



# Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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### *Times-Picayune*

#### **TP Loving Cup awarded to Ruthie Frierson Her grass-roots group proved key to post-Katrina reforms**

Monday, March 26, 2007

By John Pope, Staff writer

To the loud, prolonged applause of hundreds of friends who filled St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church's Gothic sanctuary on Sunday afternoon, Uptown activist Ruthie Frierson received The Times-Picayune Loving Cup for 2006.

Although she has a long history of volunteerism, Frierson was singled out for her most recent -- and most conspicuous -- endeavor: founding and organizing Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, a grass-roots group that was born in her dining room shortly after Hurricane Katrina pummeled the area.

Though new, the coalition quickly chalked up two major victories: the abolition of the network of highly political levee boards, which has been supplanted by two professionally run panels; and the replacement of New Orleans' seven assessors with one.

"There was a time when volunteers did not sully their hands with politics," Times-Picayune Editor Jim Amoss said. "That time is over."

Although the Loving Cup has been awarded since 1901 to men and women who do good deeds with no expectation of anything in return, Times-Picayune Publisher Ashton Phelps Jr. said that wasn't quite the case with Frierson and the members of her group, many of whom showed up Sunday wearing the trademark red blazers that helped them stand out in the Capitol when they were lobbying legislators.

"They wanted a safe city, a city safe behind sound levees, so that no future generation would endure what we have endured," Phelps said. "More than that, they wanted an honest, efficient city -- one freed of the old habits of cronyism and patronage that stifled progress and, worse, helped make us all unsafe."

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans was the first of many community groups that sprang up after Katrina's devastation because governmental response to the disaster was inadequate.

"We may have lost faith in the system, but we found faith in each other," said Frierson, 66. "Out of the tragedy of Katrina came . . . a wave of citizen activism as never before, fueled by fear, frustration and loss of hope."

Standing at the lectern of the church she has served as an elder, Frierson told of breaking down at the wheel of her car as she drove through the wreckage near City Park in the fall of 2005. Suddenly, she said, a stranger tapped on her windshield to give her two bottles of water -- and to suggest that she might need the support of a counselor.

That encounter, she said, was typical of what she found in post-Katrina New Orleans: "Strangers were reaching out to each other to ease the pain."

About that time, the Legislature defeated an attempt to restructure the network of levee boards in southeast Louisiana.

Her response was to organize the group that became Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans. The first big meeting, held in the church where she was honored Sunday, drew so many volunteers that the group filled the sanctuary.

When it came to politics, most of them were novices. "We learned on the job," Frierson said.

Nevertheless, their petition drive to persuade Gov. Kathleen Blanco to call a special session garnered 53,000 signatures.

The constitutional amendment to change the levee boards passed with 81 percent of the vote. A later amendment, aimed at New Orleans' assessors, received yes votes from 78 percent of Louisiana's electorate.

Now Frierson and her followers are focusing their attention on the criminal-justice and school systems.

"We must take back our city from violent criminals," she said. "Criminal-justice issues and education go hand in hand. We can't rebuild the city without providing each of our children the foundation of a good education."

As the group continues its work, members are continuing to learn how to maneuver to get what they want, Frierson said.

"We compromise our strategy but never our principles," she said. "Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint. The road to recovery is long, filled with roadblocks and detours. We must stay the course."

At the end of the 45-minute ceremony, the Rev. James Carter, Loyola University's former president, delivered the benediction. In his prayer, he said, "give us more leaders like Ruthie to bring our community back."

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