

Law alumna Terry O'Neill leads NOW revamping

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aspindle@tulane.edu



Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization for Women since 2009, speaks during the group's annual conference in New Orleans June 19-21. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Terry O'Neill never expected to use her legal training from Tulane Law School to advance the causes of feminism.

"The opportunity found me," said O'Neill during a break from leading a packed agenda at the recent [National Organization for Women](#) annual conference in New

Orleans. "It was a series of accidents."

O'Neill, who received her law degree in 1980 and taught at [Tulane Law School](#) for 12 years, took over as NOW president in 2009 and is guiding efforts to modernize the organization so it can stay relevant while keeping its grassroots identity.

The June 19-21 conference explored problems that spill across gender, racial and socioeconomic lines. For instance, one panel discussed women's financial disparities: A 2010 study showed that median net worth is \$100 for single black women and \$120 for Latinas but \$41,500 for white women.

Another session co-chaired by Tulane law professor and associate provost [Tania Tetlow](#) investigated women's roles in the upcoming presidential and congressional elections.

O'Neill worked on corporate securities and business transactions before joining the Tulane faculty in 1990 to teach corporate law. But she also explored feminist, critical race and "queer" theory on her own.

She got her first taste of grassroots politics in 1991, campaigning door-to-door against David Duke in his unsuccessful Louisiana gubernatorial run. She said that "humanizing" experience showed her the power of local activism.

After that election, O'Neill remained interested in politics but had no outlet for it until discovering NOW's New Orleans chapter. She knew she'd fit in when she saw a sign that read: "Sexism, racism, homophobia - connect the dots."

O'Neill credits her Tulane law background for shaping her successful career. She said today's women graduates should remain flexible and think creatively: "Keep your options open, and always look around for opportunities, because you never know what accidents will be waiting."

Ali Mansfield is Tulane Law School's communications and marketing coordinator.

“As allies, we must ... work for public policies to help our sisters of color.”—Terry O'Neill, president, National Organization for Women