Rebecca M. Currence ('61)

Woman of the storm

An alumna and her sisterhood strive to save a city, state—and, by extension, a nation—with a simple expression of faith: if they come, they will build it.

KEN BENNETT

Rebecca Currence: a desperate urgency and sense of responsibility to help rebuild and protect her beloved adopted city.

ON A MONDAY MORNING in March in Uptown New Orleans a block from the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, the parlor of Anne Milling's upscale home is a contrapuntal cacophony of competing conversations and telephone calls. The board of Women of the Storm, a grass roots organization dedicated to keeping the cause of a crippled city and imperiled coastline squarely before the nation's consciousness, is meeting in its customary style. There is a lot to do—postcards to mail, congressmen to call, platform committees to contact, convention trips to plan, press conferences to attend, networking to be done—and the weight of time is heavy; sometimes, protocol and decorum must be sacrificed to get it all done. Somehow, order emerges from the chaos and plans for another week of work to save south Louisiana are in place.

Every hurricane has its eye, and the calm at the center of this storm is a proper Uptown woman named Rebecca McDonald Currence ('61). Becky, as everyone calls her, is a bedrock of the group's board, quick to volunteer if a congressman needs calling or a press conference needs attending on short notice. And small wonder. Everything else in her life except family, it seems, falls in line behind the desperate urgency and sense of unavoidable responsibility she feels to help rebuild, restore, and secure her beloved adopted city and state.

"I'll never forget the first time I saw the Lower Ninth Ward after Katrina," she says while driving, on a glorious spring day, through what was once a vibrant working-class neighborhood but is now a wasteland intermittently punctuated with pockets of new construction, such as the Musicians Village project funded by Harry Connick, Jr., and Branford Marsalis, and a prototype of actor Brad Pitt's ambitious Make It Right project to build 150 new houses in the area.

"It was like a war zone," she continues. "It took your breath away. All I could do was weep. I knew at that moment that I had to get involved."

Becky, who grew up in Lenoir, North Carolina, moved to New Orleans in the sixties when husband Dick ('61), whom she had met and fallen in love

AGAINST the WIND

PHOTO BY JENNIFER ZDON / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

On the first day of the Atlantic hurricane season, Women of the Storm and America's Wetland Campaign to Save Coastal Louisiana launch Storm Warning II, a series of events in New Orleans to dramatize the increased danger caused by the loss of Louisiana's coastal wetlands. At Tad Gormley Stadium Thursday, June 1, 2006, Women of the Storm stand on different U.S. states painted on the field to illustrate the number of members of Congress who have not visited New Orleans post-Katrina.

with at Wake Forest, enrolled in law school at Tulane. The city became their home for good when he pursued business opportunities in the oil and gas industry, and over the years, they became paragons of genteel Uptown affluence.

Their life, like that of every other New Orleanian, was uprooted violently the weekend of August 27, 2005. They had never evacuated in previous hurricane warnings, but the approach of a monster Category 5 storm brewing in the Gulf of Mexico mandated a hasty escape. "I awoke at three a.m. [on Sunday, August 28], and started e-mailing family and close friends that we were on our way out of harm's way," Becky recalls. "There were many I was unable to contact before we got out of the city ahead of the growing traffic."

Becky and Dick drove to son John's house in Oxford, Mississippi, the howling fury of Hurricane Katrina at their heels. There they stayed for nearly six weeks as the grim drama at home played out. "We were paralyzed emotionally," she says. "The three of us clung together for strength and looked for answers as to how to deal with our beloved city."

Dick and Becky returned home in late October. "The post-storm landscape is still hard for me to visualize and understand," Becky says. "Perhaps it is a gift of the human mind that horrors subside in the memory as time passes. Very few women were in the city. No children. No sounds of birds—they had been blown away by the storm. I was reminded of the film *On the Beach* [about the after-effects of nuclear war]."

Fortunately, their home stood on relatively high ground near the Mississippi River levee and was spared flooding. They immediately went to work doing what they could to help others. In sequence they would take three persons needing lodging into their guesthouse. The first was a longshoreman whom Dick met on the street. He and his family had lost their home in St. Bernard Parish and evacuated to Texas; he was back because he had a job but no place to live. The second was an acquaintance of son John who moved to the city from Kentucky to help with the recovery by serving in the food industry without compensation. The third, who still lives with them, is a Nicaraguan business owner who was forced from his FEMA trailer and has yet to receive his federal grant money to repair his flooded property.

But Becky's greatest opportunity to help would emerge from the Thanksgiving dinner that her good friend, Anne Milling, and her husband, King (Bill Marks' banking partner), hosted for couples that had been displaced from their homes. Over dinner, the guests bemoaned the fact that very few members of Congress and others in positions of power and influence had visited the city in the wake of the calamity. Anne resolved to do something about it. In ensuing weeks she circulated among friends the notion of establishing an organization dedicated to inviting all members of Congress, and others who set the national agenda, to visit New Orleans and coastal Louisiana to see first-hand the damage wrought, the challenges faced, the signs of progress, and how the recovery of Louisiana, which supplies 30 percent of America's seafood and one-third of its oil and gas production, affects the entire country. Becky was one of those friends and was one of fourteen charter board members introduced at the founding of Women of the Storm (WOS) in January 2006.

They wasted no time. Three weeks after the announcement, 130 women and accompanying media representatives boarded a charter flight for Washington. Working in tandem, the women walked around Capitol Hill hand-delivering invitations to senators and key representatives to visit the city. During a news conference, they held aloft blue umbrellas symbolizing the blue tarps that had covered many New Orleans homes after the storm. Within a few weeks of the WOS trip, a delegation of thirty-six U.S. representatives came to New Orleans. Each subsequently became an advocate for Louisiana's recovery.

So successful was the trip that WOS repeated it in September 2006—this time with the added message of saving Louisiana's vanishing coastline. The state's coastal wetlands, sliced by canals dredged by oil and gas companies and walled off by levees from the replenishing silt of the flooding Mississippi River, have been eroding at an escalating rate for over half a century.

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The 2005 hurricanes wiped out over 200 square miles of marshland, and a tract of coastal wetlands equivalent in size to a football field disappears every thirty-eight minutes. The restoration and protection of Louisiana's coast now shares, with the rebuilding of New Orleans, the top spot in the WOS agenda.

As of March 1, fifty-seven senators and 132 U.S. representatives from forty-nine states had visited Louisiana, thanks mostly to WOS efforts. Last spring, Congress appropriated more money for Louisiana's Road Home program, which provides uninsured homeowners in the city with money to rebuild, and passed the first-ever bill giving Louisiana a portion of federal royalty revenue from leases for new oil and gas drilling off the Louisiana coast to be dedicated to coastal restoration. The WOS message is one of urgency; experts predict that if nothing is done, erosion will be irreversible within ten years and the Gulf of Mexico could be lapping at New Orleans levees within fifty.

As of March, WOS's plans for 2008 included some form of activity during the North American Summit of leaders from Canada, Mexico, and the U.S., held in New Orleans in April; travel to this summer's Republican and Democratic national conventions, where they will communicate the message of recovery to delegates, platform committees, and candidate representatives; participation in the "Our Habitat, Our Future" symposium in the Big Easy, to which the 300 members of the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus have been invited; and the preparation of 10,000 postcards for volunteers who come to the city to send, on their return, to their home-state Congressional delegations encouraging visits.

Becky, whose speaking engagements on behalf of the cause have ranged from Japanese journalists and women leaders from West Africa to various service organizations and a group of international scientists studying rice production, points to political gains at home as well. "We have a young, reform-minded governor who is moving the legislature in a new direction," says Becky, who majored in political science at Wake Forest. "Citizens' groups have forced the reform of the [city's] levee oversight system, which will reduce patronage and provide a more effective maintenance procedure.

"The crisis is not isolated to Louisiana," she asserts. "No official at any level of government was prepared to deal with the magnitude of destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. Lack of effective communication and response systems is a recipe for chaos. More than anything, we need a unified national policy to deal with events such as this."