

[A home for New Orleans folk culture and health](#)

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Architecture students working through Tulane City Center are building a dedicated space for Mardi Gras Indian performances, cooking demonstrations and classes on reading and health. The one-story structure is slated for completion in February, ending decades of shuffling between homes and other organizations' meeting spaces.



Scott Ruff, left, associate professor of architecture, and students break ground for a structure that will house gatherings on health, literacy and Mardi Gras Indian culture in the backyard of Herreast Harrison in the Upper 9th Ward. (Photo by Naomi King)

The Guardians Institute, an organization focused on preserving African-American cultural arts and promoting literacy, has worked since 2007 with the Tulane [Prevention Research Center](#), which studies how physical and social factors influence residents' eating habits and physical activity.

Last year, the institute was awarded a \$50,000 grant through the [Tulane City Center](#) to design and build the new structure. Named after the late Donald Harrison Sr., a Big Chief for several Mardi Gras Indian tribes, the building is the first physical manifestation of his passions for the community, says Herreast Harrison, his wife.

The building's two main components are an indoor classroom and an outdoor performance space and stage. In those areas, Harrison said she hopes to have regular health-focused community programs for adults and children, such as exercise groups, healthy food presentations and tobacco-free living education.

It was these programs and goals that Tulane architecture students and faculty members said they kept in mind when designing the structure.

“They need the physical infrastructure to expand their program,” said [Scott Ruff](#), an associate professor of architecture who is leading the Guardians Institute project with Seth Welty, adjunct instructor in the [Tulane School of Architecture](#).

Eventually Harrison and her family, who run the institute, want to expand the site into a campus that includes a museum. For now, though, Harrison is enjoying the moment.

“I'm just so thankful and amazed,” Harrison said. “It's my passion to do this because my husband had a passion for the culture and education.”

Naomi King is the communications and training coordinator for the Prevention Research Center at Tulane.