

Tulane reflects on Katrina: 20 years of renewal and resilience

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Tulane President Michael A. Fitts invited university leaders to join him for a conversation commemorating the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

Twenty years after Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures that forced Tulane University to shut down and scatter its community across the country, President Michael A. Fitts led a reflection with Tulanians who endured the storm and remain part of the university today.

“Our goal today really is to mark this somber anniversary by reflecting together on the experiences that shape our trajectory,” Fitts told a campus audience Aug. 28 at

"Tulane Then and Now: A Conversation 20 Years After Katrina." The gathering was a special installment of Fitts' Presidential Speaker Series.

Fitts said Tulane's current trajectory includes unprecedented growth in all facets of university life, a historic redevelopment of the university's downtown campus and a planned transformation of the former Charity Hospital building.

Founded in 1834 as a medical college responding to yellow fever outbreaks, Fitts said Tulane has long tied its mission to research, service, healthcare and the resilience of New Orleans. Katrina reconnected Tulane with these foundational goals, he said.

"We became really more a part of the city, and that has changed everything," said panelist Peter Ricchiuti, senior professor of practice in the A. B. Freeman School of Business.

After the storm, Tulane's leadership developed a Renewal Plan. It created Newcomb-Tulane College (NTC), uniting all full-time undergraduates under one umbrella for the first time, and instituting a public service requirement for graduation — the first such mandate at a major research university in the United States.

"There is no other university where students can engage in research, work with faculty who are themselves tackling those challenges and equip themselves to go out and be the modern iteration of our motto," said Mollye Demosthenidy, dean of NTC, who was a dual-degree graduate student in law and public health during Katrina. "What we're doing is training students to go out and make New Orleans, make the country, make the world a safer place and a better place. And that's core, I think, to who we are."

Medical faculty and staff who remained on the job during the storm recalled caring for patients without power or running water, improvising with canoes and hand-pumping ventilators. "The crisis was immediate and life-or-death," said Dr. Lee Hamm, a medical school professor during Katrina and now senior vice president and dean of the School of Medicine. "It was surreal." That experience inspired the rebuilding of a stronger, more resilient medical school focused on citywide care, he said.

"We didn't want to become what we were, but we wanted to become much better," Hamm said of his school's rebuilding efforts.

The storm also changed how New Orleans viewed Tulane. Before Katrina, some considered the university a self-contained “bubble,” said Ricchiuti. In the recovery years, however, students worked with small businesses, nonprofits and neighborhood groups, forging a new partnership between the university and the city.

Athletics also played a major role in the city and the university’s comeback story. Tulane women’s basketball hosted the first post-Katrina sporting event in the city, offering a spot of normalcy to the community.

“That gave us big hope. It showed we were still here,” said Ashley Langford, head coach of the Tulane Green Wave Women’s Basketball team. Langford was a first-year student in 2005, and along with the rest of the team, evacuated almost immediately after orientation that year.

Today, Tulane is strengthening its mission in research, public health and medicine through growth on the uptown campus, the Northshore and plans for its downtown corridor.

“I can’t think of a better thing to happen downtown, or really for the state of Louisiana, than what Tulane is considering doing at the former Charity Hospital building,” said panelist Dennis Lauscha, president of the New Orleans Saints and Pelicans and a Tulane Board member.

Fitts called the downtown project the next chapter in Tulane’s intertwined future with New Orleans. “We are now working to partner with state and local leaders to transform this iconic building into a hub for innovation, entrepreneurship and the community,” he said.

“Not only did the recovery re-energize Tulane,” said Fitts, who watched the disaster unfold from afar as dean of the law school at the University of Pennsylvania, “it also demonstrated the worth of the university in an unprecedented way for the local community. Universities often struggle to articulate their value to the outside world. Their impact can be diffuse and difficult to convey, but in the aftermath of Katrina, our real impact on the city of New Orleans was clear.”