

WOMEN FOR A BETTER LOUISIANA:
A CASE STUDY IN CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

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Studies measuring quality of life indicators place Louisiana in poor ranking with other states. A great deal of attention is paid to political action, planning issues, public health, and economic initiatives, however little attention is paid to citizen participation. Regardless of the ranking of the State and the opinions of outsiders, all Louisianans know that the feelings for their home are a virtual love/hate affair. While many citizens opt to simply complain about the negative elements, there are some who identify the problems then actively pursue solutions because of this love for their home and because it is the right thing to do. Focusing on the activities of the Women for a Better Louisiana, this essay highlights some of these dedicated women and demonstrates how citizen participation can reap big results for the benefit of all.

Discovering Women for a Better Louisiana

For much of the United States, Louisiana serves as a curiosity. Unfortunately, it also serves as a negative comparison standard.¹ New Orleans, the state's largest metropolitan area is often proudly referred to as "the City that Care Forgot."² Observations of the litter, graffiti, and other social ills as well as the laissez-faire attitude of the citizenry, leads one to believe that it may be more accurately described as the city that forgot to care. Many New Orleanians (and residents of surrounding communities) seem to be proud of the city's reputation of vice, squalor, and of being a banana republic.³ However, there are many citizens who love the city beyond the layers of filth and problems, but they don't know what to do to change it or have simply given up trying. And then there are those extraordinarily dedicated few who care too much to just sit back and leave the city to the whims of the politicians and the tourists. Some of these citizens are members of the Women for a Better Louisiana (WBL), an organization that has been unwavering in their two decade effort to improve the quality of life in the New Orleans metropolitan area and the state of Louisiana.

¹ This is well documented by multiple studies. The most recent report was released by the National Policy Research Council which ranks Louisiana 49th in health and welfare, 50th in public safety, 47th in education, and 46th in economic development.

² Steve Ingersoll, a researcher employed with the New Orleans Public Libraries, recently published preliminary research on New Orleans nicknames. This sobriquet appeared in the 1938 *New Orleans City Guide*. However, his search of guide books and other materials dating back to 1879 did not reveal an origin.

³ The term 'banana republic' is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "any small, usually Latin American, country that is politically unstable and has a one-crop economy controlled by foreign capital. In regard to New Orleans and Louisiana, it connotes a place that is different from the rest of the country...a place that has third world elements and is proud of it. Anyone who has ever lived there knows that it is the unique American place.

The WBL first came to my attention in December 2001. It was a cold, rainy New Orleans winter day, the kind best spent indoors. But desperately needing a good reason to leave the house for a few hours, I searched the Times-Picayune and an unusual announcement caught my eye.⁴ An afternoon tea was advertised, but unlike the typical Uptown social function, the public was invited to attend the event being held at the New Orleans Child Advocacy Center on the campus of the New Orleans Adolescent Hospital.⁵ As an urban planner specializing in social policy, it not only piqued my curiosity but it presented a perfect excuse to avoid work for a few hours. After paying the modest \$5.00 fee, I found myself amid women several decades beyond me. They fed me; they entertained me with their stories; but mostly they impressed me with their social activism and political savvy.⁶ Yet, it would be a few years before the scholarly value of their actions would be revealed.

After receiving a gracious follow-up letter offering membership to the organization and a few monthly newsletters, I decided to attend a meeting and find out more about these women.⁷ Throughout the next year, my membership served as an education in civic responsibility, citizen participation and social and political activism. I no longer call Louisiana home, yet I remain a supporter and huge fan of these women and their efforts to improve their beloved state, parishes, and local community.⁸ But I fear that because these dynamic women are aging more quickly than new, younger members are recruited, the group will eventually dismantle as we say good-bye to

⁴ The Times-Picayune is the major, citywide newspaper.

⁵ The New Orleans Adolescent Hospital is a State operated 124-bed psychiatric facility in the Uptown area. Most of the patients are wards of the state.

⁶ They also endeared themselves to me by insisting that I take home a plate of food for my evening meal. Being in the process of conducting research for my dissertation, I must wonder if I was taken on as one of their projects.

⁷ Again, the meeting cost a modest \$5.00 fee to cover food expenses. Guests are always welcome free of charge.

⁸ Parish is the equivalent of County.

each of these women who have made such an impact on the quality of life of the residents of the New Orleans metropolitan area. And I fear even more that if their story is not told, the extent and value of their activism will remain unknown. These women never sought recognition, but their undaunted efforts leave a legacy and teach us lessons about the power of civic action.

One Mission – Many Causes

Women for a Better Louisiana was chartered as a non-profit organization in 1986. The founding members originally served as the women's auxiliary to the Chamber of Commerce of New Orleans and the River Region.⁹ At that time only men were allowed chamber membership, but due to changing times and agendas, the auxiliary was dismantled. Recognizing the political strength, the power of these women, and their desire to be active in their communities, the men donated \$5,000 for the group to establish a separate organization. Although membership has changed through the years, they have maintained their original size of approximately one hundred members. Moreover, they have turned the tables on history by adopting an unofficial men's auxiliary. Since the formation of the group, several of the husbands have retired and now actively support the group by participating in their volunteer activities. Along with handling some of the literal heavy work, they provide litter pick-up devices, chauffeur members to activities, and help monitor action sites. On some occasions, they even assume the roles traditionally reserved for women (such as registration, cooking, and serving) so the members may focus on the issues at hand and their ever growing activist agenda.

⁹ The chamber was later renamed The New Orleans Regional Chamber of Commerce. As of January 2004, it merged with MetroVision to become Greater New Orleans, Inc.

Throughout their history, the group has carefully avoided partisan politics and has welcomed anyone to join. Their activist-orientation frequently leads to supporting specific political causes and developing political affiliations to strengthen their efforts, however they do not endorse candidates. By remaining politically neutral and focusing on action, the WBL has gained the respect of many politicians and several female officials have joined the membership ranks.¹⁰ The WBL has also avoided a narrow agenda and built the organization around the shared desire to actively pursue any and all opportunities that can improve the quality of life for all citizens of the state. This openness has encouraged and supported members to pursue a multitude of projects and has brought together a group of women with diverse banks of knowledge and expertise.

Orleans and Jefferson Parishes comprise 21% of Louisiana's population.¹¹ Jefferson Parish has a 22.8% black population and Orleans Parish has a 67.3% black population with a substantial number of these citizens living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The WBL membership does not reflect these same demographics as it is mostly representative of the white and middle to upper-middle class segment of the population. This appears to be a naturally occurring phenomenon since membership is open to anyone who shares their mission and annual dues modestly range from ten to thirty dollars. Regardless of the racial and class makeup, the agenda is not exclusive of any gender, race, or class. Specifically, their mission

¹⁰ Some elected officials listed in the roster during various years include Retired 4th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Miriam Waltzer, Judge Patricia Rivet Murray 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, Desiree Charbonnet Recorder of Mortgages, State Senator Paulette Irons, former State Representatives Jennifer Sneed and Melinda Schwegmann (also former Lieutenant Governor). They represent the Democratic and Republican parties. In the case of Schwegmann, she alone represents both parties having recently switched her political affiliation from Democrat to Republican.

¹¹ The total Louisiana population is 4,468,976 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

reads: “to improve the quality of life in Louisiana by working actively to attain honest and efficient government, a clean environment, area beautification, quality education, protection of children and other timely concerns.”¹² Each of these items cuts across race and class lines, but given the racial, social, and economic demographics of the New Orleans metropolitan area, most of the agenda items substantially serve the minority population and are outside the realm of issues that immediately or directly impacting these women’s lives.

Taking Action

The WBL’s initial efforts were aimed at litter reduction. Community clean-ups were organized, yet some areas were littered again the next day. Rather than getting discouraged or blaming the community denizens, they responded by seeking to learn why this problem existed, what local and state ordinances addressed the issue, and how they could be enforced. They also explored ways the group could influence change in the attitudes of citizens about litter on their streets, on their public grounds, and in their waterways. The members express frustration over their failed attempts to engage public school teachers in this effort, but rather than giving up, they shifted their attention to public officials and other decision-makers who could help drive results. Out of this effort, new areas of concern emerged and as the interests of their individual members expanded and diversified, so did the mission. Today, WBL activities are driven by subcommittees which include:¹³

¹² This is defined in Article I of the *Women for a Better Louisiana* by-laws.

¹³ This list of activities is taken directly from their membership brochure. Although lengthy, it provides insight into the range of their projects.

- Area Beautification – assists members with litter control and area beautification projects in their geographic area(s) of concern; organizes participation in “Trash Bash” and “Beach Sweep” each year;¹⁴ represents the WBL on state boards pertaining to litter and beautification.
- Child Advocacy – seeks to improve the lives of children through support of specific children’s issues dealing with neglect and/or abuse; supports the New Orleans Police Department’s child abuse section and works to make courts more sensitive to the needs of children in court cases; networks with other organizations concerned with children’s safety issues and supports legislation in the best interest of children.
- Communication – publishes and distributes the monthly newsletter to keep members informed about issues, scheduled speakers, and opportunities for involvement; publishes annual roster of members and elected officials; distributes public announcements; announces calls for volunteers from other organizations needing assistance.
- Education – monitors legislation pertaining to education at the local, state, and federal levels; provides sponsorship of the Greater New Orleans Science and Engineering Fair; donates financial support to student and school programs.
- Environment – promotes issues such as clean air and water, coastal wetlands restoration and protection, proper hazardous waste disposal, and recycling; advocates for protection of trees and green-space; co-sponsors Louisiana Coastal Wetlands workshops.¹⁵
- Legislation – keeps members informed about pending legislation and encourages contact with legislators; attends hearings; networks with other groups sharing WBL missions;

¹⁴ These are large annual or regularly scheduled clean-ups scheduled and coordinated by place specific organizations.

¹⁵ This last activity is no longer performed.

organizes an annual visit to the State Legislature which includes a luncheon with elected officials and other concerned citizen groups.

Noteworthy Results

Because of their vast reach, it is impossible to give attention to each WBL accomplishment, on-going project, or member. From the process of sorting through their documents, a few projects and women emerged as forces of change.¹⁶ Regardless of barriers erected by other organizations, the culture, and the difficult political climate, these women's efforts have altered the Louisiana landscape in both the literal and figurative sense. Some of the most substantial results have occurred in the areas of education, child advocacy, and environmental concerns.

Betty Van Norman has emerged as one of the leaders of the quality education initiative. Recognizing that Louisiana consistently ranks at the bottom of public education quality, the WBL is always seeking opportunities to provide direct support to schools and student projects. In 2003 and 2004, donations were made to:

- Bishop Perry Middle School, a private institution for minority boys. The school's mission is "preparing young African-American men for success in high school and life." The school provides a highly structured environment and the students acknowledge that it is a positive place to learn because there is no fighting.¹⁷
- Girls First, an organization created by concerned female citizens to intervene with at-risk, inner-city girls through sports and positive female mentoring. The organization provides regular cultural outings, a camp, and lessons to help these girls better understand

¹⁶ These documents were a massive collection of notes, copies of newspapers articles, and miscellaneous letters.

¹⁷ Fighting is a common problem in New Orleans public schools.

sexuality, personal hygiene, good nutrition, and other personal needs which will promote their self-esteem and support their development into womanhood.

- The Desire Academy, a private school serving children from the Desire Street public housing project.¹⁸

The WBL is also a sustaining sponsor of the Greater New Orleans Science and Engineering Fair in Region IX.¹⁹ As a sustaining sponsor, the women of the WBL coordinate volunteers and personally give hundreds of hours each year. They promote the fair to area students and teachers, register students for participation, and assist with the awards ceremony. Every year, they seek to improve the effort which led to Betty Van Norman voluntarily designing an on-line registration form. After the event, the group also invites the winners to their meeting to present their project at a WBL meeting and honor them for their efforts.

Another committee supporting children is the child advocacy group led by Nancy Simoneaux and Margaret Ransone. Each of these women has been unwavering in her pursuit of protecting children who might easily be the most vulnerable of Louisiana citizens. Often poorly represented and underserved due to a shortage of funds and overwhelming demand on the system, these women have advocated on behalf of neglected and abused children throughout the state. But their strongest impact has been in Orleans Parish. Nancy Simoneaux was one of the first members I met when attending the tea in December 2001. She provided a tour of the new Child Advocacy Center, a child-friendly place. It was created and designed to help traumatized

¹⁸ The WBL gave a cash contribution to purchase age appropriate books for the school library. Encouraging the director to use the money at a book fair fundraiser for another nonprofit agency, she reported back that the fair attendant gave an additional 50% discount. Thus two organizations were helped with one donation, and one was able to essentially double the value of the donation.

¹⁹ Region IX is the Educational District covering Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard Parishes.

children provide their statements in a non-threatening or frightening environment. As she proudly pointed out the audio/visual investigative equipment carefully camouflaged within colorful murals, I had no idea the significance of the actions required to create this place.

This center came about as a result of collaboration among many organizations and is run by Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). According to WBL documents, supporting this effort led to many disappointing years with no success. Margaret Ransone and Nancy Simoneaux refused to give up and continued to make connections with elected and appointed officials, the police department, and leaders of other child advocacy groups. Finally, some of them met over breakfast and CASA offered to sponsor the initiative. The WBL donated most of the audio/visual equipment as well as other necessary items. According to a letter from the center's program manager, the number of children served has grown tenfold since opening in 1999.²⁰ This growth is not the result of an increase in sexual/physical abuse but is a direct result of better service coordination. Nereida Levine indicates in a letter to Ms. Simoneaux and Ms. Ransone that this growth is a direct result of community support from the WBL, and cooperation between the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD), the Office of Community Services, the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office, Children's Hospital, and the University of New Orleans.²¹

Through attending meetings to gather information and letter writing campaigns, Nancy Simoneaux has also played a role in the following accomplishments:

- getting the neutral ground between West End and Pontchartrain Boulevards in Orleans Parish dedicated as the New Basin Canal Park with a monument

²⁰ The CAC began conducting forensic interviews in 1999. During that year, they interviewed 28 child victims of sexual/physical abuse. In 2003, 236 interviews were conducted.

²¹ A copy of this letter dated April 19, 2004 was forwarded to me by Mrs. Simoneaux.

dedicated to the Irish workers who helped build the city's navigational canal system.²²

- aiding the community fight to have the new Benjamin Franklin High School located at the University of New Orleans Lakefront campus where the students would not be isolated.²³
- lobbying to change the status of dumping a child's body to hide the child's death from misdemeanor to felony. Senator John Hainkle and Representative Emile "Peppi" Bruneau led the legislative process upon receiving information from Ms. Simoneaux. This law extends to adult bodies as well but was pursued due to a case involving a child.
- coordinating the purchase and distribution of supplies to support the NOPD in responding to the needs of abused and neglected children who have been taken into police custody. Items range from soap and towels to snacks and toys. Her

²² The system is no longer used for navigation but remains an important component in protecting the city from flooding.

²³ This is a story in and of itself. But of special note is the letter that Mrs. Simoneux wrote to Gail Glapion, a newly elected member of the school board. She offered to drive her to the selected site and Ms. Glapion accepted. Upon seeing the selected site in a residential area park, Ms. Glapion waged battle to have the recommended location moved to an area where the magnet school students would have access to university resources. It is also noted that Ms. Simoneaux acquired tomes of notes during this site battle which have been donated to the Louisiana Collection in the UNO Library.

efforts assure that WBL dollars are used efficiently and effectively and that police can focus on the job at hand.²⁴

- creating age appropriate educational items to help ease the fear and discomfort of minors who appear as witnesses in criminal court.²⁵ These materials are offered at no cost and free of copyright restrictions to any group working with children. They are used by the NOPD and the District Attorney's Offices. They have been sent to and recognized by community leaders in other areas, including Cook County Illinois and the City of Chicago.

In true WBL form, efforts in education were combined with environmental efforts. Even though Myrtle Dubea expresses frustration with the cultural acceptance of litter, the lack of dedicated teachers in the public school system, and the unwillingness of Orleans Parish elected officials to work with Jefferson Parish residents on the issue, she sees results. Serving as the Chairwoman of the environmental committee, she represents the WBL on other environmentally focused Boards to ease the coordination of efforts. Her extensive volunteer service resume' includes:

- securing funds to support environmental education to reduce litter. She estimates that litter in Jefferson Parish has been reduced by 60% over the past decade through coordinated efforts and that the real results are demonstrated when children are seen lecturing their parents about proper garbage disposal and environmental impacts;

²⁴ Copies of letters from police officers indicate that they did not have a budget for these items and officers often purchased food for the children with their own money.

²⁵ One item is a coloring book entitled "All About Going to Court...The Child Witness;" the other item is a brochure titled "All About Going to Court...The Teenage Witness."

- chairing the Litter Advisory Board of the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and serving on the Jefferson Parish Litter Advisory Board;
- organizing the DWI Community Service Program in Jefferson Parish in conjunction with the Jefferson Parish First Parish Court and the Jefferson Parish Department of Parkways. Originally rebuffed because of the liability of ordering community service picking up litter along the roadsides, she pointed out that these same people did not worry about the liability of driving under the influence of alcohol. To date, more than 46,000 community service hours have been spent on litter control and landscaping projects.

Additionally, she chaired the Green Space Task Force committee that is credited with saving seventeen acres of a natural hardwood forest. She subsequently oversaw its development into the Environmental Educational Forest. This area, known as LaSalle Tract, was the last sizeable, natural wilderness space left on the East Bank of Jefferson Parish.²⁶ In this role, she also received grant money to develop educational materials for visiting schools as well as placing tree markers. The Louisiana legislature recently honored her efforts by passing a bill to rename the area after her and another activist, Beulah Oswald, who shared in the effort.²⁷

Lessons for Getting Results

²⁶ East Jefferson is the geographical designation of the portion of Jefferson Parish that lies on the eastern side of the Mississippi River (actually north due to the curvature of the river) and west of Orleans Parish. It is mostly developed and is home to a large portion of the suburban communities of the New Orleans metropolitan area.

²⁷ Act No. 55 was signed by the Governor on May 21, 2004 and becomes effective on August 15, 2004. It designates the Oswald-Dubea Arboretum and Nature Center of LaSalle Park in Jefferson Parish.

Citizen participation is one of the tenets of a democratic society. Many individual and united voices have helped shape the country through various forms of activism at all levels. Most attention is focused on the federal and state levels, yet much of the activity that directly impacts the quality of our daily lives occurs at the local level. Knowing that social activism often begins with small actions by singular people, the WBL serves as a place where individual women can gather group support to pursue her own agenda within the confines of their broader mission.

Throughout the years, the women of the WBL have taken different approaches to getting results. Myrtle Dubea recalls advice she once received from a female CEO of a non-profit organization. The advice, intended to sway her efforts from unpaid volunteerism, boiled down to little more than “you are only worth what they pay you.”²⁸ Retaining that advice but proving it invalid, these women have comparable, if not more, notable accomplishments than many women who are paid to lead. Beyond leaving a legacy through their impact, they also leave valuable lessons in attaining results through citizen participation. The advice provided by Nancy Simoneaux is to always be polite in speech and writing, to show respect and support for those in the decision-making seats, and to be persistent. She recognizes that she has been able to push her agenda because she never had to worry about losing a career position as a result of her efforts. She also notes that some efforts have been hindered by women in paid positions because they might have been at risk by sharing information or linking with other groups with a similar or supportive agenda.

Unlike Ms. Simoneaux who prefers to avoid committee work, Ms. Dubea seeks out positions of power. She believes that positioning herself on advisory groups and in the leadership

²⁸ Consistent with her diplomatic personality, she respectfully refuses to divulge the name.

roles helped her achieve results. Regardless of the juxtaposition of styles, one common theme exists -- consistency. In the early years of the organization, visits were paid to mayors, elected officials, appointed leaders, and organizational heads. A few of the members note that in the beginning, many were polite but unresponsive. They believe that it was felt that they would eventually die away like many other advocates and advocacy groups when results don't come easily or quickly. Creating a professional image for the group also helped strengthen the organization's identity. They not only printed business cards for the members, but they developed relationships with journalists and wrote letters to the editor to increase recognition of their organizational strength and name.

Being a part of the WBL taught me about the political power women can gain through the citizen participation process. However, I failed to recognize the value of their variety of methods and the uniqueness of the organization until I started research for this essay. After I left Louisiana, I had the opportunity to interview them on a return visit. During our conversation, I asked them what kept them going despite the obstacles and sometimes demeaning comments from positioned women. Nancy Simoneaux summed it up saying "our power is that we have nothing to lose." Because of this, they have been able to lend their voices to causes brought to their attention by leaders who were not in a position to force change without risking their jobs or political strength. One example of this is a former superintendent of the State Police requesting their assistance to push funding for fingerprinting of teachers and childcare workers. Another is Jay Batt, an Orleans Parish councilperson, recently requested the group monitor judges for issuing fines for littering.²⁹

In addition to lending their voices, the WBL has also served as mediators between agencies to ease the process of resource linking. Their reputation has led them to become a

²⁹ Request made while speaking with the WBL at their monthly meeting on October 22, 2003.

depository of citizen donated funds. Many smaller groups have raised money to support their causes and individual citizens have provided funding to take on specific tasks. This trust was developed over the years by showing the public, agencies, and leaders that their money will be used appropriately, effectively, and with the greatest efficiency possible.

A recent accomplishment exemplifies both of these roles. For a few years, the WBL has held money earmarked for graffiti control as specified by the donor. They actively sought opportunities to put the funds to use but continuously met political roadblocks. With the change in the New Orleans political administration and the proposed plan to develop Palmer Park into a safe and comfortable place to wait for the streetcar, the WBL finally brokered a deal.³⁰ They invited the new mayor, Ray Nagin, to meet the group. Unable to attend, he sent Deputy CAO Cynthia Sylain-Lear, who in turn, brought along Lisa Sibal, Executive Director of Parkway Partners.³¹ After a series of discussions, the WBL was granted permission to paint the proposed coffee kiosk in the park with anti-graffiti paint to be purchased with the donated money.

Reflecting on my relationships with these women and the many New Orleans places, spaces, and activities that I took for granted while a resident, I am honored to know them and I feel privileged that they trusted me to share their story. While other Louisiana women are making strides in the political arena and being elected to the United States Senate and as governor, the women of the WBL remain steadfast in their efforts to improve the quality of life

³⁰ Palmer Park sits at the end of the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line at Carrollton and Claiborne Avenues. It has been neglected for years. Presently, there are no amenities nearby for tourists awaiting the return ride or for regular public transit riders who use the streetcar for mobility. In an effort to improve the image of the city, Palmer Park has been designated for development so that people will have a comfortable and safe place to get refreshments and sit while waiting.

³¹ The initial discussion occurred at the WBL meeting on October 22, 2003.

for Louisiana citizens without want of recognition or pay. Not only have they taught me about how citizens can be political forces, but they have provided valuable lessons for others to follow. I only pray that the batons they currently carry will be picked up by more women who care enough, and want change enough, to recognize that citizen participation can be political power capable of wielding results even in the most challenging of climates.

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