



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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connected, the newsletter of The Association of Junior Leagues International, Inc.

Steel MagNOL(i)As

Post-Katrina, the women of The Junior League of New Orleans took on corruption and injustice and advocated for coastal restoration, ultimately securing funding for the ecosystem and helping to reform levee management, the tax assessment process, the criminal justice system, education, housing, and ethics. In short, they did anything but wilt.

They say that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Five and a half years after Hurricane Katrina—and to lesser extent Rita, the storm that followed—there is no better illustration of that old adage holding true than a handful of women from The Junior League of New Orleans who weathered the devastation and emerged determined to make things right, each in their own way.

Barbara Bush, a native Tennessean who'd moved to the Big Easy as a college student and who in 2005 was living in a house on a swath of high ground known as the "Sliver by the River," hadn't planned to evacuate. But on that Sunday morning, after enduring several phone calls from her increasingly worried daughter-in-law, the two women and Bush's son headed out of town for the shelter of a cabin the family owned in the woods of Alabama. The drive, which normally would have required two hours, took 12, in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Her husband would follow a few hours later, and they would remain there for three months, for some of that time without any power.

"We were some of the fortunate ones," said Bush, who among other positions, served as the League's President from 1988 to 1989 and is now a Sustainer Advisor.

Sharing a single computer while holed up in the cabin, the foursome quickly discovered that they could communicate by text using their cell phones. They immediately began checking up on friends, finding out where they'd landed, and how much damage they'd suffered. Out of the texts emerged a massive daily email list that participants used to circulate news and updates.

Three weeks into their exile, Bush and her husband were allowed to return to their house just long enough to survey the damage and grab important papers and personal effects.

"We felt very, very blessed," she said, explaining that their old live oaks had been reduced to "skeletons," the electricity and gas were out, the water was brown, the fence blown down, and the roof in need of a replacement.

"There was still water in the Lower Ninth Ward and Interstate 10 had fully buckled," she said. "I remember driving out to Lakeview, stopping the car and sobbing," referring to a section of town that was 10 feet under water. "I felt so bad for the people and guilty that I didn't have more damage."

At the beginning of November, when they arrived back in town to stay for good, their neighborhood had no services, and gas stations and grocery stores had ceased to exist. Her daughter-in-law, who'd taught in a new inner-city school that had flooded, had lost her job and seen some of her students on television in the throng of refugees who'd fled to the Astrodome in Houston.

In the midst of the ruins, Bush's church became a central hub of activity; a source of aid and services to people from near and far who had nothing. Twice a week she and a group of volunteers cobbled together an offering of food, clothing, blankets, and cleaning supplies to those in need, and twice a week, the provisions were "wiped out."

"Every church had a different venue in which to do something," she said. And every day, there was a story of someone who'd died or lost a loved one. "You were surrounded with depression. We were walking around hollow," she said. "It really got you down."

She and other volunteers soon began traveling out to the most blighted neighborhoods, gutting houses and salvaging what they could, dumping trash, and ultimately rebuilding. Eventually, the congregation was able to house 20 to 30 volunteers from all over the country for up to a week at a time in a makeshift shelter on its grounds.

It was during that time that some 1,200 Junior League members from Leagues across the Association traveled down to New Orleans to see the devastation and to lend a hand,

venturing out from their hub at the Marriott through busted water lines and piles of garbage standing 15 feet high to reach residents whom they could help paint, landscape, install sheet rock, or just clean up trash.

"We could have lived with the hurricane damage, but it was the failure of the levee system, a man-made disaster, that caused the problems," she said. "We knew we had to reform the management of the system, [which consisted of] seven different districts that weren't working together," adding that the individual levee boards were comprised of political appointees who had no expertise, and that collectively included no engineers.

"It was political patronage at its worst," she said.

Targeting corruption

It was in November of 2005 that Bush and the rest of a group of 120 grass-roots volunteers led by Ruthie Frierson, also a JLNO Sustainer and the city's top residential realtor, formally organized as Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans. They petitioned Governor Blanco for a special session of the state legislature to address levee management. When the session convened but failed to address the issue, Bush says she and others became "enraged."

The group petitioned the governor again, and, in the process, collected 53,000 signatures in less than three weeks in a city whose population had fallen from roughly 400,000 to 150,000. Bush, now a member of the organization's executive committee, communicated via a chain email, asking recipients to sign the document and return it via drop box.

Then, bolstered by the overwhelming response, roughly 1,400 women dressed in eye-catching red jackets—"to show that we were 'seeing red'" Frierson explains—traveled by bus to the Capitol in Baton Rouge for a rally.

In March of 2006, the organization prevailed in getting its first significant piece of legislation passed: Seven disparate levee boards were dissolved and replaced by the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority, which was comprised of a cross-section of experts and citizens rather than appointees who lacked relevant knowledge. Six months later, Louisiana voters approved a constitutional amendment to consolidate and reform levee management in the region.

Next on the non-partisan, non-sectarian group's agenda was another "sacred cow." The city's tax assessors, some of whom had descended from a single family line for 100 years and thus had perpetuated an uneven and unfair set of assessment practices, such that next-door neighbors with identical pieces of property might pay vastly different amounts of money in taxes based on who they knew.

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans sponsored legislation to reform the system via a constitutional amendment and prevailed. As a result, Frierson, now the organization's chairman, won the Times Picayune Publishing Co.'s 2006 Loving Cup award for leading the movement that "slayed the two sacred cows of Louisiana politics and fomented citizen activism during Louisiana's darkest hour."

Today the all-volunteer staff, which is headed by an executive committee of 12, and which raised some \$850,000 for the levee board and tax assessor campaigns, has turned its attention to criminal justice reform, with a specific focus on career criminals and the juvenile justice system.

"Crime is such a critical issue for us," said Frierson, a JLNO past President who is particularly intent on reforming the juvenile justice system, which she says is "poorly addressed" by the local and state governments. The group's extensive study of the system yielded three recommendations, including the development of an integrated communication system linking all criminal justice agencies; the formation of a citizen-led watch-dog group; and the formation broad-based criminal justice collaborative to advance reform efforts.

Ultimately, Citizens for 1, as a leader in the Crime Coalition, a group of 19 civic and business leaders which it helped found, was instrumental in securing \$5.2 million in federal funding to improve a dysfunctional criminal justice system. In addition, it counts among its achievements the formation of CourtWatchNOLA which reports on cases in the Orleans Parish Criminal District Courts, and the fact that Citizens for 1 members now serve on both the Children's Youth and Planning Board and the Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative Board. Citizens for 1 received the Outstanding Leader in Citizen Participation award from the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana for bringing public attention to the critical needs of youth.

Though she says she never thought she'd be tackling the Louisiana State Legislature, Barbara Bush says she knew that by working together they'd be successful. "We're just tenacious. That's what you learn in The League. If you want to do something, be tenacious, and you'll get it done."

Tenacity is something Anne Milling knows a lot about. A fellow Sustainer of The Junior League of New Orleans, she helped to found Women of the Storm, a nonprofit dedicated to restoring the Gulf of Mexico coastline.

Restoring the coast

"In the first four and half months after Katrina, only 12 U.S. Senators and 25 House Representatives had visited to see the damage, and many of those were already from the states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana," said Milling.

"This was the largest man-made disaster in history and Washington wasn't coming," she said. "We knew we had to hand-deliver our raison d'etre."

In January 2006, Milling and 129 other women volunteers chartered a flight, flew up to Washington, and spent 20 days knocking on every door on Capitol Hill extending invitations to Congress on the grounds that without seeing the Gulf Coast for themselves, the lawmakers could not possibly imagine the scale of the devastation and thus shape a policy to repair it that was well informed and intelligent.

Advocating safer levees, housing for all, and coastal restoration, Women of the Storm persuaded 36 members of the House of Representatives to travel as a congressional delegation to New Orleans led by then-House Speaker Dennis Hastert and then-Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi. Later that spring, Congress passed a bill sufficient to fund the Road Home housing restoration program, which was the largest single housing recovery program in U.S. history.

In September 2006, Women of the Storm made a second D.C. trip to push for Outer Continental Shelf revenue sharing, which Congress approved in December. They also won endorsement, in September, from Louisiana voters for the Coastal Protection and Restoration Fund, an amendment to the state constitution ensuring that monies received from the revenue sharing from oil and gas leasing on the OCS would be dedicated to restoration.

Other major initiatives since that time include an appearance at the 2008 Democratic National Convention to educate legislators about the restoration of Gulf Coast wetlands, which are vanishing at the pace of one football field every 38 minutes; an awareness-building campaign for coastal restoration targeting members of Congress on the eve of the New Orleans Saints' appearance in Super Bowl XLIV; and the unveiling, on Day 92 of the 2010 BP Gulf Oil Spill, of the "Be the One" video featuring pleas from celebrities like Sandra Bullock, Dave Matthews, Lenny Kravitz, Dr. John, Eli and Peyton Manning, John Goodman, Drew Brees, Alfre Woodard, Emeril Lagasse, Mary Matalin, and James Carville, among many others. The corresponding petition demanding funding for restoration that was distributed electronically gathered 100,000 signatures in just over 100 hours.

Milling says the protection of the coastline in turn protects the way of life its ecosystem fosters, including the seafood industry, oil and gas production, and the commercially vital Mississippi waterway.

"I credit The Junior League with teaching me organizational skills and the importance of following through on priorities, goals, and objectives," she said. "The Junior League gave me the framework to accomplish things with style and grace and intelligence."

What she's most proud of, she says, is the diverse backgrounds of the women who have united behind this single cause.

"The city is beginning to soar," she said. It's demonstrating to the world its resilience and its ability to cope with the most serious challenges it could possibly have had."

Fair housing for all

If nature and the livelihood it provides are the causes that get Anne Milling fired up as a civic leader, then social justice, education, and fair housing are the issues that come as second nature to Diana Lewis.

One day in 1973, when she was President of the New Orleans League, she got a call from a Sustainer named Rosa Freeman Keller, a friend of her mother's and a well-to-do heiress to a Coca-Cola bottling plant.

"She was a little rebel," Lewis recalls. "She as active in the movement to integrate the city and she used to participate in sit-ins at lunch counters."

Keller told Lewis she had someone for her to meet. A short time later, Lewis found herself in a conversation with Oretha Castle Haley, a civil rights activist and founding member of the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.) for whom the historically mixed commercial district of Dryades Street in Central City was later renamed on account of her participation in the famous boycott that was staged there in 1960.

"She explained to me what it took to be an African-American living in New Orleans at that time," said Lewis. It was like no other conversation Lewis had ever had.

"Although I had already been volunteering on integrated boards in the community, it was as though I was living in two different worlds. It hadn't occurred to me how under-exposed the mostly white women of The Junior League were to these women in the African-American community who were making such an enormous difference in the 60s."

The meeting solidified her already strong commitment to civic engagement. Over the years Lewis would go on to serve in leadership roles on numerous community and institutional boards including the New Orleans Neighborhood Development Collaborative, Providence Community Housing, the Greater New Orleans Foundation, the Sci Academy, a New Orleans charter school for math and science, and the southern Louisiana Regional Advisory Board of Teach for America, among many others.

After putting some 30 or more years into these pursuits, she scaled back and began planning a sort of quasi-retirement.

"You hit your 70s and you're ready to sit on a mountain top for three months communing with the spirits," she said.

But when Katrina hit, Lewis would have done anything but meditate in isolation. A true Central City insider, she immediately went to work on the schools—35 percent of which were completely destroyed—and public housing, where she says conditions had "gotten to be less than human," adding that "the miners down in Chile had it better."

Among the many hard-won successes she and her colleagues can point to are the completion in December 2010 of a new \$183 million C.J. Peete housing complex in Central City and the development of 2,000 new housing units for the city's homeless under the auspices of an organization called Unity of Greater New Orleans.

A turnaround in education

In addition, Sci Academy, the charter school where she sits on the board, won a \$1 million grant from Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network. The school is a leading example of the type of school that netted the New Schools for New Orleans and the Recovery School District, in October of last year, a \$33 million Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. (The \$33 million will be used to scale and expand the New Orleans Charter Restart Model to other struggling urban school districts including Memphis and Nashville.)

Education is equally important to Ruthie Frierson. As if reforming the levee board, the tax board, and the justice system were not enough, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans has also been a substantial player in the drive toward education reform. Among the organization's successes are the 2008 State of Public Education Forum, which it held in conjunction with the Scott S. Cowen Institute of Tulane University and the Urban League and which drew 700 attendees, and active collaboration with several organizations steeped in the educational reform movement, including New Schools for New Orleans, New Leaders for New Schools, Teach NOLA, Teach for America, and others. A strong advocate for charter schools, Citizens for 1 has testified before the State Board of Education and the Louisiana State Legislature.

In the last few years, Citizens for 1 has focused like a laser on ethics reform, and, in the process, hammered home the importance of consensus-building among broad-based coalitions. It supported the establishment of the Office of the Inspector General, the Ethics Review Board, and the Independent Police Monitor, and worked to promote the Governor's Ethics Reform legislation. In May of 2010 it sponsored the Inspector General's Community Forum in conjunction with Xavier University and Loyola University; the event drew attendees from 26 civic and government organizations. In addition, Citizens for 1 has championed the passage of the New Orleans Master Plan with the force of law for wise land-use development.

"Learning about relationships and learning how to build consensus, these are all the skills you need to run an organization and get things done," said Frierson, who adds, "There is power in the citizen voice. We need to stay vigilant and make sure that all citizens feel that sense of responsibility."

One thing is for certain: New Orleans might not be in the promising state it is today had these four Junior Leaguers not acted on the sense of responsibility they felt. Bona-fide civic leaders all, they each found a way to make a positive and lasting impact on the quality of life in their community at a moment when no government or agency was equipped to meet a very urgent need.

According to Sustainer Stephanie Haynes, a past AJLA Board Member who serves on the Citizens for 1 executive committee along with numerous other JLNO Sustainers and past Presidents, the great untold story of Katrina and New Orleans is voluntarism.

"All these years later the volunteers are still coming," she said. "More than one million of them."

What doesn't doesn't kill you makes you stronger indeed.

– S.G.

SOURCE: connected, the newsletter of The Association of Junior Leagues International, Inc.