

A half century ago, a young, newly married Palm Beach native arrived in New Orleans with—as she puts it—“no idea where she was or what she was doing”. But for someone new to the city, its people, and all the wonderful oddities that make New Orleans what it is, Fran Villere has managed to leave an indelible impression on her adopted home. In the 50 years since her arrival, Fran has sat on the Boards of nearly 20 different local organizations and served as chair of half a dozen of them, including the Greater New Orleans Foundation. Her impressive legacy of work spans education, healthcare, art, and beyond, and demonstrates her deep care for and commitment to this city’s residents.

Fran tells the story of her success as a series of serendipitous encounters with the mentors who helped show her the ropes along the way, including all three of her fellow honorees this evening. In fact, one of her earliest forays into public service was at the Junior League, under the mentorship of Ms. Diana Lewis.

But those who know Fran best do not point to Fran’s mentors as the most important factor in her effectiveness and impact as a civic leader. Instead, they unanimously credit her tenacity, her incredible determination to attack a problem from every direction until she gets the job done and gets it done right.

Simply put, if you’ve got a challenging, worthy, selfless job that needs doing, Fran Villere’s your gal.

Fran is just as comfortable in a boardroom attracting donations from executives as she is rolling up her sleeves to do the hardest, least glamorous of tasks. From the impressive growth of assets, funds, and grant distributions achieved during her tenure as GNOF Chair; to transforming the Ogden Museum from an art-lover’s dream into a reality; to personally cooking, cleaning, and caring for the dying at Project Lazarus—Fran’s commitment to doing whatever needs to be done is truly admirable.

Fran's strength as a volunteer and leader is perhaps best described as the perfect combination of sharp intellect, big heart, and dirty hands. As friend, colleague, and Executive Director of the Ogden Museum William Andrews put it, "Fran is strong yet gracious, with a spacious heart and a generous soul."

It is also helpful that in her pursuit of driving positive change in our community, Fran is unafraid to challenge the status quo. Her energy, zest, and spunk drive both her determination to improve and enrich the lives of those around her and her ability to do just that. So it is perhaps no surprise that she respects those who are similarly unbound by tradition: when asked which two people she'd invite to a dream dinner party, Fran selected Pope Francis and her self-professed girl crush, Beyoncé. A dinner party we'd all love to attend, I'm sure.

Fran, how lucky we are that all those years ago, you arrived here and chose to direct your compassion, your zealous energy, and your dedicated doggedness toward the city of New Orleans. We have all benefited from your service, and we are so honored to call you a New Orleanian and member of the GNOF family.