

A Report Back on The Institute for Sustainable Communities Convening in Atlanta

By Barbara Herndon

I am Barbara Herndon, and I have been a client of, and then assistant case manager for WSR since 2017. I have lived in NE Houston since 1998, and am a mother of four adult children. I have been living alone in my home, where I had my wedding, since my husband passed in 2003. Working with WSR over the last two years has helped me reengage with my community and the world.



Between February 12th and 14th, I, along with Jade Flores, Myrtala Tristan and Ben Hirsch, attended a two day Conference called *Lives, People, and Our Communities: Advancing Climate Resilience for Equity and Opportunity*, in Atlanta Georgia. The event was wonderful. I met people from all over the United States struggling with disaster related issues. Some are like us, still recovering, and some have recovered and found ways to use recovery to to make their neighborhoods better places to live. For example, I met a group from Flint, who are using old plastics to build a watering system for their park.



I met people who work with community groups similar to West Street and learned what they're doing to improve the lives of people in their communities. It was surprising to meet four people still working on rebuilding the 9th ward in New Orleans almost 20 years after Katrina. They are slowly making progress, which makes me hopeful that we will continue to rebuild Northeast Houston. While I enjoyed attending the Conference, I found reflecting on it as I write this summary even more enlightening. Here are some of my big takeaways:

- Because we were invited I felt that ISC saw something in us, and that made me feel positive, that we are validated, and that people see that we are doing something good for our community.

- I learned a lot about fundraising, especially that it is a lot of work! But I still feel that I have lots to learn, and would like to attend more events like this so that I can fully understand and implement fundraising ideas for my community. I brought up the struggle that survivors have with mental health, and I saw that my comment moved a lot of attendees, who came and spoke with me about the issue. Mental health has always been hidden and made people ashamed, especially in Black and Brown communities so it hasn't received enough attention. I felt that speaking to this group about mental health got my concerns recognized as a true issue by people outside of WSR. And I hope that they will now incorporate into their work.
- I heard from a Californian group about how the wildfires destroyed Native American reserves. I was shocked because we have only heard about animals and houses being hurt by these fires. I worry that the lack of news coverage must make the tribes who live there feel unimportant, and disrespected. They have been forgotten to an even greater degree than we have, but it still stinks, and reminds me that we are still fighting to be seen and heard.
- I learned that after disasters trust is critical. WSR started as a rag-tag group, but we have come together as one. As the packet of information we got about the conference said, "Resilient communities are only as strong as relationships of their residents." I think that our work, and the hundreds of phone calls I have made as part of WSR are part of strengthening these relationships.