

ST. CHARLES AVENUE'S 2011

ACTIVISTS OF THE YEAR

BY MINH DANG | PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFFERY JOHNSTON

St. Charles Avenue magazine is proud to present its Activists of the Year 2011: Mimi Bowen, Leah Chase, Dr. Norman Francis, Leslie Jacobs, Diana Lewis, Dr. E. Ralph Lupin, James Reiss Jr. and Suzanne Rusovich.

For our 15th anniversary year, we have chosen eight locals who we believe are the cream of the crop. By honoring them, we're honoring the gifts they have given of their time, their energies, their specialties – themselves – to our city.

LESLIE JACOBS



Leslie Jacobs left her hometown of New Orleans to attend Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., where she earned a bachelor's degree in history. She is an award-winning education reform activist, business leader and philanthropist. For more than two decades, she has been a passionate voice for K-12 education reform in Louisiana. Jacobs served initially as an elected member of the Orleans Parish School Board and then as a member of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Crescent City and left the Orleans Parish school board in shambles, Jacobs seized the opportunity to play a key role in assembling Orleans Parish failing schools into a state-run Recovery School District. The recovery district didn't renew the teachers' collective bargaining agreement and purged most of the city's schools of underperforming teachers. At the same time Jacobs helped champion the expansive growth of the charter school movement. She also recruited the nationally recognized Knowledge is Power Program to come to New Orleans.

"I am very excited by the transformation of public education in New Orleans," Jacobs says. "We are the most improved school district in the United States, and I expect us to continue improving."

She is also the founder of Educate Now!, a nonprofit dedicated to continuing the broad, post-Katrina reforms of New Orleans public schools she helped institute and

execute as a member of the BESE.

"I love New Orleans," Jacobs says. It is this enduring love for her city that continues to inspire her, and her hard work has garnered national attention.

In a visit to New Orleans earlier this year, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called the New Orleans school district's progress in the last six years "stunning." Jacobs' ideas are also shaping other states' approaches to improve underperforming schools.

"We have the chance to prove to ourselves and the nation that we can create the best urban school district in the United States," she says. "While we still have a long way to go, our schools are much better today than they were six years ago and we are providing students better educational opportunities."

Jacobs resides in New Orleans with her husband, Scott, and enjoys spending time with their daughters, Lauren and Michelle.

PAST AND PRESENT ORGANIZATIONS:

Greater New Orleans, Inc., chairman
New Orleans Business Alliance, vice chairman
New Orleans Business Council, vice chairman
Educate Now!, founder
504ward, founder
New Orleans Startup Fund, one of the founding board members
Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
Orleans Parish School Board

AWARDS:

- ▶ **Forbes**, named No. 5 of The World's 7 Most Powerful Educators
- ▶ **The Jewish Daily Forward**, named one of The Forward 50
- ▶ **National Association of State Boards of Education**, Distinguished Service Award
- ▶ **National Governors Association**, Distinguished Service to State Government Award
- ▶ **Business Insurance**, name one of the Top 100 Female Insurance Executives
- ▶ **Louisiana Life magazine**, one of Twenty People Who Influenced Louisiana (1981-2001)