



EVENTS » EVENTS FEATURE

October 11, 2011

The Amazing Race

by Ken Korman

New Orleans Film Festival

Oct. 14–21

www.neworleansfilmsociety.org

Race

4:30 p.m. Sun., Oct. 17

The Theatres at Canal Place, 365 Canal St., third floor

7 p.m. Sun., Oct. 17

The Porch, 1362 St. Anthony St.

5:30 p.m. Wed., Oct. 20

The Prytania Theatre, 5339 Prytania St.



I never vote for anybody," W.C. Fields famously said. "I only vote against." But even Fields could scarcely have imagined New Orleans' 2006 mayoral race, in which not a candidate, but a master plan for rebuilding post-Katrina New Orleans — widely

PHOTO BY KATHERINE
CECIL

Mayor Ray Nagin wins
re-election in 2006.

known as the "green space plan" because it would have left many neighborhoods, especially African-American neighborhoods, bulldozed for green space — galvanized voters in a contentious post-Katrina election. These events revealed hard truths about race relations and community responsibility in New Orleans that still resonate today.

This tumultuous time inspired local documentary filmmaker Katherine Cecil to pick up her camera. The resulting film, *Race*, which screens at the 2010 New Orleans Film Festival, began when Cecil returned to New Orleans in January 2006 after a three-month stint working on *NOW on PBS* in New York.

"The election was the most interesting thing going on, and I just found myself shooting it without much of a plan," Cecil recalls. "I had just gotten a small high-definition camera, which is big enough to be taken seriously and small enough to be unobtrusive. So I elbowed my way in with the news guys."

Cecil immediately detected a change in the tenor of local discourse, both public and private, as the right to return to New Orleans became a major issue. "People said things after the storm that they would never have said otherwise," Cecil says. "I became particularly interested in all this exclusionary rhetoric, like 'We don't need those people back.'"

Race untangles the complex tale of how Ray Nagin — originally the Republican "business candidate" in 2002 — won that election with only 38 percent of the black vote, and was then re-elected in 2006 after he opposed the green space plan, earning more than 80 percent of the black vote. His opponent: Mitch Landrieu, who would succeed Nagin in 2010. The film manages to strike a delicate balance and lets all sides speak for themselves. "I'm not crazy about documentaries that come across as didactic," Cecil says. "I think my point of view comes across, but I didn't want to ram it down people's throats."

Cecil hails from Dorset, England, and arrived in New Orleans in 2001 to complete a master's degree in Southern literature at Tulane University. She never left. "I have the advantage of being a foreigner," she says. "Even though I've lived here nine years I'm

still very much an outsider, so people of all different persuasions say all kinds of things to me."

Cecil captured about 120 hours of footage for what would be an hourlong film, shooting 95 percent of it herself while also serving as producer and handling the audio. It won the best documentary award at the recent Martha's Vineyard African-American Film Festival, and she hopes *Race* will reach a wide audience on DVD. "'Documentary business' is an oxymoron," Cecil says. "It's something you try to do in your spare time. It's a labor of love."

For more previews of New Orleans Film Festival documentaries, see page 119.