

As Norman Francis pleads Louisiana's case for recovery, he knows full well the ordeals of Katrina

A MAN OF THE MOMENT

By Coleman Warner

Staff writer

In many respects, Norman Francis has led a charmed life and attained high stature in the community, the region and now the nation. But when he stands before Congress or visits with President Bush in his capacity as head of the state authority attempting to guide the hurricane recovery and rebuild southeast Louisiana, Francis speaks with an authenticity born of profound anguish and personal loss.

Xavier, the university that Francis has headed for the past 38 years,

was severely damaged by the flooding that followed Katrina, as was Francis' home, a stone's throw from the ruptured London Avenue Canal.

Francis might have been forgiven for declining further civic responsibilities in order to deal with these challenges exclusively. Instead, the 74-year-old added to his burdens in mid-October by accepting Gov. Kathleen Blanco's request that he chair the Louisiana Recovery Authority, an all-consuming job in its own right and as critical as any Francis, the longest-serving president of a U.S. college, has ever held.

See **FRANCIS**, A-10

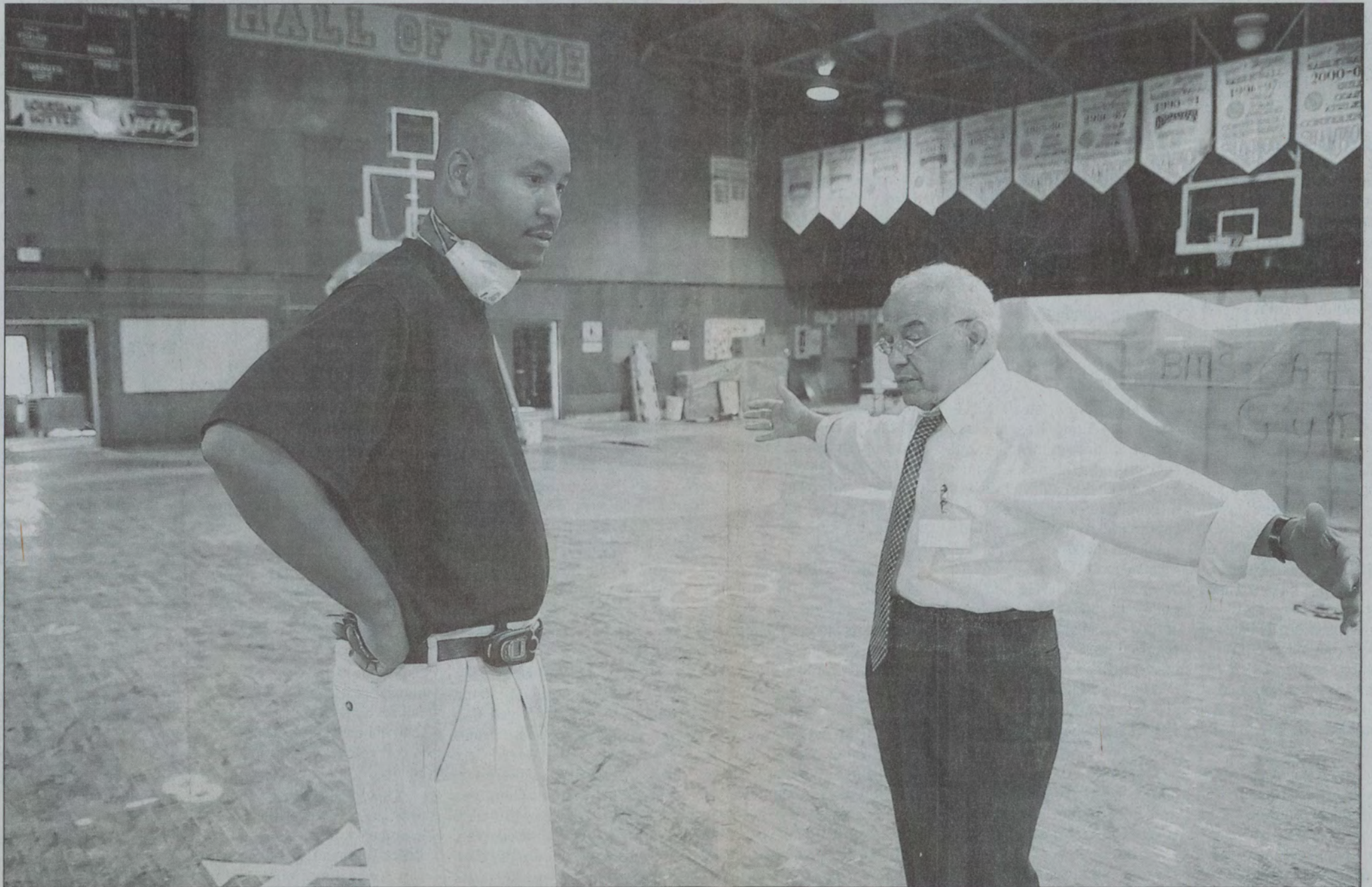
10/10	10/11	10/12
10/13	10/14	10/15
10/16	10/17	10/18
10/19	10/20	10/21
10/22	10/23	10/24
10/25	10/26	10/27
10/28	10/29	10/30
10/31	10/32	10/33



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT ROSE

The chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, Norman Francis has a proven record as a bridge builder between New Orleans' racial and economic castes.

HURRICANE AFTERMATH



STAFF PHOTO BY ELLIS LUCIA

Xavier University President Norman Francis, right, discusses damage to basketball facilities in 'The Barn' last month with basketball coach Danton Jackson.

Francis takes on another huge job

FRANCIS, from A-1

His duties range from the ceremonial to the intricacies of leading a 26-member authority that the federal government looks to as a guide to whatever rebuilding effort Congress ultimately agrees to finance.

On Dec. 1 in Baton Rouge, Francis signed off on hiring three planning firms to develop a regional vision for south Louisiana. On Wednesday, he joined former Presidents Bush and Clinton at the University of New Orleans as they promised to award \$90 million in grants to colleges and churches hurt by Katrina.

And Francis has become a key player in trying to impress upon Congress the pivotal importance of financing a substantially reformed flood-control system capable of withstanding a Category 5 storm.

Congress must understand that recovery will take time and that the nation's economic health is intertwined with the coastal zone's fate, he said.

"It's not simply Louisiana — I can't say that enough," Francis said. "The nation as a whole suffers if Louisiana isn't able to do what it does."

A proven record

With a proven record as a bridge builder between the city's racial and economic castes, Francis typically has veiled his authority in easy banter and conciliatory remarks. Not so on the occasion of an October hurricane-recovery conference when he spoke stridently of devastation he had surveyed during a helicopter tour.

"I saw yesterday something I hope I never see again," Francis told education and government officials, including Blanco, gathered in Baton Rouge. "Anybody (present) from St. Bernard Parish? Ninth Ward? If we took the president and all the members of Congress to New Orleans, to Lake Charles, to St. Bernard Parish and to Plaquemines Parish, they could not come back and live with their conscience if they didn't respond."

As the crowd reacted with murmurs and clapping, he drove the point home: "I think maybe the one thing we need to do, governor, is to get buses and bring them now to St. Bernard Parish — and see what happens."

As LRA chairman, Francis has frequently done just that, escorting visiting dignitaries on tours to help them see the big picture of what Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have done and what kinds of response they demand.

Sad, hopeful story

But his personal and profes-



STAFF PHOTO BY JENNIFER ZDON

On Nov. 7, Norman Francis, right, spoke to members of the Senate Commerce Committee about the importance of higher education in New Orleans.

sional ordeals have sensitized him to the suffering's grassroots level. When the Katrina story is told in full, Francis could be its narrator. His storytelling would be both sad and hopeful.

"This was an unexpected devastation that shocked us into a trauma that I don't think we fully appreciate," he said.

"New Orleans will be back, but it's going to take longer than any of us right now can imagine. . . . It's going to come back, but it will come back in increments. The one that we knew and loved is not going to come back tomorrow."

As floodwaters swept through the city, Francis fled a downtown hotel and settled at a relative's home in Grand Coteau, near Lafayette. Weeks later, he returned to his home and barely

recognized the debris-strewn lower floors. The flood line was 8 feet up the walls. One source of relief: a china set he bought for his wife in Germany long ago was unscathed, in a cabinet that didn't collapse.

Despite being a skilled fundraiser, Francis couldn't land enough emergency aid to avert layoffs at Xavier and, usually at a distance, has monitored repairs to flood-damaged buildings at the campus.

Meanwhile, he runs meetings of the Blanco advisory group in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and has joined lobbying trips to Washington. He is among Recovery Authority members expected to play a role in coming weeks in staging public forums and storm-related workshops for local government officials in

the region.

Couldn't say no

Francis' wife, Blanche, worries about how her husband drives himself as a crisis manager. "He is worn out," she said, "he really is."

But the multitasking Francis barely flinched when Blanco asked him to lead her recovery panel. He likened it to his being called into the service in the 1950s after college. "I saluted and served two years in the Army, and so when I was called by the governor, I saluted."

See **FRANCIS**, A-11

HURRICANE AFTERMATH



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT ROSE

Norman Francis concedes that he's not quite ready to rebuild his home on King Drive, near the ruptured London Avenue Canal.

Francis optimistic on obtaining aid to rebuild N.O.

FRANCIS, from A-10

If the Lafayette native has assumed a role that ensures a place in Louisiana history, it won't be the first time.

In 1955, Francis became the first black graduate of Loyola University's law school, at a time when African-Americans were barred from Loyola housing. Named president of Xavier, his undergraduate alma mater, in 1968 — at the age of 36 — Francis has presided ever since over Xavier's rise to national prominence as a lead producer of African-American doctors and researchers. Along the way, he has served as an adviser to several U.S. presidents, including Ronald Reagan, whose administration tapped Francis to serve on a 1983 panel that produced the "Nation at Risk" report calling for reform of public education.

Steeped in Catholic values, an advocate for egalitarian behavior — "we have to get rid of race, class and gender," he said — Francis is much-admired, a favored African-American when powerful figures are sorting names for a new commission.

"He's played that multiple role for years," said Joseph Boucree, a retired auditor and one of Francis' New Orleans neighbors. "There are a lot of talented minorities that can have valuable input, but he's had such a reputation, they always go to him."

'A moral vision'

Integrity is the trait often cited. And the Rev. Kevin Wildes, Loyola University president, lately has been struck by Francis' easy demeanor in the midst of crisis: "He still could laugh, has a sense of humor; I thought to myself later, what a state of grace."

Walter Isaacson, journalist-turned-chairman of the Aspen Institute think tank, said he agreed to serve as vice chairman of the state recovery board partly because Francis would lead it. Isaacson became an admirer of the Xavier president in the 1970s, when he wrote stories for the New Orleans States-Item and Francis gave the young journalist rides home after City Hall meetings.

"There's a remarkable calm that he exudes from having a security with what he believes, but also a humility in the way he carries himself," Isaacson said. "He (pushes) for the moral things that should guide us, which is enormously important. He realizes that we have to be a city characterized by fairness and a good social fabric, and that helps minimize any policy disagreements — because from the beginning we're signed on to a moral vision."

But Francis' internal compass doesn't shield him from harsh post-Katrina forces. He must deflect criticism of Louisiana's dual recovery panels — from Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, among others — that Blanco's panel duplicates work of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission. The boards share a few members and aren't at odds, and Blanco's advisory group has a broader mission because it responds to damage caused by Rita in other parts of Louisiana, Francis said.

His lobbying of Washington figures, in phone calls or in person, has taken on new importance as Louisiana's delegation

fighters to obtain many billions of dollars for levees and other rebuilding projects. Francis remains optimistic but said the sell becomes harder as time passes since Katrina's Aug. 29 landfall.

Faculty criticism

Katrina's blow to Xavier brought unprecedented tests for Francis and his top aides. In early October, with the Catholic institution's 4,000 students scattered, the president scrambled to secure donations or grants that would avert layoffs.

It didn't work, and weeks later Xavier announced it would terminate or place on leave 318 staff members and terminate 89 faculty members. The cuts represent 58 percent of Xavier's staff and 36 percent of its faculty, and, working under a financial emergency declaration, campus officials said they wouldn't be bound by tenure status or seniority in deciding who to retain.

Xavier is aggressively carrying out a \$35 million repair and cleanup drive, in preparation for a Jan. 17 reopening, and 2,800 students have indicated they plan to return — far more than 2,000 projected earlier. A trailer colony may be set up at the campus, near South Carrollton Avenue, to house displaced faculty and staff.

Not surprisingly, some laid-off faculty members said they resent the administration's decisions. One, requesting anonymity because of an ongoing job search, voiced suspicion that the emergency served as cover for

clearing out faculty who had lost favor with the administration.

Others wonder why Xavier didn't have business-interruption insurance for core academic services and didn't tap a \$54 million long-term endowment to save the jobs of teachers who will be needed when the university reaches full strength again.

"It looks like he's acting on an impulse and he's not thinking long-term," said one former faculty member now living out of state. "We will all find jobs at other universities, but it's Xavier that will suffer — and Xavier's students."

Francis said the staff cuts were painful but necessary, driven by who was least needed to get Xavier up and running in the spring. "Either you do that, or you lose the whole ship, and we live to fight another day," he said.

It's never good to spend down the invested endowment, most of which has restricted uses and cannot be used to fix a budget shortfall, Francis said. And he said the private university decided, as many do, that insuring against a campus shutdown was too costly.

Missing N.O.

Norman and Blanche Francis will soon move back to New Orleans, living for the time being in a son's home in Faubourg St. John.

The return will come as a relief to Blanche Francis, who, while fond of those she has met in Grand Coteau, misses her native New Orleans. "Being here by myself, it's hard," she said

from her temporary home. "I don't know this city very well. You go down the street and there's a sign pointing with an arrow (saying) you're in another little town."

But the couple, who celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in June, face a choice familiar to thousands of New Orleanians: what to do with their King Drive home.

The bottom levels that took on water are gutted to the studs. The twisted furniture, the ruined collection of baseball caps are gone.

The place is secure.

Blanche Francis is prepared to move out of her son's house as soon as "we get our house straight." But Xavier's president, front man for Katrina recovery, concedes he isn't quite ready to rebuild. Walking across his front yard, Francis glanced north, toward Lake Pontchar-

train and a hastily repaired canal wall, and sized up the threat.

"That's the London Avenue Canal," he said. "It wouldn't take much, and we'd be back where we started from. A lot of people are worried about that."

Coleman Warner can be reached at cwarner@timespicayune.com or at (504) 826-3311.

SIGNS
BANNERS
& MAGNETS
464-4436
FULL COLOR PRINTING



www.pelicanUSA.com