

In the fall of 2016, The Walls looked down the 10 blocks of Gus Young Avenue, easily seeing past the worn streets, blighted properties, and overgrown shrubbery. A vision of restoring Gus Young Avenue and the businesses, schools, and parks that line it to their former glory would not only brighten the neighborhood, but would allow residents to harbor a sense of place, pride, and safety.

Luckily, this hasn't been the first time The Walls has successfully revitalized a neighborhood. Every MLK Day since 2014, The Walls has hosted a festival of service. What originated as a one-day event, quickly transformed into a weekend-long series of reactivation steps culminating to the final MLK Day event.

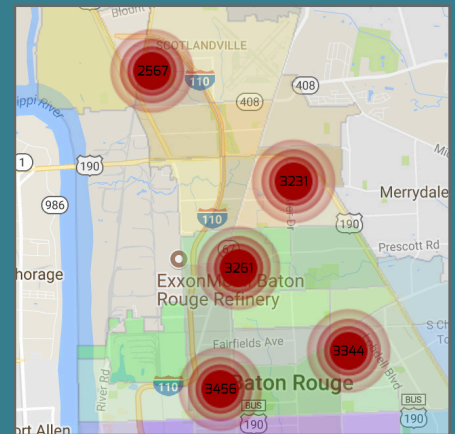
Over the next few months, with constant input from the local community members, The Walls designed a plan to overtake the avenue with volunteers to pick up trash, haul away broken appliances, freshen the facades of houses and buildings, plant community gardens, and paint iconic and inspiring murals.

Bringing together more than 2,000 volunteers and partnering with over 70 organizations, The Walls set the plan into motion. Within the first two days trash was cleared, buildings were getting fresh paint, and much needed landscaping had been done. By day three, the spaces for the upcoming murals were primed and ready. No small feat, considering one mural alone on Gus Young Avenue measured 19' x 146'.

On MLK Day the festival came to its epoch, with talented hand-picked local artists implementing designs chosen by the community members, as well as an all-day celebration with dancing, music, and food. Moreover, the residents also interacted with local organizations they may have never known about with a resource fair.

Within the four days, 40 blocks were cleaned, 10 buildings were revived, 2,000 pounds of garbage was hauled, and most importantly the citizens from all over Baton Rouge were able to come together with a common goal.

Beyond beautification of the neighborhood, The Walls has a deeper motive. The places chosen as the focus for the MLK Festival of Service are areas labeled crime "hot spots". By selecting areas in great need of resurgence, the effect of the festival is strengthened. Communities impacted by this unorthodox means of improvement tend to react better than those who receive extra policing. "...The evidence suggests that such strategies rarely improve community perceptions of the police."¹ With the intention of producing an area where pride of place is not only available, but largely participated in, crime becomes a community issue, rather than a judicial one.



2016 map of crime "hot spots" (# of violent crimes) in Baton Rouge, highest areas being where we position our Reactivation efforts.



Mayor-President Sharon Weston-Broome speaks to the crowd at the Festival's Block Party



Music heard during the Festival's Block Party inspires a group of volunteers of all ages to form a conga line

¹ Committee on Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime, Communities, and Civil Liberties in the United States