In the late 1970s, the Gordon Plaza was built on a former site of an agricultural street landfill in New Orleans. This landfill was maintained for approximately 40 years and caused numerous underground fires that burned for decades. Gordon Plaza was a federal government-funded subdivision in the upper ninth ward that provided affordable housing to lower-income families.

In 1987, the Orleans Parish School Board opened Robert R. Moton Elementary School adjacent to the Gordon Plaza subdivision. Before being built, the school board was aware of how the land was utilized, and in an attempt to clean and level the area, it added approximately five feet of fresh soil to cover the preexisting land. Students, teachers, and families began to show signs of lead poisoning and suffered from respiratory issues and cancer, resulting in deaths.

By 1994, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) came to test the soil at both the school and surrounding neighborhoods of Gordan Plaza and Desire. These lands tested positive for radioactive material, which was later determined to cause the sickness. In an attempt to rectify the issues with the land, the EPA replaced several feet of topsoil. The school was closed in 1994 by the school board and was turned into a Catholic School for the next seven years. It was not until the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that the school was closed for good.

Schools in lower-income communities typically have students who don’t have health insurance, resulting in longer periods of illness and extended periods of absences from school. The school has been rebuilt in a new location with another lower-income community and currently serves 94% of African American students and 4% of Latino students. Of the 98% of the students being educated at Moton Elementary, 95% receive free or reduced-price lunches.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) statistics reported that 4.2% or 3 million children did not have health insurance in 2022. These are some of the same children and families that Ordinarie Heros serves daily.

Work Cited

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