

The *Incomparable* Yvette Jones

AFTER 36 YEARS AT TULANE, THE ARGUABLY MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY IS STEPPING DOWN, LEAVING A LEGACY THAT INCLUDES YULMAN STADIUM, RECOVERY FROM HURRICANE KATRINA AND SOLID SUPPORT AMONG ALUMNI AND THE NEW ORLEANS COMMUNITY.

By Mike Strecker



PAULA BURCH-CELENTANO



For three decades, Yvette Jones has worked tirelessly for the success of Tulane. Here she is circa 1992.



PAULA BURCH-CELESTANO

Jones meets with other university leaders on the heavily damaged uptown campus after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.



Jones shares a laugh with former Tulane President Eamon Kelly when the official portrait of him and his wife, Margaret, is unveiled in January 2004.



In 2008, Jones and then-President Scott Cowen commemorate the achievements of "Promise and Distinction," the largest fundraising campaign for Tulane to date.



On July 31, when she steps down as executive vice president for university relations and development, Yvette Jones will cap a 36-year career that she began as a secretary with no college degree and ended as one of Tulane's longest-serving, most beloved and most powerful leaders ever.

It's a career in which she earned two Tulane degrees, worked for four Tulane presidents, held 10 different titles ranging from chief of staff to interim athletic director and raised hundreds of millions of dollars.

"For 36 years Yvette has been a star and pillar of Tulane University. Her talent, warm and gracious personality, and relationships have made her a beloved figure throughout the entire Tulane community," said Tulane President Emeritus Scott Cowen.

Cowen's sentiments are echoed by the leaders who preceded and succeeded him, as well as by board members, staff members, faculty and Tulanians everywhere.

"There are not a lot of things at Tulane that don't have her fingerprints on them," said Jill Glazer, a board member and major Tulane donor. "We're losing one of our finest. You'll get me crying."

"When I think of her, I have to think of my favorite movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and George Bailey. What would Tulane be without Yvette Jones? Would the football stadium be there? Would the campus be there? Would the programs be there?" current Tulane President Mike Fitts said.

"She is a unique individual who has had an impact comparable with anyone in Tulane's history," Tulane President Emeritus Eamon Kelly said. "A great intellect, energy and personality."

It was Kelly, in fact, who kept Jones at Tulane when, 13 years into her career, she considered stepping down to attend law school.

"He took me to a long lunch at Commander's Palace and convinced me to stay. That worked out to be a very good move for me," said Jones, who would remain at Tulane for another 23 years—years of exponential growth for the university and her.

"She was a secretary who was making such an impact, I wanted to make her chief of staff," Kelly said. "But she needed a degree to do that, so she got one. As a chief of staff she was making such an impact, I wanted to make her a vice president but she needed an MBA, so she got that."

Jones also raised a family during this time. Her daughter, Shannon

Jones-Couhig, said there was never a conflict between her mother's personal and professional life.

"We've talked a lot about the work-life balance," says Jones-Couhig, now a Tulane staff member and mom herself. "But she doesn't see it as a balance. She sees it as one. My parents' circle of friends were all Tulanians. Tulane was her world."

Jones-Couhig remembers a mom who would "take calls at anytime" and devote her evenings to Tulane business.

"She would sit down after dinner surrounded by work. We would talk like a normal family, watch 'Law and Order' or whatever, but she would be working the whole time, until 10:30 or 11 o'clock at night. That's just who she is and who she was, and that made her happy."

The work surrounding her during those long evenings was most certainly in paper form due to Jones' penchant for printing emails from staff members and replying to them with notes written in lovely script at the top of each page.

Jones laughingly defends the habit, explaining that she began printing out emails in the days before Wi-Fi was available on flights so she could answer them during her frequent cross-country fundraising trips.

"You get used to doing it," she said, crediting her mother and first- and second-grade teachers at Paul Revere Elementary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she grew up, for her immaculate penmanship and unerring spelling.

In addition to home and career, Jones also became heavily involved in the New Orleans community during her years at Tulane, serving as adviser, board member or chair for numerous civic organizations including Idea Village, the New Orleans Bioinnovation Center, the New Orleans Regional Medical Consortium, the New Orleans Bio-District and many more.

By 2005 Jones was at the height of her career. As senior vice president for external affairs, she had overseen record levels of giving to the university that fueled major construction including the Israel Environmental Science Building, Goldring/Woldenberg Hall II and the newly launched renovations of Turchin Stadium and what would become the Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life. The university had also just



PAULA BURCH-CELENTANO

The Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life officially opens in January 2007. It is among many campus building projects that Jones helped develop.



TRACIE MORRIS SCHAEFFER

Jones and benefactor Jill Glazer have fun at the opening of the Glazer Family Club in Yulman Stadium in 2014.



MICHAEL JURBICK

President Mike Fitts presents Jones with the Tulane President's Medal during the Beads on Broadway gala for Tulane alumni and friends in New York in April 2016.

Jones is honored along with healthcare leader Dr. Karen DeSalvo at the American Red Cross Power of Women luncheon in New Orleans in August 2015.



MARY MOUTON



MARY MOUTON

Jones calls them her "greenies." They are her grounding force—daughter Shannon, son-in-law Rob Couhig, grandson Jack and husband Rick Jones.

announced "Promise and Distinction: The Campaign for Tulane," with the goal of increasing Tulane's endowment to \$1 billion.

Then, as all New Orleans narratives go ... Katrina hit. Tulane was devastated, with more than \$650 million in damages and losses and its students, faculty and staff scattered throughout the country.

It was in the crucible of this existential threat that Jones displayed her greatest value. While evacuated in Houston with a handful of administrators and staff, Cowen tapped Jones as his chief operating officer and second in command. The former secretary had arguably become the most powerful woman in Tulane's history.

Jones played a central role in rebuilding and rebranding the university post-Katrina. This included hiring the remediation and construction company that led the physical resurrection of Tulane.

"Her contributions to Tulane's success and advancement, especially after Hurricane Katrina, solidify her legacy as an outstanding alumna and leader of the university," Cowen said.

Jones looks back at Katrina, which destroyed much of her personal property, with a mix of the horror and strange nostalgia that only those who experienced it can.

"Katrina is my best and worst memory at Tulane. It was the worst because of the devastation. It was best because of how we became family and how we were able to open in 2006—how our hard work paid off," Jones said.

The years that followed Katrina brought continued growth, challenges and opportunities. After the campus was rebuilt, Jones turned her attention to completing the "Promise and Distinction" capital campaign, surpassing the campaign's \$700 million goal and making it the largest fundraising effort in Louisiana's history.

It was during this time that Jones met Jill and Avie Glazer, who would become one of the lead donors to Yulman Stadium and numerous other university efforts. Glazer recalls Jones and Cowen "walking into my backyard" in Florida one day and winning her and her husband over immediately.

"She is one of Tulane's finest ambassadors. She believes in what she is saying. You know it's real. When you introduce her to other

donors, you know when she walks away they are going to say, 'Wow, where do I sign?'"

Jones' "wow factor" has resulted in programs and buildings too numerous to count that have, literally, changed the face and character of Tulane University. She has set a standard of raising \$120 million per year for Tulane. Her portfolio includes a breathtaking array of university responsibilities that defy conventional job descriptions including, but not limited to, fundraising, governmental affairs, media relations, marketing, board relations and alumni affairs.

Jones can look back on a host of brick-and-mortar accomplishments, outsized achievements and countless recognitions she has received through the years, including *New Orleans CityBusiness'* "Women of the Year Award," the Red Cross' "Power of Women Award" or the Yvette Milner Jones Award, established in her name to honor extraordinary Tulane staff.

Yet when asked to name her legacy she mentions others—namely those who she has helped through the years.

"What has touched me the most is the number of people who have written to me and told me how much I helped them whether it was navigating financial aid, mentoring or whatever. I didn't realize the number of people I helped," Jones said.

She admits she never had a real plan for her own career and simply accepted the next challenge and position that came her way. It is something she tries to impart to the many young people who seek her advice.

"It's good to have a destination but not to have a plan that you can't move away from. Be adaptable," she said.

As far as her own plans for life after Tulane, Jones said she will first take some time to "recalibrate" before marshaling her talents to do "something meaningful in New Orleans."

"I have to find out who I am. I am not going to be Yvette Jones, executive vice president for university relations and development anymore."

She does, however, promise to always be a Tulanian.

"In many ways Tulane is like a small town where you know everyone. I can remember so many people, how I met them, their first day here. I have family here. It's been a great ride." 🍷