

America's Best Leaders 2009



Leadership

NORMAN FRANCIS | COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Steering the Way Through the Storm

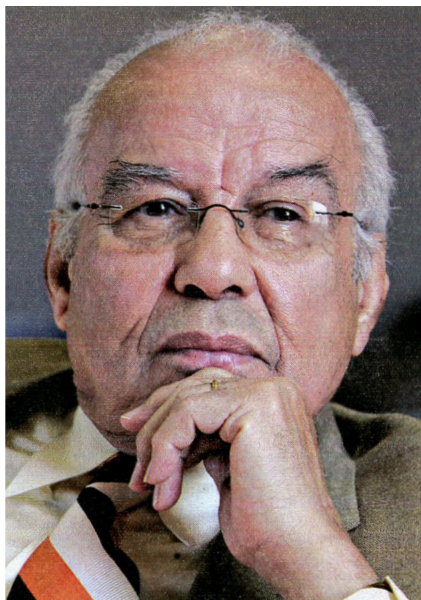
By Kim Clark

As New Orleans's governmental services collapsed after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Norman Francis, president of Xavier University of Louisiana—the “Black Notre Dame of the South”—organized an armada of boats and a convoy of buses to evacuate students and staffers stranded at the flooded campus.

Even more remarkable: Within weeks, Francis ordered up his own storm—of repairs, fundraising, and morale-boosting for the 4,000-student campus. By January 2006, the nation's most successful training ground for African-American physicians, scientists, and pharmacists was back.

In 2007, Xavier graduated 165 African-American math and science majors. Ohio State, high and dry with more than 50,000 students, graduated 27; MIT, 12. But Xavier is no degree mill. It places a disproportionate number of its grads into medical and dental schools. Among the alumni: Alexis Herman, secretary of labor under President Clinton, and Regina Benjamin, winner of a “MacArthur genius grant,” President Obama's nominee to be surgeon general, and an America's Best Leaders pick in 2008.

Reopening so quickly “was quite a feat. It was dangerous just trying to get back into New Orleans through October [2005],”



BILL HABER—AP

recalls Leonard Weather, a Louisiana physician, former Xavier lecturer, and president-elect of the National Medical Association, a group of African-American doctors. Francis “has done an incredible job,” Weather says.

The son of a barber, Francis worked his way through Xavier and desegregated nearby Loyola Law School. He traveled the South as a civil rights lawyer. As a Xavier dean in the 1960s, he ignored bomb threats to house Freedom Riders in the school's dorms. In 1968, just 36, Francis took the helm at Xavier and quietly built the science program into what he complains is one of the world's “best-kept secrets.”

There is no fairy-tale post-hurricane ending, though. Xavier struggles with Katrina damage, the recession, and longtime societal problems. Enrollment hasn't recovered to pre-Katrina

levels. About 90 percent of Xavier students need financial aid. But Francis, a 2006 recipient of the Medal of Freedom, has raised millions to fund scholarships and improvements. At 78, he is bubbling with plans to improve Xavier's pharmacy and business programs, science summer schools for youngsters, and teacher training programs. With Obama funneling billions of dollars into education, Francis believes that “Xavier is sitting on the cusp of an opportunity it never had before.”

Maybe the secret is finally getting out. ●