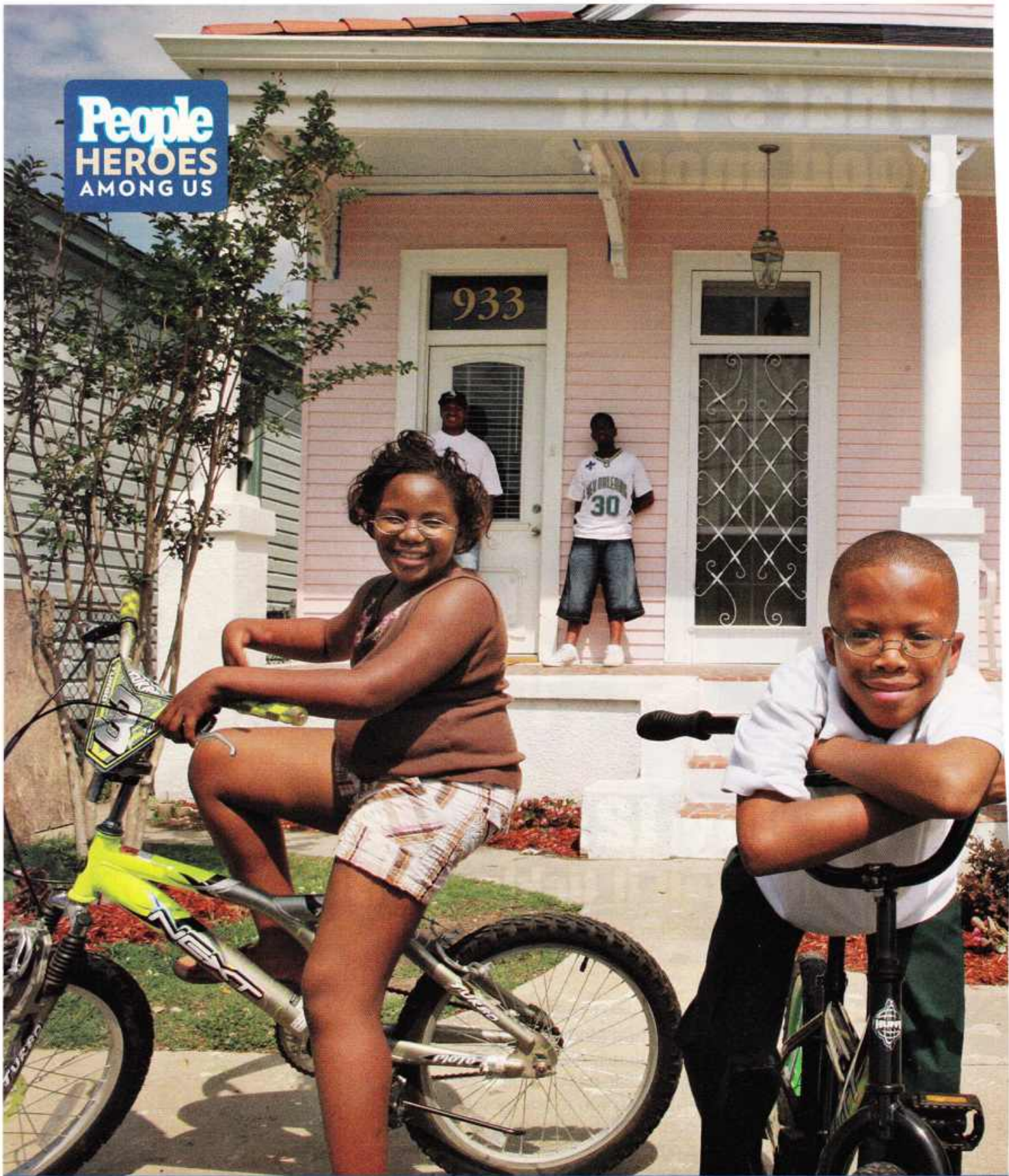
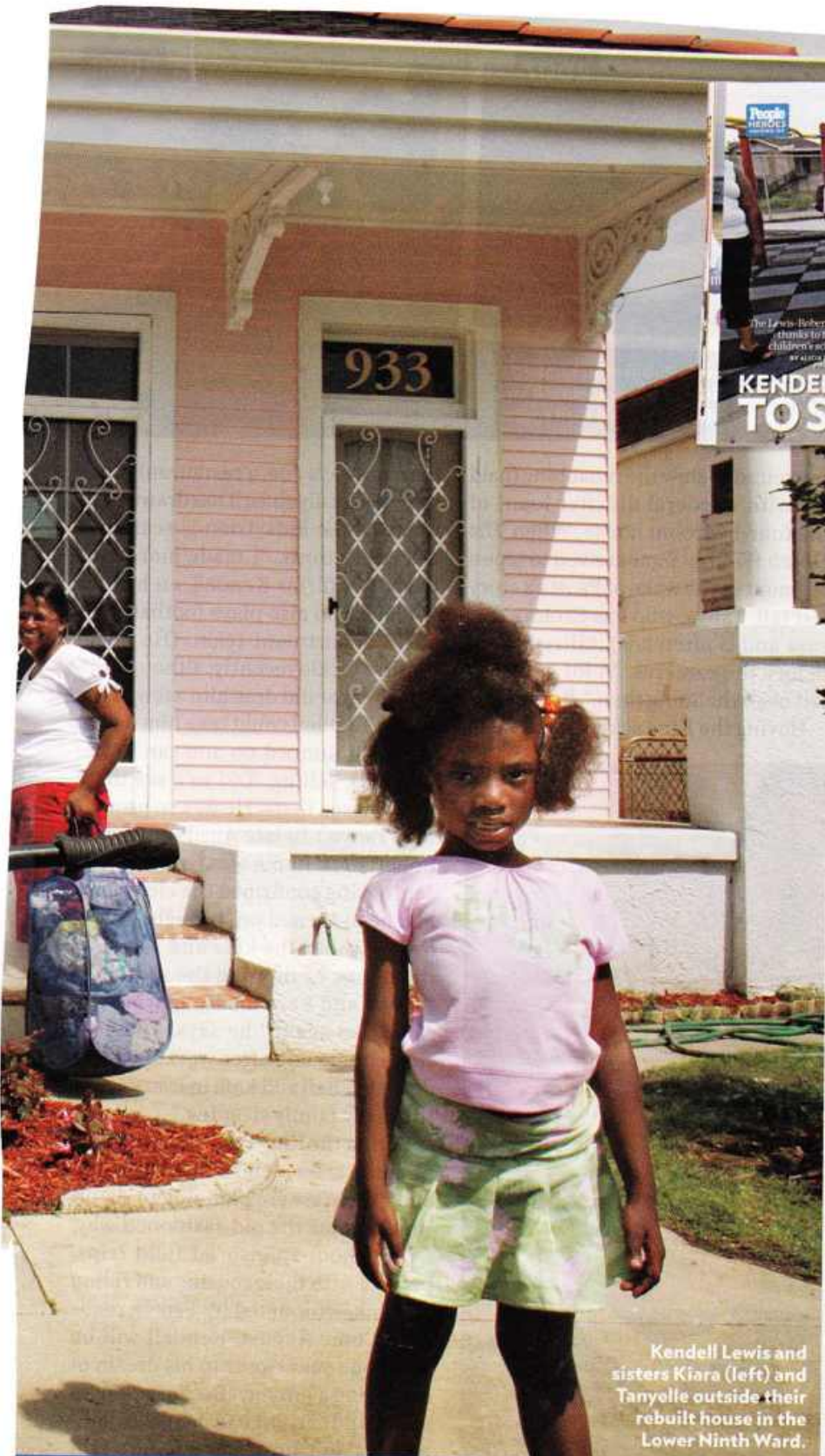


People
HEROES
AMONG US



SCHOOL'S OUT!



Kendell Lewis and sisters Kiara (left) and Tanyelle outside their rebuilt house in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Last year PEOPLE visited fourth grader Kendell Lewis on his first day back at a New Orleans school wiped out by Katrina. Now he's got good grades and a new home **BY ANNE LANG**



KENDELL GOES BACK TO SCHOOL

It was the morning of May 15, and Breeda Thompson had a mini crisis on her hands. A teacher at New Orleans' Martin Luther King School for Science & Technology, she found herself in the dark, literally, along with her 22 fifth graders, when a fierce rainstorm and high winds knocked down a power line. Thompson knew what would happen next, since at this particular school, in this particular city, extreme weather brings bad memories. "When the lights flickered and the trees began to sway, some of the children screamed," she recalls. "I told them, 'The weatherman predicted stormy weather today, but he didn't predict a hurricane, so you don't need to worry.'"

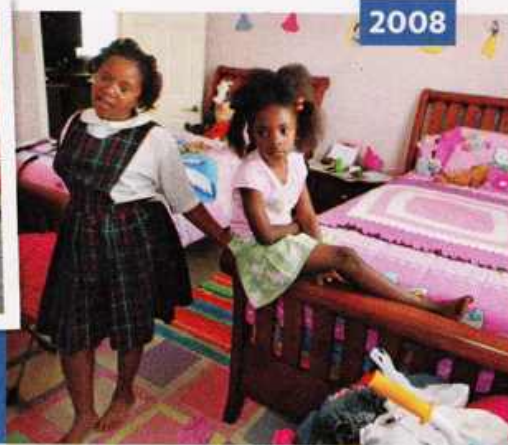
Heavy weather may still cause problems. But for the staff and 600 students of the Lower Ninth Ward's only public elementary school to reopen since Hurricane Katrina—a remarkable comeback chronicled in PEOPLE last year (Aug. 27, 2007)—the end of the first school year is a time for rejoicing. Enrollment is up by a third since the beginning of the school year, nearly the entire pre-storm staff has returned, and President Bush spent three hours at school last August, paying tribute to the tenacity of the community coming back to life around it. Says principal Doris Hicks, who led the effort to rebuild: "We have been inundated with donations—books for our library, school supplies and also money, which has really helped to keep us afloat." The school has a new high-profile friend: Brad Pitt has been using the building for meetings of his

Make It Right Foundation reconstruction group. "Brad has given me his promise he's going to do some special things with us," says Hicks, 65, with a smile. "We're not going to let him forget!"

There's still plenty to be done. A third of the King school families are still living in cramped FEMA trailers, according to Hicks. But gradually they're moving out. Last year fourth grader Kendell Lewis was sharing a double bed in a trailer with his mother, Tanya, and sisters Kiara, now 8, and Tanyelle, 6. His 17-year-old brother Larry and stepdad, Joe, 47, hunkered down in a second trailer parked at a dry cleaner's near the family's half-collapsed shell of a house on Lizardi Street. "I had to do my homework in the bed," says Kendell, a professorial-looking old soul in an 11-year-old's body. Delays with contractors, missed inspection deadlines, rising costs—all



2007
Tanya Lewis-Robertson bunked with her kids in a trailer. Now Kiara and Tanyelle have their own room.



conspired to slow the rehabbing (paid for with a federal disaster loan) of the four-bedroom house. When *The Oprah Winfrey Show* arrived to tape a segment in the wake of PEOPLE's story last fall, Tanya, who has Crohn's disease and is often hospitalized, wept before the cameras. "A lot of things felt overwhelming then," she says.

Having the King school open was a

blessing, says Joe, a restaurant manager, especially since it has drawn back many of the kids' friends scattered after the storm. "I made more new friends," affirms Kendell, an honors student who also plays football on a parks department team. (He made his first tackle recently, although the other player did drag him a few yards before Kendell could take him down. "Kendell jumped up and ran to the sidelines, yelling, 'Did y'all see that? Did y'all see that?'" He was so proud," says Tanya.) In late April the Lewis-Robertsons' home was ready at last. Joe, having confirmed the electricity had been turned on, brought Tanya over without the kids and gave her the honor of flipping the switches. "Tanya and I are finally sharing the same bed again," he says. "When I come home late after work, I can go down the hall and look in every room to see my family sleeping."

Back at the King school, all will soon be quiet; classes end May 29. Kendell and his sisters are planning to spend the summer the old-fashioned way, with school-sponsored field trips, playing with their cousins and riding new bikes (donated by PEOPLE readers). Come August, Kendell will be back, one year closer to his dream of becoming a lawyer. "Because they're smart and can put bad people in jail," he says. For now, though, he's still savoring the first-in-a-lifetime thrill of having his own bedroom. "I'm most thankful for my house," he says, "and that my family is okay." ●



"Every day you see more people back [in the neighborhood]," says a hopeful Doris Hicks (surrounded by her students).