



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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Times-Picayune

Post-Katrina activist gets TP Loving Cup

Ruthie Frierson rejects politics as usual

Sunday, February 18, 2007

By Michelle Krupa, Staff writer

It began with one woman's sorrow.

Ruthie Frierson returned in October 2005 to her Uptown home, and still today, when she recalls that time, she speaks of the silence. National Guard trucks rumbled down half-empty streets. Chainsaws whirred. But stillness emanated from the nearby Audubon Park playground.

No children.

A grandmother and former high school teacher, Frierson agonized over the absence of families in New Orleans after the flood. As a real estate agent, she knew it would take a renewed sense of security to draw them home. So weeks later, when reform of the state's fractured levee board system appeared to be dying in Baton Rouge, Frierson's anguish turned to anger.

That's when the movement took off.

In the end, Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans, the civic group Frierson formed to fight for levee board consolidation, would manage not only to win on that issue but also to abolish the city's century-old system of multiple municipal assessors, which many citizens, Frierson among them, saw as another example of ineffective government threatening the recovery.

Perhaps most important, though, the organization that took its first steps in Frierson's Uptown home helped foment an unprecedented swell of citizen participation that, without question, has been an engine of the region's recovery.

"I went from mourning to rage to hope through action," she said. "It brought a renewed sense of hope at a time of total despair."

For her leadership in a movement that slayed two sacred cows of Louisiana politics and advanced civic activism during southeast Louisiana's darkest hour, Frierson, 66, has been selected to receive The Times-Picayune Loving Cup for 2006. The Loving Cup has been awarded since 1901 to women and men who have worked unselfishly for the community without expectation of public recognition or material reward.

Lessons from history

Though Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans marked her first foray into the convoluted world of politics, volunteerism long had been a foundation of Frierson's life. During her years as a student at Louise S. McGehee School, she volunteered at Crippled Children's Hospital, now Children's Hospital of New Orleans, and visited the elderly with the Little Sisters of the Poor.

After graduating from Newcomb College, Frierson taught history at Riverdale High School in Old Jefferson, where she stressed the importance of voting and civic engagement. Three years later, she married Lou Frierson, whom she calls her "mentor and best friend." The couple raised two sons, Lou Jr. and George.

A past president of the Junior League, Frierson remained active in the community, with a primary focus on education. Among many volunteer roles, she served on the boards of McGehee and Isidore Newman School and organized volunteer services at New Orleans public schools. She was board chairman of the Louisiana Nature and Science Center, a past president of the New Orleans Town Gardeners, as well as a former board member of

the Metropolitan Council on Aging, Longue Vue House and Gardens and the Hermann-Grima Historic House.

She is numbered among Louisiana Speaks Champions for 2006, which is the long-range planning committee for Louisiana Recovery Authority, and has been an elder at St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church for more than 20 years.

Her community ties proved critical 15 months ago, when Frierson called for support to push the Legislature to merge southeast Louisiana's patchwork of levee boards into a single oversight body. More than 120 people packed her Walnut Street dining room. They christened it "the war room."

From that moment, Frierson's laser-like focus drove the mission. Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans amassed 53,000 signatures in 3 1/2 weeks calling for legislators to enact levee board reform. Members, attired in trademark red scarves and blazers, attended every committee hearing on the matter. Frierson took the message to editorial boards and the national news media.

'Assertive, not aggressive'

At the Capitol, lawmakers took notice, though at first, the "ladies in red" daunted no one, said state Sen. Water Boasso, who sponsored a key levee board bill.

"They were so pure and ambitious," he said. "So many people are naive to the political process and the way it works. They were in awe in the sense that they could not believe that politics was so parochial to the (point) that it's not about the people."

But Frierson would not concede her good-government ideals. Under her direction to be "assertive, not aggressive," Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans made its message stick. The patchwork of levee boards in southeast Louisiana was consolidated into two superboards -- one on either side of the Mississippi River -- by means of legislation that led to a successful statewide referendum on the necessary constitutional amendment.

"She probably is the greatest example of a steel magnolia I've ever seen," said Karyn Noles Bewley, a managing director of the Aquarium of the Americas and a member of the executive committee of Citizens For 1 Great New Orleans.

Even when patronage-driven politics threatened to derail the effort, Frierson drew on her belief that the power of ordinary citizens would trounce poor governance, said Jay Lapeyre, chairman of the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region and the chairman of Frierson's Citizens committee.

"There were plenty of times when we all doubted the outcome and we faced obstacles that we didn't know we could overcome," he said "Ruthie's strength -- despite that anxiety, despite that fear -- was to continue to press forward."

Drawing on her expertise in U.S. history, Frierson likens the Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans movement to the American Revolution: "You can compromise on strategy but not on principle," she said. And she notes that the group's second initiative -- merging New Orleans' antiquated system of seven property assessors into a single office -- took root in the same democratic principles.

Silver lining

Even as Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans continues to push for reducing crime and improving education, Frierson beams at the outcome of its first two campaigns: overwhelming support in statewide ballot initiatives for the causes the group championed. And she doesn't minimize the even more sweeping change that her group helped advance.

"The best thing that happened since Katrina was the new wave of activism, like I'd never seen before," she said.

It's a notion shared by many, including some of the insiders whose way of doing business Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans strove to upend.

"What these ladies proved, with Ruthie at the helm, is that you can hold government accountable if you're willing to take a little time out of your life to make it happen," Boasso said.

"It was a pilgrimage, what they did," he said. "It was a revolution."

Previous Loving Cup winners are:

Frank T. Howard, 1901; Isidore Newman, 1902; Sophie B. Wright, 1903; Dr. A.W. DeRoaldes, 1904; Charles Janvier, 1905; W.R. Bloomfield, 1906; Ida Richardson, 1907.

No awards were presented in 1908 or 1909.

Dr. Sara T. Mayo, 1910; Hugh McCloskey, 1911; R.M. Walmsley, 1912; Leon C. Simon, 1913; Deborah Milliken, 1914; W.B. Thompson, 1915; W.R. Irby, 1916; Mrs. John Dibert, 1917; Eleanor McMain, 1918; Mrs. James Oscar Nixon, 1919; Charles Weinberger, 1920; Jean Gordon, 1921; Rudolf S. Hecht, 1922; Simon Schwartz, 1923; Frank B. Williams, 1924; Rabbi Emil W. Leipziger, 1925; W.J. Warrington, 1926.

J.P. Butler, 1927; Brig. Gen. Allison Owen, 1928; Mrs. A.J. Stallings, 1929. Edgar B. Stern, 1930; B.C. Casanas, 1931; Thomas F. Cunningham, 1932; Felix P. Dreyfous, 1933; Charles A. Favrot, 1934; Warren Kearny, 1935. Nicholas Bauer, 1936; Col. L. Kemper Williams, 1937; Samuel Zemurray, 1938; Joseph A. Airey, 1939; Dr. Rudolph Matas, 1940; Charles E. Dunbar Jr., 1941; William G. Zetzmann, 1942; Sister Stanislaus Malone, 1943; A.B. Paterson, 1944; Dr. Alton Ochsner, 1945; Mrs. Joseph E. Friend, 1946; Mrs. Charles F. Buck Jr., 1947; Charles E. Fenner, 1948; Mrs. James Weak's Reily, 1949; Harry Latter, 1950.

Harry McCall, 1951; Joseph H. Epstein, 1952; Mrs. Ernest A. Robin, 1953; Carmelite Janvier, 1954; A.B. Freeman, 1955; Clifford F. Favrot, 1956; Capt. Neville Levy, 1957; Crawford H. Ellis, 1958; James Gilly Jr., 1959; Martha Gilmore Robinson, 1960; Leon Heymann, 1961; Mrs. Robert Laird, 1962; Percival Stern, 1963; Edith Stern, 1964; Darwin S. Fenner, 1965; Edgar A.G. Bright, 1966; Rabbi Julian B. Feibelman, 1967; Harold Salmon Sr., 1968; Lucile Blum, 1969; Lester J. Lautenschlaeger, 1970; the Rev. J.D. Grey, 1971; Clayton L. Nairne, 1972; Norma Monnin Hynes, 1973; William B. Burkenroad Jr., 1974; Francis C. Doyle, 1975; Albert W. Dent, 1976; Richard West Freeman, 1977; the Rev. Peter V. Rogers, 1978; Harry McCall Jr., 1979.

James J. Coleman Sr., 1980; Armand LeGardeur, 1981; Archbishop Philip Hannan, 1982; Ed Rowley, 1983; Rosa Freeman Keller, 1984; Bryan Bell, 1985; Michael J. Molony Jr., 1986; Mary Pumilia, 1987; A. Louis Read, 1988; Dave Dixon, 1989; Carolyn Gay "Blondie" Labouisse, 1990; Norman Francis, 1991; Diana Lewis, 1992; John F. Bricker, 1993; Betty Wisdom, 1994; Anne Milling, 1995; Lester Kabacoff, 1996; Leah Chase, 1997; Sunny Norman, 1998; Herschel L. Abbott Jr., 1999; Alden McDonald, 2000; Waldemar Nelson, 2001; C. Allen Favrot, 2002; Fran Villere, 2003; Moise Steeg Jr., 2004; and Louis Freeman, 2005.

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