

A voice for girls

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Nola4Women shines a light on women's contributions to the history of New Orleans while advocating for a better status in the future. From left: Founders Martha Sullivan, Kathy Seligman, Florence André and Sylvia Frey. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

A quartet of Newcomb/Tulane women—strong-willed and experienced—founded Nola4Women two years ago in anticipation of the tricentennial of New Orleans.

The women—emerita professor of history Sylvia Frey and former university administrators and alumni Florence Defroscia André, Kathy Epstein Seligman and Martha Hatten Sullivan—have the goal of educating people about the important role that women have played in the city from its beginnings. They also want action taken to ensure that women and girls have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

They hope that Nola4Women will serve as a model that can be replicated in communities around the world.

Sullivan, former associate dean for academic affairs at Newcomb College and later vice president for student affairs and dean of students at Tulane, said, “From every corner of the city, regardless of the age, race, education or socio-economic status of the participants, an air of excitement permeates any gathering where the project is described.”

She added, “Members of the Tulane community have encouraged us every step of the way, offering assistance on many levels. ... At every turn, we were met with excitement and enthusiasm. That delight helped to assure the continuation of this project. ...”

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To bring awareness of women’s contributions to the city, a major educational component of Nola4Women is Women of New Orleans: Builders and Rebuilders, a series of more than 45 exhibits and/or performances that began in September 2015 and will continue to pop up through December 2018.

“Women’s history, in general, is on a parallel path with mainstream history, but it’s not been fully integrated into it,” said Frey. “It’s one reason you don’t see the accomplishments of women in medicine, music, politics and so many other genres in today’s school textbooks.”

Frey, author of several books including *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (University of North Carolina Press), is the namesake of the Sylvia R. Frey Lecture series presented by the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South at Tulane.

“We’re so much more than Betsy Ross and Amelia Earhart,” said Seligman, former director of the Office of Newcomb Alumnae and Development. She is now a strategic consultant with a special interest in issues impacting women and girls globally.

“Katherine Johnson, the African-American physicist and mathematician who made enormous contributions to NASA, was never heard of until 2016’s film *Hidden Figures*,” Seligman said. “She just celebrated her 99th birthday, yet we are first hearing about this woman who made an enormous contribution to the space

program."

Forty different contributing institutions from libraries to large and small house museums are involved in the Builders and Rebuilders series.

"Taken together, they showcase, in extraordinary fashion, the prominent role women have played in the city," Frey said. "Each of our partner institutions searched their own collections, some hidden away in boxes and forgotten, to retrieve the histories of forgotten women. The Builders project represents a beginning to change that."

Builders exhibits are on display or will be soon and throughout the 2018 tricentennial at venues including The National WWII Museum, New Orleans Museum of Art and the Old U.S. Mint. Go to www.nola4women.org for a complete list of exhibits.

An important part of Nola4Women is Hear My Voice. This program encourages adolescent girls to use their own voices to advocate for change on issues that they deem important.

Nola4Women partnered with Bright Moments, a community outreach organization, to recruit a group of high school students from private and public schools and with Lift Louisiana, an advocacy group for improving health outcomes for women and children.

"It's important that teenage girls learn to speak up about issues that concern them and their future," said André, counselor to women at Newcomb College in the 1970s.

The high school students came up with a list of priorities, which included information about reproductive rights, rape and sexual violence, and socio-economic issues like the wage gap.

Nola4Women asked facilitators to address these vital issues with the students, so they could hear from experts.

"We want to stress women helping women," André said. "But research proves it's important that boys understand this, too, so they become men who understand and appreciate the challenges women face and become advocates for change as well."

Plans are for boys to be included in future Hear My Voice sessions.

Another facet of Nola4Women is Heroes, a project that involves bringing New Orleans leaders, many of them known internationally, face-to-face with students in classrooms. Local schools have participated in a research and writing pilot program as part of their World History and Language Arts curriculum.

Ruby Bridges, who became a national symbol of the civil rights movement as the first student to integrate the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans in 1960, is one of the Heroes. Bridges came to Sci High to speak to students.

"Watching those students in the classroom was inspiring," Sullivan said. "They were completely engaged and eagerly sitting on the edge of their seats."

In addition to Bridges, the list of New Orleans Heroes runs the gamut from Anne Levy, a Holocaust survivor who fought against the candidacy of former Klansman David Duke as governor of Louisiana in 1991, to Keiana Cavé, who as a 15-year-old Lusher High School student in New Orleans researched toxins present in the BP oil spill in 2010. (Cavé continued her research in the lab of Sunshine Van Bael, Tulane assistant professor of ecology and evolutionary biology.)

Other Heroes are the late Ruth Rogan Benerito, a 1935 Newcomb College graduate and an inventor, who discovered a method to make cotton wrinkle-resistant, and Mahalia Jackson, the New Orleans native who became the world's gospel queen.

A group of students had the opportunity to meet Hero chef Leah Chase up-close and personal when Nola4Women took them to Dooky Chase's Restaurant, a meeting place for civil rights activists in the 1960s.

The statistics for women in Louisiana and New Orleans are troubling. One in four women in Louisiana is uninsured, the state ranks 50th in publicly funded women's health services, and one out of 10 New Orleans women working full-time, working year-round, earns less than \$15,000 a year.

"In the '70s, we were trying to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed, and today we're still illuminating the same inequities," André said. (Women today make 80 percent of what men earn in the United States, according to the American Association of University Women.)

"And, teen pregnancy is an issue in every part of the world," Seligman said.

"We may not all discuss domestic violence," she added, "but it crosses all class boundaries. Whether it's physical or verbal, it's happening everywhere."

The Nola4Women programs will culminate in a Global Summit on Women and Girls in the second half of 2018. Open to the public, the summit will look at successful initiatives around the world and will concentrate on action plans for women and girls in New Orleans.

"We need to change the dialogue—not only about the inspiring women in New Orleans—but nationwide," Seligman said.

"We need to create an agenda for change. Anything we can do toward awareness raising is important. One's questioning of the norm usually comes with hindsight. If we can look to others, outside our own immediate frame of reference, it gives us perspective."

To that end, Nola4Women's plan is to bring together people working in the areas of women's rights and justice from around the world to discover how critical problems have been dealt with in the most successful ways.

"The problems women of New Orleans face are universal," said Frey. "We have a great deal to learn from countries like Sweden, which have the most advanced national policy for women and girls, but also from developing countries like Haiti and Liberia, with whom we have historic connections."

The roster of speakers for the summit is not finalized, but the summit promises to be a landmark occasion with an exchange of ideas from around the globe that will flow well beyond 2018.

"New Orleans post-Katrina has taken on the mantle of victim," said Seligman. "But we want New Orleans to be seen as an innovator. Changing mindsets can be slow, but we have to keep chipping away at it. Rome wasn't built in a day."

The other Nola4Women founders have their own high hopes for the summit.

"I have always been an advocate for social justice," said Frey. "Let's look back at where we've been, how far we've come, and where we need to go, through historical introspection."

The city of New Orleans is particularly important, said Sullivan. "It is a model of resilience and rebirth, and that's one of the reasons why we charge forward,

sometimes in spite of the fact that we felt overwhelmed by the legwork to be done. But, there's a positive undertone that always rallies us together."

"We are now at the point where we need even more volunteers, and need to consider the possibility of an eventual center or entity that would encourage programs that support women and help ensure that the city of New Orleans does indeed adopt an agenda for women and girls," said André. "If you don't think big, you may never get to your goal."

Editor's note: This story was originally published in the [December 2017 issue of Tulane magazine](#).

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— Martha Hatten Sullivan, former associate dean for academic affairs at Newcomb College