

Local Restaurateur, Activist Honored at Commencement

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On a morning when she was about to receive an honorary doctorate from one of the most prominent universities in the country, New Orleans restaurateur and humanitarian Leah Chase shared a bit of the old-school wisdom that has carried her through her long and distinguished life.



Leah Chase receives her honorary doctorate of humane letters from Tulane President Scott Cowen during Saturday's (May 17) commencement ceremony. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

"I was brought up to think that it was your responsibility to make a better space to live for everybody," said Chase, during an interview that took place only minutes before she joined senior members of the Tulane administration, board and faculty on the commencement stage in the Louisiana Superdome on Saturday (May 17).

"You have to do for others. You look at the beautiful air we breathe, the sunshine, the trees ? I never considered those things free."

In addition to her award, Chase had another reason to celebrate on Saturday ? her granddaughter, Chase Kamata, graduated on Saturday with a master's of fine arts

degree in musical theater.

Adding to the family's Tulane connection is that Leah Chase's daughter, also called Leah Chase, is a much-beloved jazz vocal instructor in the Newcomb Department of Music.

The elder Chase, the chef and owner of Dooky Chase's restaurant in New Orleans, is a civil rights activist, patron of the arts and preserver and promoter of the city's indigenous Creole cuisine.

Though the 85-year-old Chase, who has received the Torch of Liberty Award from B'nai B'rith and the *Times-Picayune* Loving Cup, is something of a local icon, she remains humble.

Humility is difficult to maintain, she said, because people are always trying to scramble to get ahead. "When you are climbing you have to know where you are going to climb, where you are going to go, or where you want to stop," she said.

Chase, whose restaurant was severely flooded following Hurricane Katrina, said the storm exposed the extent to which the city had "too many people who could not fend for themselves."

"When I saw all those people, that told me, 'Leah, you didn't do what you are supposed to do.' You are supposed to help people. Show people. Teach them how to rise up. I don't think we did a good job at that."

Chase said she believes the key to a successful society is having citizens who know their own self-worth.

When she first started out in the restaurant business, Chase recalls being looked down upon; she had to find the worth in what she was doing.

"People would look at you as if you're nothing. What are you? You're just a cook. And then I started putting two and two together, and I said, 'Well I don't care if you're the Pope or if you are the president, you have to eat.' So somebody's got to feed you.

"People have to find their own space, whatever it is. That's what uplifts you," she

said. "It is easy to live. People just make life hard."