

THE NEW ORLEANS

 **Tribune**

Volume 26, Number 2



***A Documentary That Examines
the 2006 Mayoral Election and
the Impact of Race
Culminating in the Recent Election
of Mayor-Elect Mitch Landrieu.***



By Lovell Beaulieu

As the starting time approached for the sneak preview of her documentary film, “RACE”, filmmaker Katherine Cecil of CecilFilm Productions waited anxiously to hear what her 58-minute long film would mean for the diverse audience that was starting to gather inside the Lawless Memorial Chapel on the campus of Dillard University.

Would they roar with applause when the film was finished? Would they recognize themselves in any of the shots? Would they wonder whether the film captured the essence of the 2006 mayoral election that pitted Mayor C. Ray Nagin against nearly two dozen opponents, including the city’s current mayor-elect, Mitch Landrieu, all of whom ran in 2006 when they saw the perfect opportunity to recapture the city’s mayor’s office based on a perceived smaller electorate and discontent with the incumbent mayor?.

Cecil saw the sneak preview as an opportunity to gather all types of feedback from locals toward the more than 100 hours of film footage and countless interviews she conducted. She also considered it an opportunity to tackle the albatross of race by someone who had neither a vested interest nor any political agenda. The fact the preview came within an academic setting (sponsored by the Dillard Political Science Department) presented the perfect backdrop for what remains New Orleans’ most talked about hot-button topic, race.

In the end, Cecil’s film won. It won big, based on early reactions by most in attendance. With the chapel nearly full, the film instantly grabbed the audience’s attention as it zoomed in on Mayor Nagin’s victory celebration the night of his hard-fought win over Landrieu four years ago.

Even with the results well known, however, the film kept members of the audience patiently waiting for an outcome long decided. To be sure, the audience was one of the most remarkable inclusions of racial, ethnic, gender and sexual preference diversity ever to be found in New Orleans but mostly lost in the annals of the city’s daily and weekly media. This was not an orchestrated poll sampling. People who attended wanted to.

Dr. Gary Clark, chairman of the political science department at Dillard, moderated the panel, which took questions from the audience at the end of the film. Four panelists, including two professors from the political science department, one female student and Cecil, gave their impressions of the film, each mostly positive. With the exception of three individuals who expressed negative comments which seemed to be based more on the fact that that film was made than they were with the contents of its scenes, the audience was extremely supportive of Cecil’s efforts.

For her part, Cecil (pronounced Ses-sel), believes she managed to capture the essence of the mayor’s race four years ago without being strident, something local media have either ignored or missed. To be sure, she handled the negative comments diplomatically.

“I think that I was trying to say that as long as we don’t look out for each other – especially post-disaster – that people will vote race,” Cecil said after the sneak preview. “That an accumulation of exclusionary actions (WSJ article, Dallas meeting, and MOST OF ALL – the “green space” plan – all made registered African-American voters vote for Nagin in overwhelming numbers (83%), and of course this was a sharp contrast to 2002 in which white voters overwhelmingly voted for him (86%). Many African-Americans did not feel welcome back here.”

That historical fact may have been lost on a few people in the audience. While the film clearly demonstrated the dichotomy in two separate racial political camps, a few still managed to come out thinking the film wrongly portrayed African-Americans and how they vote, even as several speakers in the film, from political consultants to elected officials, all pretty much documented the opposite. Race was a factor in both camps.

The first speaker (none of the speakers were required to give their names) said he didn’t understand why the film was even made. He said the city’s recent mayoral election shows the city is ready to move beyond race, although a number of people in the audience shook their heads in disagreement.

Another speaker who expressed negative comments

said he moved to New Orleans from Tampa recently, and found the film portrayed African-Americans as voting along racial lines and not always in their best interest, despite the fact there were large numbers of African-Americans who expressed the opposite viewpoint in the film. Indeed, former District B Councilman James Singleton, whose political organization BOLD (Black Organization for Leadership Development) enthusiastically endorsed Stacey Head, the racially polarizing White incumbent, against a highly qualified African American engineer Corey Watson, in the recent February 6 District B. City Council election, said Blacks often vote in large numbers when they fear something, as opposed to being for something.

Political consultant, the late James Carvin, when he was interviewed for the documentary, essentially concurred with Singleton’s assessment that race played a major role in the Nagin-Landrieu election, and that Nagin may have been the one to lead the charge, if not directly, with direct appeals to displaced New Orleanians

None of that was lost on Cecil.

“This flip from 2002 is the key point of the film too,” she said. “We tried to answer the question, “How did Mayor Nagin get re-elected?” and to show how many white people helped Nagin win by not wanting everyone to come home and showing evidence of this in so many different ways.

According to Cecil, the result of the early 2006 post-disaster, with the majority of the city still displaced and with “such exclusionary rhetoric,” the landscape was ripe for Nagin’s re-election campaign to appeal to a different base from 2002.

“How could he do anything else? His white base that elected him in 2002 abandoned his candidacy for Ron Forman!” she said.

At its very basic element, Cecil says the documentary tries to explain how Nagin got re-elected – “perhaps not to a local audience, but to an outside one.”

“This film then becomes a cautionary tale about how, if we gave each other enough evidence to trust each other, then perhaps the racial divide would be less pronounced. But as you know I think we are a long way

from being “post-racial” – and to suggest that we are close to being so – is an excuse not to talk about race. To talk about it is to attempt to get through it.”

Cecil looked at it all from a pragmatic point of view, a lesson well learned.

“One piece of evidence to suggest I might have (succeeded) is that at the sneak “Sneak Preview” - the film received criticism from people from different ends of the spectrum, so perhaps this means I got something right. It is a difficult and controversial subject (and no one wants to be told the truth by a foreigner like me, even if I have lived here for 9 years!).”

Despite the criticism, including some harsh words toward former Mayor Moon Landrieu and Mitch Landrieu’s father by Momma D (Diane French Cole), Cecil held firm, and the audience seemed to back her up. Cecil even suggested to Momma D to watch the film again and to make suggestions on how to make it better. It was a reaching out to one of New Orleans’ most vocal activists that was not lost on the audience.

The documentary itself showed the powerful and the powerless. It featured such individuals as author Douglas Brinkley, whose book “The Great Deluge,” highlighted the pitfalls of Katrina and its aftermath; journalist and media consultant Warren Bell; 9th Ward resident Harvey Bender, a crowd favorite who gave Cannizaro an unedited piece of his mind; James Singleton, former District B city councilman; activist Bill Rousselle; businessman and chair of the bring New Orleans back commission, Joe Cannizaro; James Reiss as well as regular neighborhood people and those did, who had angered the African American community, when he boldly, after Katrina said, “Those who want to see the city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way demographically, geographically and politically. I’m not just speaking for myself here. The way we’ve been living is not going to happen again, or we’re out.” And for those who may have felt the film showed a one-side view of racial animosities, one person interviewed, Kimberly Guidry of Mid-City, had a memorable line when she blamed Moon Landrieu for giving the city to African Americans and turning New Orleans into the nation’s “armpit.” Some in the audience did not need an interpreter for that line.

Dillard’s campus, with its white buildings and stately oak trees, offered the perfect setting for Cecil’s sneak preview. The fact there was so much give and take afterward demonstrated that many New Orleanians recognize the importance of discussing the subject of race, even if it means going back two mayoral elections and ruffling some feathers.

“The truth hurts,” Cecil added. “On one had you have the majority of white people who don’t want to believe that they were complicit in something that was exclusionary (silent during the green space discussions), and on the other you have the majority of African-Americans who don’t want to admit that they voted race. How could I make myself popular by pointing this out?”

“Did I achieve my goal? I don’t know. I think I won’t know if I achieved my goal until I get more feedback.

“But everyone here seems to see what they want to see in the film, which is interesting too, and shows that the story is complex. I may not be telling locals anything new, but I might tell outsiders something new. But then again, quite a few e-mails I received today were from locals who said that I did tell them lots of new things - both black and white.”

Strange as it may seem, that may eventually be Cecil’s signature on whatever becomes the ultimate New Orleans footprint.

Lovell Beaulieu is a journalist who lives in New Orleans. He was a consultant to the documentary film, “RACE,” by CecilFilm Productions.

