; (2) To improve overall health of residents and access to affordable health care; (3) to equip the Dawson Resource Center to be the hub of the community; and (4) to build a more economically vibrant and socially integrated community by developing businesses to reinvigorate the West End.”<sup>2</sup>

For a handful of families in the most hazardous locations, WWEI and WCRT have helped navigate a government buyout program, enabling them to move elsewhere in town, farther from the river. The majority of the residents of the West End, however, did not want to leave the land that their families have held for so long. WWEI is working with those residents to elevate their homes and build back with future floods in mind, with support from Week of Compassion.

In February, Disciples across the United States and Canada will collect a special offering for Week of Compassion. Each year, this offering enables the kind of programming and support that is taking place in Wharton County. This year's Special Offering theme is "Invest In Futures."

Week of Compassion is partnering with WWEI and WCRT to help Wharton not only recover from Hurricane Harvey and the 2019 floods, but also invest in a flourishing future in the West End, celebrating its rich cultural history, addressing systemic racism and generational housing inequality, and preparing for the next flood that will wash along the banks of the Colorado in Wharton, Texas. Together, our church is truly invested in the future of our local communities, through relationships and practical assistance, in ways that will yield growth for years to come.

Resources are available on the [website](#) as churches and leaders begin preparations to promote 2020 Special Offering in worship and church communications.

<sup>1</sup>[Transcript](#) of oral history of Steve Braham, Wharton County Historical Museum files,  
<sup>2</sup>Gulf Coast Medical Foundation, "[Current Initiatives](#)."



#### Mission

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