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Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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Slaying Two Sacred Cows: One Group's Part in Helping New Orleans Reform, Rebuild, and Renew

Ruthie Frierson

Citizens for One Greater New Orleans was a volunteer group of women that exemplified the surge of citizen activism that flourished in New Orleans after Katrina. Alarmed by their realization that local government was too dysfunctional to direct a successful comeback, citizens mobilized and charged at two seemingly untouchable local institutions they deemed ripe for reform, the ineffectual levee board and the notoriously biased board of tax assessors. Using skills honed through years of volunteer work, they mobilized public opinion, lobbied reluctant state lawmakers, and finally achieved success through the passage of constitutional amendments in two separate statewide referendum elections. Reforming these two “sacred cows” was a signal accomplishment that instilled badly needed confidence in government, spurring locals to return and thereby clearing the path for a robust recovery in the Crescent City.

Many ingredients define New Orleans—certainly our music, our food, and our architecture, but most basic and defining of all is water and our relationship with it. Nestled between the Gulf of Mexico and an enormous body of brackish water, the fifty-by-thirty-mile Lake Pontchartrain, the city sits near the mouth of the Mississippi River, which drains water from 41 percent of the lower forty-eight states. We are pelted with an average sixty-five inches of rain a year; famously wet Seattle gets about half that amount. Much of our city is built on land a few feet below sea level, protected from the consequences of that location by a complex system of levees, floodwalls, pumps, and outfall canals. We all own multiple pairs of rain boots; we avoid certain intersections during thunderstorms because of the dangerously deep water that collects there. We New Orleanians know water. We also know corruption, another near-universal part of our city's image. The fatalistic shrug with which locals receive allegations of improper dealings says, essentially, “What yah gonna do?” We laugh that, far from being the worst-governed city in the United States, we are the best-governed in the Caribbean. Roguish officials seem to have a place in many hearts. Wet and crooked, that *was* us.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was the most catastrophic man-made disaster in the nation's history. Katrina changed everything, and every one of us. It was a shock and a wake-up call. Having obeyed Mayor Ray Nagin's order for a mandatory evacuation of the city, our family watched from afar as New Orleans went under water. We saw images of the city's devastation, the horror of people trapped in their houses or on rooftops waiting for rescue, of people in need of water, food, and medical attention, of deaths, of plunder and the sounds of gunfire. Eighty percent of our city was under water for more than three weeks. Our infrastructure was almost completely destroyed—our public facilities, schools, homes, businesses. More than eighteen hundred of our citizens lost their lives and thousands of others were displaced. The challenges we faced to rebuild our city were daunting and unparalleled in our history—on so many levels, and all at the same time. Yet, out of this tragedy of Katrina's aftermath have come opportunities and a new wave of activism and involvement.

Ruthie Frierson is the founder of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, an all-female volunteer reform organization. For her leadership in a movement advancing citizen activism during Southeast Louisiana's darkest hour, she received the Times-Picayune Loving Cup for 2006.

We returned on the first day that anyone was allowed into the deserted city to find that we were among the lucky ones. We lived in the 20 percent of the city that had not flooded, known as “the sliver by the river.” Our house was mostly intact, though damaged by wind. Yet all around us, it looked like our impression of a war zone: deep silence, no birds, no children, just the occasional roaring of distant chain saws, full blackness at night until electricity could be restored to our nearly deserted city.

One day, as I drove to City Park, I became disoriented—no landmarks, just miles and miles of total devastation. I broke down crying. A workman knocked on my car window and said, “Lady, you need help.” I told him I didn’t need help, that I would be fine. He said, “Yes, you do, lady, you do need help,” and with that he handed me a bottle of water and said, “Please take this—it’s all I have to give you—I wish I could help you more.” This was the story of Katrina—of a stranger reaching out to another to ease her pain. My hand was gripped around the bottle all the way home, and it sat on my dresser for years as a reminder of that special gesture of kindness and of the deep pain we all experienced with the loss of our city. I knew at that moment that I had to be involved in our city’s recovery.

Tears came easily to most of us; everyone spoke of having “Katrina moments” in our eerie surroundings, triggered by thoughts of whom and what had been lost. With the flooding that covered most of our city, it would take months before cleanup began, before electricity and communications were restored, before neighborhoods were livable, and six months to a year before school openings allowing children and their parents to return to the city, before key government agencies were up and running; many police and other first responders who had lost their homes had to sleep in their cars. Everywhere we looked was gray and dark. Many who returned suffered from depression and other mental health issues, but treatment was in most instances unavailable. We experienced a period of profound mourning. But gradually, mourning gave way to rage as we realized, terrifyingly: There is no plan; our government will not act!

The eye of the storm actually by-passed the city. The flooding was brought on by breaches of the levees, which failed under the stress of rising water from the lakes that surround the city. Because of poor construction and design compounded by complacency and inattentiveness, the breaches were a catastrophe waiting to happen

Before Katrina, Southeast Louisiana had eight politically appointed levee boards, each with a separate jurisdiction. Though water knows no boundaries, there was no comprehensive review of the levee system. Each board was made up of political appointees, most of whom lacked any expertise in levees or flood control. The US Army Corps of Engineers and the local levee boards were required to do joint annual inspections of the more than one hundred miles of levees. The inspections typically lasted a cursory five hours and were followed by a leisurely lunch. In New Orleans, the board had focused on their non-flood-related assets, such as a casino, marinas, an airport, and land holdings, which distracted them from their primary responsibility of the levees and flood control. Years of corruption, cronyism, and political patronage had stifled the board’s effectiveness, inspiring the local press to comment dryly that this body “had a dismal history of political intrigue.”

I had been a residential realtor for more than eighteen years when Katrina hit the city. Almost immediately after the storm passed, my phone rang from morning to night, with callers in total despair. Was it safe to come back? Should they rebuild? Could they risk it, or should they relocate? It became clearer to me every day that people would not return to start over in our city if they did not feel safe from a future catastrophic flood. Yet in November 2005, in a special session of the

state legislature, a committee in the House of Representatives defeated a bill that would have done much to allay fears and reduce the uncertainty then preventing our recovery.

This measure, sponsored by Senator Walter Boasso and Representative Karen Carter Peterson, would have created a unified, nonpolitical levee board whose members had scientific and technological expertise and a single focus on flood protection. Provision was also made for a non-politically appointed nominating committee to insure the board's autonomy. It was the necessary confidence booster, without which our renewal could not proceed. The New Orleans Business Council had backed the defeated reform bill but the lawmakers in Baton Rouge had killed it in committee, not even letting it get consideration by the full house. The bill did not have the backing of Governor Kathleen Blanco—she was silent on the issue.

This shocking legislative refusal to act was the catalyst that moved us from mourning to rage and from there to action. My thought was to harness that outrage and to organize a petition drive requesting that Governor Blanco call another special session of the state legislature that would focus on flood protection and levee-board reform. I met with Jay Lapeyre, chairman of the New Orleans Business Council, to review the failed levee bill. I asked him to speak to a group of women the Monday after Thanksgiving. In preparation for the meeting, we printed hundreds of packets that included a levee petition, a list of all the legislators who had not supported the levee reform legislation, a page for fifty people to sign the petition, our statement of support, and a very strong letter from the New Orleans Business Council to Governor Blanco, which became a part of our messaging to the public, legislators, and media around the city, state, and nation.

We also made many calls, asking people in turn to call anyone they knew or met. Our efforts paid off: 120 concerned women met at my house. When Lapeyre spoke, he explained to the group why this reform of the levee boards was the number-one priority for our city and region and why the old system needed to be reformed: “[OLD], the Orleans Parish Levee District, claimed to provide and failed to provide local oversight for design and construction of the levees, and design flaws and construction shortcuts by the Corps of Engineers caused the failures. The Corps and OLD were responsible for not providing local oversight. The Levee Board claimed to be on watch and had none of the expertise, independence, or commitment to mission needed for the job.”

These concerned women were excited to see that there was a way to be engaged in reforming and rebuilding our city in a meaningful way. In an article on post-Katrina gender politics, Pamela Tyler observes, “When the *New York Times* reported a ‘wave of citizen activism’ in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, it failed to mention that much of the wave was wearing lipstick and carrying a purse. Mopping up is, and always has been women’s work, so it comes as no surprise that large numbers of local women were active in post-Katrina recovery efforts.”¹

After much discussion, we named ourselves Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans. “Citizens” represents everyone and “Greater” refers to the region where all were affected and belonged to “1” of the eight politically appointed levee boards. Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans was organized as a voice for reform and renewal of a Greater New Orleans and a better Louisiana. We became a grassroots all-volunteer, nonpartisan organization demanding an end to politics as usual. Brash and ambitious, we wanted to rebuild New Orleans with good responsive government, high ethical standards, and accountability at all levels. Lapeyre and the New Orleans Business Council became Citizens for 1’s first coalition partner. We created a website that proved crucial to our success by providing education and two-way communications for us and our website participants. Those who signed a petition gave only their e-mail address, since their homes were flooded and uninhabitable, and we updated our website daily with citizens’ names and e-mail addresses.

Women left the meeting with petitions for levee-board reform and spread out, often in pairs of two across our city wherever people could be found. The drive mushroomed, and churches, civic groups, businesses, and individuals from around the city and around the region sent in petitions. In one afternoon, two thousand e-mails were sent by fax from Covington, Louisiana. We sent our petition to Boston to be translated into Vietnamese, and Father Vien Nguyen, leader of the New Orleans East Vietnamese community, distributed them to his congregation, and soon we had two thousand more signed petitions and supporters. As we branched out throughout the community, we built relationships with individuals, the media, members of the business community and of churches and civic organizations, and some elected and appointed officials at the local and state levels. Our efforts built a new collective voice and trust among citizens from across our city and gave much-needed hope to thousands of our citizens in Southeast Louisiana's darkest hour.

After the initial meeting in November 2005, eight women, all professional and civic leaders, sat at our dining room table to plan strategy, including how to coordinate for the future success of our efforts—and our executive committee was formed. We ranged in age from late forties to eighty. Through our post-Katrina work, we formed a lifelong bond of deep friendship and respect. Among us were the heads of successful businesses, chairs of numerous civic organizations, and members of school and college boards of directors. One member chairs a significant foundation, one is the top residential realtor in Metropolitan New Orleans, and one received the Civilian French Legion Medal of Honor for risking her life to help her countrymen fight the Nazis in World War II. As members of the New Orleans Junior League, a women's community service organization, the majority of us had honed invaluable leadership skills in planning agendas, building coalitions, setting goals and objectives, and chairing community boards and committees. In doing so, we had each created a toolbox we have carried with us the rest of our lives. None of us, however, had ever faced anything so daunting as the task now before us. The dining room was dubbed "the war room." Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans began with women of like background and expanded quickly to become "metro-wide, diverse and irresistible."²

We branded ourselves with red jackets, because we were seeing red and we wanted the legislators to see red too. We designed pins and signs calling for one levee board with a big red "1" in the middle of our logo. We created a PR committee to contact TV, radio, and print media at the local and state levels. One member of the committee ordered signs and stored them at her house; another ordered pins and organized their distribution. One small group took charge of organizing volunteers to distribute thousands of signs throughout the city. Another group planned community meetings to educate the public at six sites across the city. As chairman, I became the voice of Citizens for 1 in the media, at meetings, and later in the legislature. But all of us became skilled at simple focused messaging, because every day we encountered media and citizens with questions

Jay Lapeyre and his company helped us set up a more comprehensive website, which became a powerful voice to express citizen opinions to our state legislators and local city council. We met every afternoon for the three and a half weeks of the petition drive to plan for future outreach. My doorbell seemed to ring steadily from morning to evening, with people dropping off petitions. Everyone had a story, and we listened with sadness and concern as they recounted their heartbreaking losses. In a breathless three and a half weeks, we had garnered fifty-three thousand signed petitions, representing a third of our city's returned population. After this surge of activism, Governor Blanco called another special session of the state legislature on flood protection and levee-board reform and consolidation in Southeast Louisiana.

In preparation for the special session, Randy Haynie, the New Orleans Business Council lobbyist, trained a hundred of us in how to be effective, successful citizen lobbyists with an understanding of the ins and outs of procedures and appropriate protocol. The challenge was to mobilize and train volunteers for this legislative session. It was a grassroots movement. The majority of volunteers had never been involved in political activity, much less advocacy. But they saw this as an opportunity for real change. These women were willing to make the sacrifice and take time away from family and jobs to make this reform a reality. Our approach was to stay focused on the issue, to have facts to back up our messaging, and to never attack individuals.

On February 6, 2006, we staged a rally on the steps of the State Capitol on the opening day of the session. From across the city we had bused more than twelve hundred citizens, wearing red jackets, scarfs, ties, and Citizens for 1 pins. The women got off the buses and, in a sea of red, walked to the Capitol steps, carrying signs that read, “One Levee Board Voice” and “United we stand, divided we flood.” The one that caught the most media attention read, “Drove my Chevy to the levee, and it floated away.” It was spectacular. After I spoke briefly to the crowd of supporters and restated our position, Governor Blanco addressed the crowd in support of levee-board reform. She was followed by speakers from the Vietnamese, Hispanic, black, and white communities who reinforced our position. Representative from the media were everywhere that day and throughout the legislative session, providing significant coverage of our activities on the local, state, and national levels.

For the two-and-a-half-week special session, large numbers of our volunteers were very visible at the Capitol every day. Citizens for 1 members, now known as “the Redcoats,” attended and testified at all committee meetings and attended all general sessions in the House and Senate. We met with individual members of the committees that were hearing the bill before their committees met to take a vote. We met with the legislators who had voted against the bill in the November special session. It was a battle that required constant vigilance, which we maintained by making phone calls, posting e-mails on our website, and giving testimony and many interviews with local, state, and national media.

We practically lived at the Capitol. Many of us slept in sleeping bags on the floor of places rented by evacuees from New Orleans. Several representatives told us that the levee-board reform would never pass. Opponents worked to undermine and weaken the legislation or to kill the bill in committee. But as citizen volunteers we knew it was government of, by, and for the people and that it was our Capitol, and so we persisted. Longtime observers of the legislative scene said that we were a different breed of lobbyists: We were prepared with the facts and, as some legislators put it, we “never went away.”

Throughout the session, Citizens for 1 sent our messages to our interactive website participants, who played a significant role by responding directly to legislators through e-mails and phone calls. Our volunteers contacted their state representatives, most for the first time, and in the process, became overnight advocates. Through knowledge, commitment, a laser focus, and passion for our cause, we built strong alliances with many reform-minded legislators, who proved invaluable to our case.

Though the Senate committee that heard the levee-board legislation and the Senate voted to pass the bill, the big challenge facing us was the vote by the House committee. They had defeated the bill in the November 2005 special session of the state legislature. On the day the key vote was called by the House committee hearing the levee bill, we noticed the posting of the 9:30 a.m. meeting had been changed to 4:30 that afternoon. Perhaps legislators hoped we would go back home to New Orleans before then. But, to their surprise, a large contingent of Red Coats attended.

The meeting went on until 2:30 in the morning. The committee voted to defeat the bill. Our hearts sank—we thought it was over. As I left the meeting, Robert Travis Scott, Capitol Bureau chief of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, asked me how I felt. I said, “Was it worth all the effort?” He said, “Yes, it is not over yet.”

That same morning, the conference committee met and a compromise was reached. The revised bill created two levee boards, one on the east bank of the Mississippi River to be known as the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority East (SLFPA-E) and one on the west bank to be known as the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority West (SLFPA-W). The bill provided for the appointment of one member from each parish within the territorial jurisdiction of the authorities. The SLFPA-E board would be required to have nine members, five of whom must be an engineer or a professional in a related field such as geotechnical, hydrological, or environmental science. Of those five, one would have to be a civil engineer. Two members would have to be professionals in disciplines other than engineering, geotechnical, hydrological, or environmental science and have at least ten years of professional experience in that discipline, and two members would be at-large. SLFPA-W would have seven members with similar requirements. The governor would select board members from a list of up to three nominees proposed in each category by the nominating committee for each board.

The bill also provided for a non-politically appointed nominating committee consisting of members designated by the Public Affairs Research Council, the Council for a Better Louisiana, the Association of State Floodplain Managers, the National Academy of Engineering, the National Society of Black Engineers, the American Institute of Hydrology, the school of Science and Engineering at Tulane University, the College of Engineering at Louisiana State University, the National Society of Professional Engineers, and the American Society of Civil Engineers.

On Valentine’s Day 2006, Senator Boasso called me and said, “Bring up the Redcoats—we have reached an acceptable compromise in conference committee that Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans can support.” Governor Blanco, dressed in Valentine’s Day red, attended the meeting in Senate chambers, pleased with the outcome we all had supported. She turned to me and said, “This is the toughest session I can remember. There were no carrots!”

A member of the conference committee told me that members of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans had been instrumental in the conference committee’s decision to find a compromise. The legislature finally passed the historic legislation that dissolved local levee commissioners and created the East bank and West bank Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authorities. The legislation now required passage of a statewide constitutional amendment by a vote that would be held September 30, 2006.

The Louisiana congressional delegation warned that it would be difficult to persuade Washington to allocate the billions that were needed to rebuild our city unless the legislature enacted the necessary reforms to city government. As New Orleans faced the challenge of a massive recovery, issues related to local property valuations came into focus. Since the 1930s, good-government reformers had assailed the property-tax collection system, which encompassed seven separate assessor offices, for being unfair and rife with political patronage. It became clear after Katrina that local property assessments were so flawed as to be worthless in valuing damages done by the storm and flood. The New Orleans Bureau of Governmental Research had published excellent reports over the years on the need for citizens to address this issue, but the reports sat on shelves and no action was taken. These reports would soon be put to good use. Just as Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans had demanded change in the levee-board system to protect the city from catastrophic storms, Citizens for 1 took up the gauntlet demanding change and protection from the

city's antiquated and unfair property-assessment system. Many citizens through our website and in personal calls asked us to take on this needed reform. Once again, we would be calling for professional standards and honest, transparent government.

Members of Citizens for 1 saw an opportunity to change the entrenched property-assessment system and voiced a public call for assessor reform legislation that would consolidate the seven assessor offices into a single office that would require a uniform method of assessment. We were the only parish in our state and the only large city, except Indianapolis, in our country with more than one assessor. The existing system was wasteful and unfair, and it required deal making and cozy relationships with the friendly neighborhood assessor—one whose family had held the position for more than a hundred years. Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans and the New Orleans Business Council worked directly with lawmakers to get a bill introduced calling for the reform and consolidation of assessor offices in Orleans Parish. Representative Austin Badon and Senator Ann Duplessis authored the bill.

Members of Citizens for 1 again spent weeks at the State Capitol, attending and testifying at every legislative committee hearing on the bill while it was under debate. We were met with strong opposition, because two assessors' family members were on the House Ways and Means Committee hearing the bill and they refused to recuse themselves. Our response to the opposition's arguments was that a committee vote in support of the bill would give the citizens of Orleans Parish and the state of Louisiana the right to decide the outcome and allow for democratic principles to prevail through a referendum. It would not be a vote to abolish the offices of the seven assessors. After much acrimony and heated debate, the bill was passed out of committee and sent to the full house, where the House voted 98–2 approval. Only two New Orleans area legislators cast no votes, but the two representatives related to assessors who had argued against the measure were recorded as absent on the final vote.

The bill finally passed in both House and Senate. The legislation now required passage of a statewide constitutional amendment in a referendum to be held on November 7, 2006. This amendment needed to pass in both the state and Orleans Parish.

The passage of these two reform bills on levees and assessors by the state legislature was a significant and historic victory that signaled that positive change and reform had begun in Louisiana. In 2006, through our Citizens for 1 website, more than 1.75 million e-mails were sent to state legislators. Ashton Phelps, publisher of the *Times-Picayune*, in his remarks about Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans on March 25, 2007, said, "These citizens want a safe city behind sound levees so that no generation would endure what we have endured, and more than that they want honest, efficient city government, one free of old habits of cronyism and patronage, that stifles progress and made us all unsafe."

In summer and early fall 2006 our focus was to plan our strategy and organize our base for the fall constitutional amendment votes across the state. With support from the New Orleans Business Council, our group raised \$850,000 to fund public education efforts, and we mounted statewide print, radio, and television campaigns. We identified key message strategies and tested these messages through market research to determine what spoke to the people. On levees, the simple message was about safety and flood protection. For assessors, it was Why pay seven to do the job of one? We developed a disciplined and focused message strategy and carried the same message throughout in campaign literature, advertisements, and radio and television spots. Because timing was important, television and radio spots and advertising were timed to run just ten days before the two elections. We spoke to numerous civic and business organizations around the city and the state. Our volunteers and supporters across the city attended community meetings,

informed and worked with other civic organizations, neighborhood associations, and churches, including African American, Hispanic, and Vietnamese communities, and organized neighborhood get-out-the vote campaigns. Citizens for 1 flooded the city with One Levee Board signs that read “Vote Amendment 3” and placed them near every polling station before the September 30 vote. Before the November 7 vote on assessors, we placed Citizens for 1 signs that read “Vote Amendment 7.” Hundreds of community volunteers walked neighborhoods going door-to-door with our flyers. Huge signs were hung around the city in strategic locations. We used our website to garner support from more than twenty thousand website participants. We wrote opinion editorials and letters to the editor in papers around the state and were interviewed on radio and television stations.

A seventeen-page feature article by Charles Mann on the one-year anniversary of Katrina appeared in the August 2006 issue of *Fortune* magazine. Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans was featured in the article. “Against all that,” Mann writes, “the efforts of Ruthie Frierson and her accidental activists to save a city and its economy seem a slender reed to lean on. The scale of this rebuilding effort is a reminder of the limits of local self-reliance and the need for effective government. Yet New Orleans’ best chance for recovery may lie in its reawakened sense of community, born of shared disaster—because government, it is now clear, will not act unless pushed hard.”

On the days of the votes, September 30 and November 7, we were at major intersections waving our Get-out-the-vote signs for each reform measure. Some of us drove around the city in cars, using megaphones and asking everyone to get to the polls to vote. Some of us rode on a fire truck, which created quite a sensation!

The results were resounding victories—the amendments passed with wide majorities throughout the state—for levees with 94 percent in Orleans Parish and 81 percent statewide. The assessor amendment received 80 percent statewide and 70 percent approval in Orleans. These two successful reform efforts brought a new era of professionalism, accountability, and transparency to the Greater New Orleans area. The most powerful thing about the votes was that the yeas crossed over former neighborhood, racial, and economic divides. The independent weekly newspaper *Gambit* ranked the stunning consolidations of the levee boards and assessor system as the number-one story of 2006.

After the levee-board reforms, the East and West Authorities brought the talent, focus, and independence needed to provide oversight of the design and construction and ongoing maintenance for miles of levee and pumping systems that protect the three-parish area. Inspection policies were included in a host of reforms in levee-board management after Katrina. The new \$14.5 billion storm protection system on the east bank of the river, overseen by the new SLFPA-E, now has eleven full-time trained staff doing full-time checks on the levees. A three-man team is assigned to check the 39 miles of flood walls and 117 miles of levees four times a year, each check taking six weeks. A team of eight employees open and close 204 floodgates and 102 flood valves in Orleans throughout the year. “Absolutely better inspections might have found signs of trouble,” Paul Kemp, a Louisiana State University geologist, member of the local flood authority board, and co-author of the report clearing local levee boards of causing the engineering failures, said. “There’s no question what we are doing today is night and day from the old system.”³

The passage of the assessor reform and consolidation amendments made the property-assessment system more equitable, more transparent, and more efficient for property owners, and it made the city more attractive to business. Also, having one assessor office saved money for the city, allowing more funding for critical services for schools, police, and fire protection.

The passage of these two statewide levee board and assessor amendments was the beginning of a reform movement that gave Citizens for 1 the stature and courage to focus on big issues that have no finish line but instead call for slow, incremental progress: criminal justice, pre-K–12 public education, and ethics/good government reform. Among these needed reforms were the creation of a New Orleans Ethics Review Board, the permanent New Orleans Office of Inspector General, and the New Orleans Office of Independent Police Monitor; the establishment of a 501c3 Court Watch NOLA organization; and the successful passage of legislation that transformed all New Orleans public schools, pre-K–12, into public charter schools.

Our approach to advocacy and the process we use to achieve our goals is simple.

Our committees’ research and educate ourselves and others and advocate and monitor the issues.

- We build and work in broad-based coalitions of civic and business organizations on issues important to the common good of our citizenry.
- We build and sustain relationships with elected and appointed officials at the state and local levels.
- We testify at state and local legislative committees.
- We focus on clear messaging, never attacking individuals.
- We use our website and media contacts to communicate our positions.

In 2010, the Brookings Institution and the Greater New Orleans Data Center reported, “Since 2005, New Orleanians have undertaken more major reforms simultaneously than any other modern city.”⁴

We recognize that our city’s bright future depends on all of our citizens continuing to stay informed, persistent, and engaged. Above all else, we must remain vigilant and never lose sight of the importance of an informed citizenry—for we get the government we demand.

Yes, Katrina did change everything and every one of us. Success came with broad-based support from diverse groups: churches, individuals, neighborhood associations, civic and business organizations, and city and statewide elected officials committed to reform. These successes demonstrated the power of the citizen voice and gave our citizens much-needed hope that together we can reform, renew, and rebuild our city and region, stronger and better than before Katrina. Wet and crooked? Not so much anymore, thanks to a roomful of women who were first enraged and then engaged.

Notes

¹ Pamela Tyler, “The Post-Katrina Semiseparate World of Gender Politics,” in “Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue?,” special issue, *Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (December 2007): 780.

² Clancy DuBos, “Da Winnas and Da Loozas,” *Gambit Weekly*, November 14, 2006.

³ Bob Marshall, “Post-Katrina Reforms Make Levee, Floodwall Inspections a Daily Job,” *The Lens*, August 6, 2015, <https://thelensnola.org/2015/08/06/post-katrina-reforms-make-levee-floodwall-inspections-a-daily-job/>.

⁴ Amy Liu and Allison Plyer, “The New Orleans Index at Five: An Overview of Greater New Orleans—From Recovery to Transformation,” Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program and Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, August 2010, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/08neworleansindex.pdf>.