



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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New Orleans Living Magazine

Seize the moment

By Nicole Wrotaen - September 2006 health & fitness

In fighting for New Orleans, Ruthie Frierson and Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans have done just that.

During the past year, many organizations and initiatives have been formed in response to Hurricane Katrina and the devastation it wrought upon the city. One of the groups that has surpassed all expectations and accomplished so much is Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans.

Formed as a nonpartisan, grassroots initiative to be a voice of reform and renewal for the city of New Orleans and a better Louisiana, Citizens for 1 provides a venue for citizens to express their opinions and to get active in rebuilding the city.

The organization represents thousands of people who want levee reform to be a top priority so citizens can return and rebuild knowing that the levees will be stronger and better than before.

When levee reform and consolidation was rejected during the special legislative session last November, Ruthie Frierson, a Prudential Gardener Realtor, along with several other citizens, decided to take action. Soon, a leadership team was formed and Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans was born.

Today, one year after Hurricane Katrina, the group's mission and overriding goal remains the same: to engage citizens and make New Orleans a better place to live.

"This year has been life-changing for me and certainly for all the members of this group," says Frierson, the committee's chairwoman. "This event was catastrophic, and it has impacted our lives in every regard, whether it be dealing with the loss of homes, with disconnected families ... there is so much."

Frierson has seen firsthand what New Orleans has endured and what it still needs, but she recognizes that it has seen an incredible amount of development in one year as well.

"I think there's been growth," she says. "Unfortunately, we grow through pain, and the thing that impresses me the most is how we've reached out to each other and realized that we have to work together as a community through the political process, citizen activism, the business community—people from every walk of life need to come together to build a better community."

Frierson says that this is the only way that rebuilding can occur, because there has been a lot of "mistrust in the past" between citizens and officials.

"There is a lack of trust, and we need to address this ... so we can work together."

As the year has progressed and so many goals have been accomplished by Citizens for 1, Frierson says that one of the most memorable and rewarding things the group has achieved is the petition drive for levee reform: in three weeks more than 53,000 citizens signed it.

"People came together and each person offered a tremendous and tireless commitment," she says. "Our thoughts were to demand that the governor call another special session to focus on the levees."

Which is exactly what happened. After the rejection of levee reform on November 20, Gov. Kathleen Blanco called another special session. "It was really powerful. It was such a victory and a statement for citizen's voices," Frierson says.

One year after Katrina, there is still a lot for Citizens for 1 to do. "Progress is going to be up and down, and it's going to be long term," she says. "I think the primary issues in people's minds right now are citizen safety, keeping businesses here, the crime situation, health care and education, the infrastructure, the potholes, getting insurance companies to work with us We cannot have a city without addressing these." However, she says, the levee issue is a far greater concern. When Citizens for 1 formed, its focus was levee

board reform and consolidation to assure citizen safety. It is still the main priority today and will continue to be in the future.

"Right now we need to stay focused on what's happening in the political arena," she says. "We need to see that politicians are held accountable, that they address the issues that need to be addressed because citizens who are on hold about rebuilding their homes need to have answers."

Citizens for 1 has transitioned into the next phase of its campaign, to pass two initiatives: the Orleans Parish Assessor Reconsolidation on the ballot November 7 and the Regional Levee Board Reform on the September 30 ballot.

"The people of New Orleans must take ownership of these two issues," says Frierson. "Both initiatives are about moving forward as a community and letting the powers that be know that the people are demanding that our public officials act to protect the lives, property and interests of all citizens."

According to Frierson and the executive committee of Citizens for 1, these reforms are the beginning of a movement for recovery, reform and renewal for the city of New Orleans and are vital to making the community a place for families to live and grow. It requires the commitment of all citizens, Frierson says, to seize the moment.

Frierson finds the following quote by American anthropologist Margaret Meade very fitting in regards to the efforts of her organization: "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world ... indeed it is the only thing that ever has."