



Everything New Orleans

Nonprofit group trying to rescue lighthouse

Efforts shine light on battered beacon

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By Leslie Williams
Staff writer

Aug. 14, 2006, was among the better post-Katrina days for Anne Rheams, offering a short reprieve from the tribulations of a nearly yearlong struggle to rescue the New Canal Lighthouse.

A New Orleans icon for generations, the lighthouse has represented the part of the city where urban life makes room for fishing, swimming, sailing, breezy promenades and sunsets. Just before Katrina, the circa-1890s structure had ended a 40-year stint as the area's Coast Guard station.

Rheams, deputy director of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, had watched with dismay as one savage beating after another rendered the lighthouse barely recognizable.

The damage to the structure wrought by Hurricane Katrina left Rheams feeling "like someone punched me in my stomach." Three weeks later, the winds along the perimeter of Hurricane Rita dealt another beating. Rheams' tears flowed again in November when gusts from an unexpected thunderstorm smashed the cupola of the much-weakened lighthouse.

"I fell to my knees," recalled Rheams, of the moment she saw the third injury to the historic building.

Rheams had been overseeing pre-Katrina efforts to allow the nonprofit foundation -- widely praised for its efforts in restoring the health of Lake Pontchartrain -- to take over and restore the lighthouse, vacated in 2001 when the Coast Guard moved to a larger complex in Bucktown.

"I feel a strong connection to this place. My parents grew up in Lakeview near the lighthouse when it was considered the country," she said. "My father swam in the New Basin Canal with his buddies, stealing watermelons off the barges that brought produce to the city. My mother rode the streetcar along the canal to school. She has often described to me the beautiful oleanders that lined that route. My grandmother spent every Friday night many years ago crabbing alongside the lighthouse."

Katrina made the once-plodding campaign to acquire the lighthouse from the Coast Guard a matter of urgency. The foundation revved up its efforts, arguing that the sooner it got possession of the lighthouse, the sooner it could start restoration work.

"Every day that goes by there's more deterioration -- that's why this was so important," Rheams said.

Transfer in question

The campaign's long-awaited breakthrough came three weeks ago in the form of a document from the Coast Guard to the governing board of the Orleans Levee District. It acknowledged the results of a title search and the discovery that the lighthouse would revert to the Levee Board if the Coast Guard's use of it ended.

Turning the structure over to the lake foundation could be achieved with the stroke of a pen. But for Rheams, elation soon gave way to anxiety.

The Levee Board has not signed the document, which effectively would annul its vestigial interest in the property.

Levee Board president Michael McCrossen said this week that the board does not know whether the document is legal. The board's attorney, Cornelia Ullman, is reviewing the two-page "release of reversionary interest" document, McCrossen said, a process that may be completed in the next two weeks.

Graham Arceneaux, a local title lawyer hired by the Coast Guard who found reference to the Levee Board's interest, said there "is no legal problem."

"The Coast Guard fights legal issues every day or so," he said, "and that (document) was drafted by someone who knows what they're talking about."

In a letter to the board, Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. S. Mason writes: "It will be necessary for the Levee Board to release or relinquish their reversionary interest in a manner that provides Coast Guard unfettered rights to the property."

If the board signs the document, the Coast Guard -- via the National Historical Lighthouse Preservation Act -- could turn the property over to the foundation in a matter of weeks, said Scott Schneider, a spokesman for U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-New Orleans, who supports transferring the property to the foundation.

'Keepers of the light'

Meanwhile, the foundation, Rheams said, is poised to purchase a \$23,000-a-year general liability policy to insure the site and is planning a fund-raising campaign to finance the restoration.

"As a result of Katrina, we've lost a lot out there, including different kinds of landmarks," said Stephanie Bruno, director of the Preservation Resource Center's Operation Comeback program in New Orleans. "I think it's fantastic that someone is working to bring it back."

Rheams said her work to acquire the lighthouse began in 1999, when the foundation proposed converting it into an environmental education center after the Coast Guard moved out. Immediately after Katrina hit, the foundation revised its plan to focus on restoring the lighthouse, she said.

"I am part Irish and feel a connection to the many Irishmen who lost their lives digging the New Basin Canal," Rheams said. "I also feel a connection to the five women who were the keepers of the light -- and particularly, the two brave ones who saved hundreds of lives from sinking ships using just a row boat.

"I have used the vision of their courage to keep going since Katrina," Rheams said, "to save this lighthouse that means so much to the lakeshore communities. I feel it is the one thing I can do to help this city come back."

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