



“A MOVER AND SHAKER BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER”

*Dr. Norman
Francis: A
Legacy of
Leadership*

**Dionne Butler,
Associate
Producer**

By Dean M. Shapiro

When WYES-Channel 12 hired Dionne Butler as associate producer for their upcoming documentary on former Xavier University President, Dr. Norman Francis, they knew they were getting a seasoned media professional to help pull together the many elements and details that went into the making of the production.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR

The hour-long piece on Dr. Francis, airing on September 27, involved the painstaking process of gathering up visual materials – still photos and video – and setting up interviews but this was nothing new to Dionne. She spent nearly 30 years working in the broadcast medium, most of which was as a segment producer for Sally-Ann Roberts on WWL-TV Channel 4's Eyewitness Morning News.

"When I was asked to do this I felt that I could assist in any way they needed, given my years of experience," Dionne explained. "I concentrated on lining up the guests, doing research, trying to find pictures; everything I could do to make the writing of the scripts easier for the producer, Thanh (Truong), and to help Dominic (Massa, the executive producer) out as much as I could.

"I'm spending much of my time trying to make sure we have as much video as we need," Dionne added. "So, as the editing is going on, I'm in touch with Dominic and the editor, Lenny Delbert, to fill the gaps."

In addition to securing archival images of Xavier's founder, Saint Katharine Drexel, and Dr. Francis at various stages of his life, Dionne also took on a large share of the interviewing process, when Truong was unavailable to do so. Among the people she interviewed were Dr. Francis' sons, Tim and David; Dr. Francis' successor, Dr. Reynold Verret; Alden and Todd McDonald from Liberty Bank, of which Dr. Francis chairman of the board; and New Orleans City Council President Helena Moreno.

The interviewees will not be seen on camera and, as much as possible, the questions they asked will not be heard, Dionne noted. "We just focused on who was talking. We'd ask the questions but we used just their answers."

Regarding Dr. Francis' pivotal role in the community, Dionne lauded him as "a mover and shaker" but one who deliberately kept a low profile. "He was nearly always in the background," Dionne said. "He did not take center stage. What he did was bring people together, and that's what we're going to try to show. He moved

mountains but not like a Hercules pushing it over. It was more like someone who did it very slowly, carefully and diplomatically. He was simply doing what needed to be done."

Dionne described Dr. Francis, who is in his early 90s, as "sharp as a tack. He has tons of stories to tell and he will go from one story into another. You could just sit there and listen to him for an hour. When you ask him about something that he did 40 years ago he can tell you all about it."

Dr. Francis, Dionne noted, appears to be "honored" by the fact that a documentary is being made about his life and career and his extensive record of service to the community. "He seems to be flattered that people are coming to his home and asking to talk to him. I'm not sure we can say he's 'humbled' by it because he is already a humble man. I do think he's excited and happy that he's able to do this."

For Dionne, participating in this project was, as she described it, "like old home week." Although she retired from WWL-TV eight years ago, she is once

again working side by side with other Channel 4 alumni including Roberts, Truong and Massa, all of whom she worked with during her time at the station.

Starting out as a desk assistant in the mid-1980s when the morning news show was hosted by Eric Paulsen and the late Andre Trevigne, Dionne moved up the ladder after Roberts took over Trevigne's on-air spot several years later. For a time she shared an office with Paulsen, and for 19 years she was the segment producer for the a.m. Eyewitness News broadcasts.

Also during her long tenure at the station, Dionne also helped produce the early '90s teen talk segment, "Our Generation," which was hosted by Roberts, and she worked closely on occasions with the then-evening news co-anchors Garland Robinette and Angela Hill. She also produced some of Hill's namesake "The Angela Show" segments during the daily program's seven-year run in the 1990s.

Although retired from Channel 4 and currently working part-time as a tour guide, Dionne's TV production experience



Dionne with Channel 4 Producer Val Amadee

PHOTO COURTESY OF WWL-TV

COVER STORY



and talents were recently called back into service. She is temporarily filling in for a segment producer on maternity leave for the station's Great Day Louisiana program. Interviewed just prior to getting on



board with the show, she said she was eagerly looking forward to working with Great Day's jovial host, Malik Mingo.

Growing up in the city's 7th Ward, Dionne attended St. Joseph Academy for high school and then went to UNO where she received a B.A. in English. "My plan was to be a writer," she said. "I did not expect to become a journalist but I fell into a couple of jobs having to do with journalism." One of her earliest freelance jobs was

working with the ABC's Wide World of Sports during the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York.

"I got to view the workings of a TV station and it fascinated me," she recalled. "That was the first time I thought about going into broadcast journalism." After working in various capacities with other TV stations around the country, she decided to return home to New Orleans and was shortly thereafter hired by Channel 4. That would become her workplace "home" for the next two-plus decades and the source of numerous professional honors and awards.

And so, reflecting on a long run in the television broadcast media, how does Dionne Butler view the role she played in making several thousand news and feature segments happen? In her characteristically modest manner, she simply admits, "I'm like Dr. Francis. I like to be behind the scenes." ❧



(l. to r.) Al Gauthier, Mike Hoss, Sally-Ann Roberts and Dionne Butler in the Channel 4 studio.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DIONNE BUTLE