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ENTERTAINMENT

The town Frank Stronach built

MONTREAL—Filmmaker Abbey Neidik is glad he stuck around to keep the cameras rolling for his up-to-the-minute documentary *Canadaville, USA*.

By **Nelson Wyatt** THE CANADIAN PRESS

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MONTREAL—Filmmaker Abbey Neidik is glad he stuck around to keep the cameras rolling for his up-to-the-minute documentary *Canadaville, USA*.

Otherwise, his ending probably would have been a lot less uplifting.

"In the first year, there were always problems," he said. "There were drug problems, there were children being taken away and you could just see there was a general kind of depression that was there.

"We would go there every couple of months and start filming and you would not see anyone on the streets. They're all barricaded in their houses. And I only started to understand that it was the shock of Katrina and losing everything.... It took time to heal."

Neidik's film, *Canadaville, USA*, is ultimately a story about the triumph of the human spirit and compassion.

Shot over two years, it tells how Canadian auto-parts baron Frank Stronach was deeply touched by the plight of refugees from Hurricane Katrina in

August 2005 and created a Louisiana village to give 300 of the poorest disaster victims new starts.

The refugees, who affectionately dubbed the community Canadaville, are given five years of rent-free living and the chance to participate in an ambitious organic farm. Many of them come from New Orleans' tough Ninth Ward and they have a hard time adjusting to their new rural surroundings.

The documentary, to be broadcast tonight at 9 on CBC, tracks several people, including Cindy, a single mother with two kids who are taken away from her when authorities learn she is addicted to painkillers.

There's also Shane Carmichael, Canadaville's on-site manager from Toronto, who leads the efforts to get the community up and running and whose efforts have a surprising payoff in the end.

He's the real face of Stronach's Magna International in the film because Stronach is barely seen except at media events.

But probably one of the most compelling stories in the film is that of Kevin and Michelle Johnson and their six children.

Kevin and Michelle both come from troubled pasts: he was thrown out of a third-storey window as a youth by his father; she was raped by her stepfather and thrown out by her mother when she learned of the abuse.

Kevin and Michelle met on the street and have struggled with unemployment, a lack of social skills and brushes with the law as they try to keep their family together. At one point in the documentary, Kevin even violates his probation and takes his family on the run. But even that brings another surprise.

Not everything in *Canadaville, USA* is smooth sailing. Besides the ups and downs faced by the people in the film, there is also the cool reception given to the new arrivals by some of the residents and mayor of nearby Simmesport, La., which is also plagued with unemployment.

Neidik and producer Irene Angelico say questions still remain about the role of companies in helping out in such a manner – indeed there was much cynicism initially about Stronach’s project – but the filmmakers give the tycoon full marks for his efforts.

Canadaville remains a work in progress and one that Neidik and Angelico would like to track, maybe for a feature-length documentary.

“Basically, it took a year-and-a-half to finally get it off the ground,” Neidik says of the Louisiana community.

“You could see the change once the farm and the chickens were there. There was a buzz that started. You could feel it in the air.”

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