

AS SEEN IN THE AUGUST 2015 ISSUE



## RUTHIE FRIERSON

FOUNDER AND CHAIR EMERITUS, CITIZENS FOR 1 GREATER NEW ORLEANS

Ask anyone to describe Ruthie Frierson, and words such as “fearless, unselfish, focused” come to mind. So in the days after Katrina and the levee breaches, Frierson felt called to action. Then only three months after New Orleans flooded, the Louisiana State Legislature rejected a bill to consolidate and reform the inefficient Levee Boards in south Louisiana. “It made no sense. How could we get New Orleanians home if they didn’t feel safe?” she says. It then became clear: With laser focus Frierson assembled a coalition of concerned citizens to demand the state reform this broken system.

Frierson, a long-time community leader and businesswoman, harnessed the anger and frustration of the local community, and with the support of The Business Council of New Orleans assembled 120 women who formed Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, a grass roots, non-partisan, non-sectarian organization that now counts 20,000 supporters in the region. Within days of the group’s first meeting, Citizens for 1 created an interactive website to educate the public and elected officials about the need to create a unified levee authority comprised of experts who would operate professionally and transparently. Citizens’ petition demanding that Governor Kathleen Blanco call a special session of the state legislature with the focus on flood protection garnered 53,000 signatures. More than 1,200 men and women dressed in trademark red jackets rallied on opening day in front of the capital in support of levee board reform. The measure passed, and in September 2006, Louisiana voters approved a constitutional amendment to reform the levee board system.

“It was democracy at its best,” says Frierson. “New Orleanians went from mourning the loss of our city to rage about what really happened to hope for the future and taking action. It worked.”

Armed with experience and support, Citizens for 1 immediately took on another deeply flawed system: Property tax collection and the seven separate assessor offices. Members of Citizens for 1 again spent weeks at the state capital working with legislators and attending and testifying at every legislative committee session while the bill was considered. Following an intense statewide education campaign, the amendment passed with an 80 percent approval of voters statewide, 70 percent in New Orleans in November 2006.

Today, Citizens for 1 continues to serve as a powerful force for change and has formed collaborations with 85 leadership organizations across the region. Through careful research, tireless lobbying, education and monitoring legislation, the group has successfully advocated for reform in criminal justice, governmental ethics and education. Members of Citizens for 1 have attended every legislative session for the past 10 years. They are present at all Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and School Board meetings and many City Council meetings as well. When advocating, members of the organization arrive in Baton Rouge armed with knowledge, commitment and passion for a cause.

“There is power in the collective voice,” says Frierson, who no longer chairs Citizens for 1 but often advises other cities on how to lead such efforts. “It really is a new New Orleans.”