



Dennis Mills, president of the Magnaville project, appearing on Canada AM on Tuesday, Aug. 28, 2007.

## 'Canadaville' thriving two years after Katrina

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[CTV.ca](#) News Staff

A small Louisiana community built to house displaced New Orleans residents is thriving almost two years after Hurricane Katrina struck the region.

Magnaville - dubbed Canadaville by residents, was created by Frank Stronach, chairman of auto parts company Magna International. The magnate bought 369 hectares of land, outside Simmesport, a small town in Louisiana, 240 kilometres north of New Orleans in an effort on the part of the magnate to help people displaced by Hurricane Katrina which hit the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005.

"It was a great challenge for me coming to a different type setting but I thank God that I've adjusted and I love where I'm at and I'm not going back to New Orleans," Canadaville resident Lisa Johnson told CTV's Canada AM.

Before Hurricane Katrina, Johnson was a veteran hotel employee in New Orleans. Johnson works at a welcome centre in Canadaville as an office manager and lives with her husband and 14-year-old daughter.

Johnson's family are among the approximately 150 Canadaville residents, who live in the 49 three-bedroom homes that were built within three months of the hurricane. The residents are allowed to stay on the area on the condition that they are either actively seeking work or attending school and perform an allotted amount of community service. The people living in the homes will be allowed to live rent-free for five years. Magna expects to pump \$10 million into the area over that five-year period.

Most of the residents are now working and are supporting their families. However, Magnaville project president Dennis Mills is president of the Magnaville project and admits that it has not been all smooth sailing in establishing the community, which is a notably more rural setting than New Orleans.

"To be right upfront, there were a number of people who found the environment quite challenging and a number of people returned to their roots in New Orleans and we celebrate that," said Mills, former Liberal MP and longtime friend of Stronach.

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"We were there to provide support and assistance for those that wanted to be there in that environment and we were there to help them get jobs."

However, the influx of people displaced by the hurricane has caused local controversy. James Fontenot, mayor of Simmesport, and some other residents had expressed concerns that the people moving into the area would raise the crime rate.

Mills said there were three town hall meetings discussing concerns before Canadaville was settled. In response, community residents created T-shirts bearing the slogan "We live in Canadaville and we're not criminals."

Now that the community is approaching its second anniversary, Mills says many of the existing community's fears have been tempered, a sentiment shared by Johnson.

"The mayor is much more supportive of us," Johnson said. "...He's in a much better spirit, so we're all working together to strive to get what we need to get."

Future plans for the community include expanding an organic farm in the area. After a successful experiment, Magna is set to expand the farm to over 340 hectares and is working with America's largest chain of natural food supermarkets, to sell goods from the farms.

"We have a very intense discussion going on with Whole Foods," Mills told Canada AM. "In fact they want us to work with them to develop that part of the farm that's going to be for organic products."

The proposed expansion of the organic farms is indicative of positive initiatives in the future for the people living in Canadaville, who are grateful for a chance to start over.

"We have a lot of us here who have been able to move forward with our lives," Johnson said.