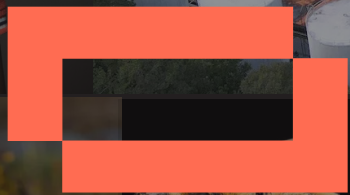


THE LENS

IMPACT REPORT 2025



From Roots to Results: Building a Future Together



THE LENS



EDITORIAL VISION



The Lens' editorial vision is to tell the often-complex context that often cannot be told within a regular news cycle.

The Lens' editorial vision is to tell the often-complex context that often cannot be told within a regular news cycle. Within the daily news ecosystem, most stories are covered briefly—within a few minutes by television and within maybe 20 column inches by newspapers. The stories answer the basic questions: who, what, where and when.

Sometimes The Lens has also stepped into the daily cycle, to ask basic questions about a massive oil-refinery fire, to cover the most interesting campaign from Election Day, to create a portrait of a man who was about to be executed by the state of Louisiana, to explain why the NOLA Public Schools superintendent suddenly resigned, or to write about facility issues that contributed to the Orleans Parish jailbreak.

Reporters from The Lens can often quickly reach sources to answer basic questions. Then we spend more time asking why.

To find out why, we get neighbors to tell us back stories dating back 50 years or five days. We dig into archives, request public records, and look through family photos. We reach out to local and national experts and to family members, to provide a broader look, centered on the people of this city and this region.

People tell us that it's the kind of deep coverage that New Orleanians deserve, and we're proud of that.

MISSION

The Lens fights to reveal and report on issues that impact the New Orleans community and the region. Staunchly defending the public's rights to know, we are deeply committed to sharing our knowledge with the community at large. We center human impact in all our work. We report stories that others aren't or can't. We provide readers with the source documents used in our reporting, inviting them to check and challenge our work, or to build on it through research. Our staff dedicates significant time and effort to deeply reporting and analyzing information and providing context for that information.

We will never paywall information, we will always put truth and accurate information first, and we will always push back against any agency or institution that denies the public's right to know.

It is incumbent on The Lens to report, inform and engage the community we live and report from.

LETTER FROM OUR FOUNDER

Looking back over more than 15 years of reporting, I'm struck by how journalism can be as simple as keeping a reporter's eye on public meeting agendas, and as complex as suing the city for access to records that should already belong to the public.

Every staff member, past, present, and most likely future, adds their own skills to The Lens. That accumulation of talent and perspective is our collective strength.

The Lens itself is the culmination of many people's work. Ariella Cohen, co-founder of The Lens, was a crucial partner in those early years. She had a remarkable ability to quickly understand and respond to the expectations of our foundational funders. The language they spoke often felt foreign to me, but she translated it, adapted to it, and helped build the infrastructure that allowed our journalism to grow.

Our impact is not just in the stories we've published, but in how we've reported them. We made source documents public. We insisted on transparency, not only from the government, but from ourselves. We adopted new technologies when they helped us reach people, and we let them go when they no longer served the public (*yes, I'm looking at you, Twitter*). We launched a podcast to broaden our reach and meet audiences where they are.

We also expanded our Opinion section, creating space for informed voices from the community and for perspectives that deepen and sometimes challenge our reporting. At the same time, we made a deliberate effort to grow our partnerships. You will see the work of other publications in our pages when it connects to the issues we cover. What you may not always see is our reporting appearing elsewhere, extending the reach of local stories beyond New Orleans and into national conversations.

That exchange is intentional. Journalism is stronger when it is collaborative rather than competitive.

The future of this industry continues to evolve, sometimes in unpredictable ways. What cannot change is our commitment to putting readers first, ensuring access to information and news they might not otherwise receive: No paywalls. No barrier between the public and the facts they need.

And as we look toward what comes next, we do so knowing that The Lens has not simply followed the changes in this industry; everyone who has worked here has helped shape them.

Looking back over the 15 years, I have chosen 15 stories that reflect different aspects of the work we do, I hope you have some favorites too.

KAREN GADBOIS
CO-FOUNDER



1



→ **JANUARY 2010: KAREN'S FIRST STORY**

This story became my white whale. There was obvious corruption, but I could only nibble at the edges. The bank and the principals behind the development were tangled in layers of shady, suspicious activity. Using a grant from the city to pay off the fines the developer had accrued, for instance.

For more than a decade, The Lens published stories that brushed up against both Ryan and one of his associates, Pastor Charles Southall, who was also convicted of fraud.

In 2023, First NBC Bank President Ashton Ryan was sentenced to 14 years in prison for fraud and other crimes.

Those two names hung in the air like helium balloons we could never quite catch. After the sentencing, I spoke with an agent from the FBI. They praised our reporting and told me the full story would have been impossible to uncover—it hinged on bank records that were never available to the public, which explains the lag time between the events we had reported on and the eventual massive bank fraud conviction.

2



→ **DECEMBER 2011: LONG ROAD HOME**

Lens Reporter Jessica Williams partnered with California-based reporter Bob Butler to produce a prestigious Edward R. Murrow Award-winning story about loss, displacement, and what it meant to keep living in a city still marked by Hurricane Katrina six years after the storm.

In the years following Katrina, many banks seized homeowners' insurance payouts, applying the money to outstanding mortgages rather than allowing residents to reinvest in repairing their homes. For one homeowner, that decision set off years of uncertainty and struggle. The story follows the long, uneven road to resolution and the human cost of policies that treated recovery as a balance sheet instead of a life.

3



→ **2013: THE CONSENT DECREE**

The major story of 2013 was a consent decree outlining reforms at Orleans Parish Prison and the ensuing battle between Mayor Mitch Landrieu and Sheriff Marlin Gusman over who would pay for it. The Lens followed each development and was the only news outlet to live-blog a critical hearing in federal court, where lawyers disclosed a shocking video that showed inmates using drugs and displaying a loaded gun inside the jail. Later, The Lens addressed the price of the consent decree by describing various ways that taxes and fees could be raised to pay for the reforms.



4

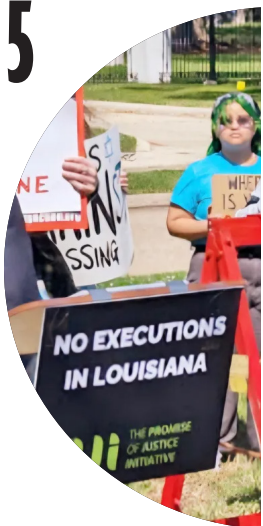


→ **2019: KENNEDY GRADE FIXING**

This story was first reported by our education reporter Marta Jewson in 2019, and its fallout is still being felt today. School administrators had manually changed students' grades and even administered the wrong version of a state exam. When these actions came to light, the consequences fell hardest on the students, who lost their diplomas and were unable to "walk" with their classmates.

To me, this story illustrates the importance of staff continuity. Marta covered education for The Lens nearly since the beginning. In my view, she remains the dean of education reporting in New Orleans: deeply knowledgeable, dogged, and trusted by the community.

5



→ **2025: OPERATING CAPITAL**

It had been fifteen years since Louisiana last carried out an execution. With the election of a new governor, it wasn't long before the state's death penalty machinery began to turn again.

Editor Katy Reckdahl led a team approach to covering the development - a method that has proven both effective and efficient for complex, fast-moving stories. It also showcased Katy's award-winning writing: her ability to craft a paradoxically complex narrative that acknowledges both victim and

perpetrator, without losing sight of the broader systems at play.

The new Governor announced his intention to resume capital punishment and the series The Lens produced was a fuller look at the systems of execution.

In February 2025, Gov. Jeff Landry made an announcement titled "Promises Made, Promises Kept: Justice Coming for Crime Victims." On March 18, the state executed Jessie Hoffman.

6



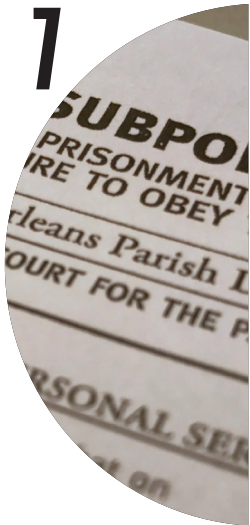
→ **2013: ENTERGY ASTROTURFING**

In 2018 as part of an international journalism exchange The Lens hosted a group of fellow journalists from Ukraine. As part of the program I took them to City Hall to watch a hearing about Entergy and their plans to build a gas plant in the East, a predominantly Vietnamese community. The place was packed and oddly there seemed to be an extraordinary number of people in favor of the plant who seemed...planted. All men with matching tee shirts that appeared to be gathered together but with no obvious connection to each other. Our visiting Ukrainians were shocked that the request was approved in spite of the obvious opposition. But that was just the start of a series about "astroturfing" the support. This wasn't the first time we had reported on an astroturfing scam, where paid actors were sent to "show community support" for projects not always in the public interest.

The reporting was picked up by John Oliver which you can view the segment on [YouTube](#).



7



→ 2017: FAKE SUBPEOPNAS

A 2017 investigation by Lens reporter Charles Maldonado revealed that the Orleans Parish District Attorney's office used fake subpoenas to pressure witnesses, leading to a civil rights lawsuit and policy changes. The practice was halted, the DA's office settled the civil rights suit in 2021, and a judge ordered the former DA to pay penalties for refusing to release records related to the subpoenas.

This story started with a tip and spread, victims being issued fake subpoenas, an intimidation tactic to force testimony. The story was a difficult one to report and as part of the information gathering process The Lens printed postcards and distributed them throughout the community seeking people who had been targeted. The erosion of trust in our legal system compounds the ability to gain trust as a news outlet, we went out of our way to earn that trust and the results

8



CAROLYNE HELDMAN

At one point, when we were looking under the hood of The Lens, we discovered a widget that could determine the reading comprehension level of our stories. With New Orleans' persistently low literacy rates in mind, we began thinking seriously about accessibility. We wanted our reporting to open space for more reader or people who may not have been reached by traditional investigative journalism, but who deserve it just as much.

9  **THE VAULT**

With support from The Knight Foundation, we were able to bring on a technologist, Abe Handler—later joined by Tom Thoren—to build The Vault. Abe and Tom created a suite of programs that scraped and organized city data: contracts, payroll, real estate transfers, and more. For the first time, this information was searchable, sortable, and usable by the public.

We later heard, anecdotally, that even people inside City Hall were using The Vault to locate contracts and look up their coworkers' salaries. It was a small but satisfying reminder of why we built it in the first place.

The Vault was a powerful example of how technology can be put to work in service of transparency—turning scattered public records into accessible information. And that, at its core, is the mission of The Lens. Unfortunately, like many innovative programs, the site was shut down because of a lack of funding and continued maintenance. Which leads us to my next favorite story.



15 STORIES: KAREN'S REFLECTIONS

10



→ 2017: PUBLIC RECORDS LAWSUIT

Show me the receipts! While it was helpful to see the contracts, the real story—the real meat—was in the payments themselves. Following the money opened up questions that contracts alone could never answer. But accessing those payment records launched a long and expensive legal battle with the city, one we ultimately won.

This fight is just one example of The Lens using public records law to obtain information that the city, the state, and various government agencies would rather keep out of public view. Transparency isn't a slogan for us; it's a practice, sometimes a costly one, but always worth it.

11



→ LOSING GROUND

This was an ambitious time intensive partnership with ProPublica. We were first approached by Al Shaw and Brian Jacobs from ProPublica to explore coastal land loss, an issue that had long shaped life in south Louisiana but was still difficult to fully grasp. Using high-resolution satellite imagery and historical maps dating back to 1922, they made the scale of the crisis unmistakable: the Gulf of Mexico is swallowing southeast Louisiana at a rate of roughly one football field of land every 48 minutes.

12



→ 2017: THE FERN COLLABORATION WITH BARRY YEOMAN

We have so many varied versions of collaborations. This one with Fern and Barry Yeoman was a standout.

Not only was the piece deeply and humanely reported, but after publication we were able to gather together the story subjects and create a venue for the community to come together, hear about the real impact of a changing landscape, and hear about it from the people experiencing it.



13

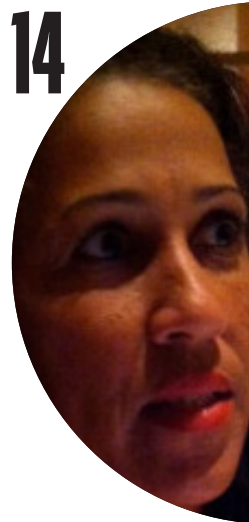


→ **2020: FACIAL RECOGNITION BAN**

I include this story, written five years ago, for many reasons. Recently I've been walking my dog daily in new areas of the neighborhood, and there are two houses with alarm systems that crisply announce that you are being recorded as you pass. It is especially jarring in New Orleans, where more often someone is talking to you from their porch or about road work, the Saints, the weather, or how funny my dog looks.

The contrast between those two emanating voices is unsettling. One assumes connection, familiarity, and a shared public space; the other threat, suspicion, and the need for documentation. It's not just the technology that feels out of place, but the worldview behind it, the idea that simply moving through a neighborhood requires surveillance, that human presence itself must be monitored. That tension, between community and control, between being seen and being watched, is at the heart of why this story still matters.

14



→ **2013: LETTER FROM ICU**

On Mother's Day in 2013, I was busy sewing when my phone rang. It was a Sunday, and the last thing I expected was an urgent plea to get to the hospital, where my good friend Deb Cotton was fighting for her life after being shot at a Second Line.

As her friend, what I could offer in that moment was a clear head and the innate calm that surfaces in an emergency. What The Lens could offer was something different--- a platform. From her ICU room, Deb was able to dictate a column from her bed, determined to keep telling the truth even as she fought for her life. It was a fraught and traumatic situation, but to me, it embodied what we strive to give this community: a place where voices can be heard, even in the most difficult moments.

15



→ **2024: THE WILMERHALE STORY**

Last year Lens reporter Nick Chrastil exposed how the state of Louisiana is using the high-priced Washington, D.C. law firm, WilmerHale, to mount a defense against the Department of Justice's civil-rights investigation into the Louisiana State Police, revealing after a public records lawsuit the generous contract terms. (The Lens was represented by the First Amendment Law Clinic at Tulane University.) This dogged piece of reporting highlighted our dedication to pursuing public records and the lengths the state will go to stonewall you.

THE LENS 2025: TOP TEN

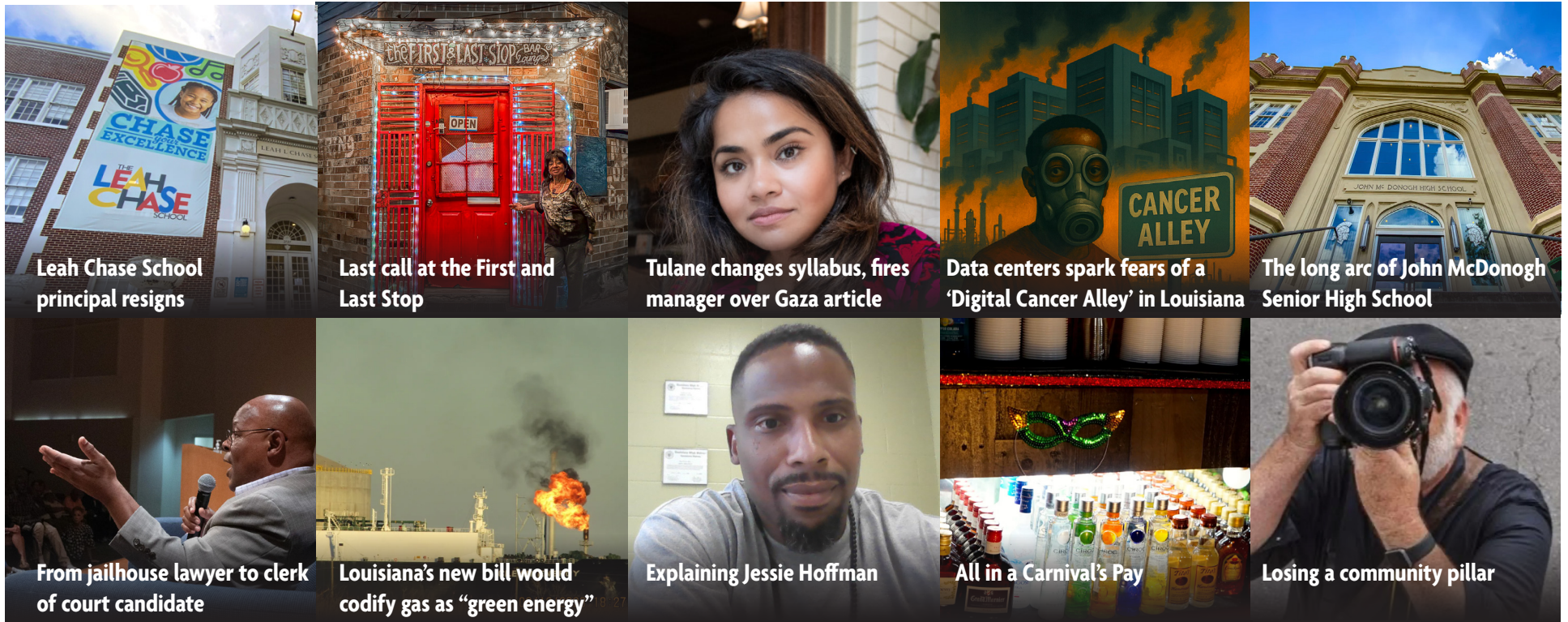


THE MOST LOVED POSTS OF 2025

Judged by how many people clicked and read them. They span the entire year, starting in January 2025, when the governor created a homeless shelter on the Industrial Canal just before the Super Bowl. A few weeks later, photographer Pableaux Johnson collapsed from a fatal heart attack at a Sunday secondline.

In March, we wrote a deeply personal profile about Jessie Hoffman, a star quarterback from John F. Kennedy High School, whose horrific crime never matched with the person his classmates knew. Hoffman was executed by the state of Louisiana in March 2025.

We also wrote about the concessions made for the state-planned gargantuan Data Center and about the Tulane University instructor fired over Israel-Palestine political arguments that influenced a syllabus, fueled social media posts - and ultimately ended with her being terminated.



THE LENS: TELLING STORIES VISUALLY



AN IMAGE CAN SAY A 1,000 WORDS



OUR PARTNERS

TV & DIGITAL

WYES-Informed Source, Fox 8 WDSU, Weather Channel, WWL-TV, Al Jazeera Fault Lines, Propublica, Slate, Politifact, Hechinger Report, Juvenile Justice Information Exchange, Huffington Post, The Atavist, Columbia Journalism Investigations/Center for Public Integrity, HuffPost, Southerly, Al Jazeera English, Real News Network, The Intercept, Floodlight, Louisiana Illuminator, The Guardian, Grist, Next City

RADIO

WWNO
WRBH
WHIV
WAMF
WBOK

PRINT

The Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate
Louisiana Weekly
The Nation

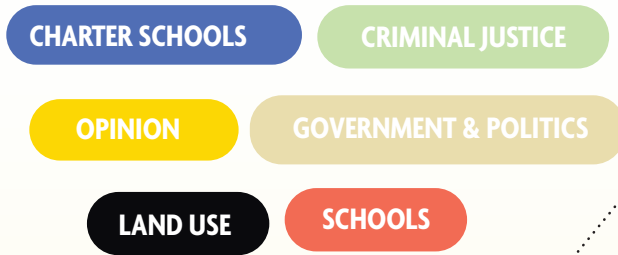
THE LENS BY THE NUMBERS



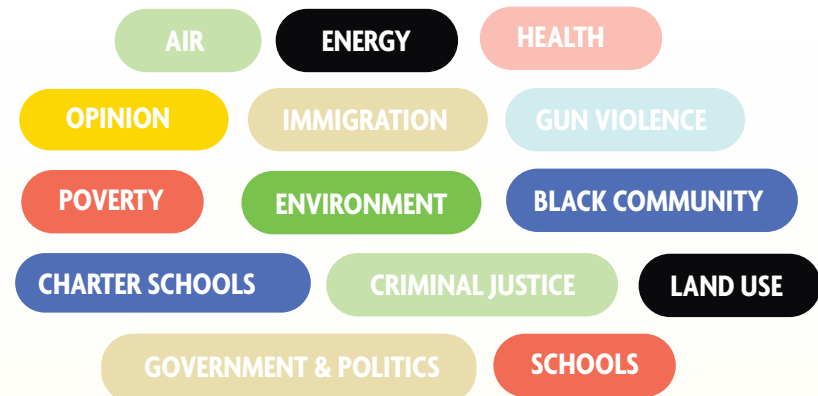
2011 - 2026 OUR REPORTING MATTERS AND GETS RESULTS

ANNUAL BUDGET 2011 \$499,000

BUDGET 2026 \$680,500



Total stories posted: 661



15 years of Beats

Total stories posted: 6,768

THE LENS
WEBSITE

Average user per month: 157,447

BEHIND
THE LENS
PODCAST

Podcast total number of listens
since February 2023 : 28,161

(Data from Blubrry)



47,468 social media users

Across six platforms

WHY THE LENS MATTERS



PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT US



I APPRECIATE INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM.

YOUR WORK IS IMPORTANT TO OUR CITY AND OUR STATE AND I WANT YOU TO KNOW YOU'RE APPRECIATED.

YOU ALL GIVE VOICE TO IMPORTANT PERSPECTIVES ON MANY PRESSING ISSUES FACING THE CITY AND REGION.

CRITICAL TO TELL THE STORIES OF THE DISENFRANCHISED & ELEVATE SOLUTIONS TO LOCAL JUSTICE CHALLENGES.

Y'ALL'S WORK IS ESSENTIAL, NOW MORE THAN EVER. THANK YOU.

UNDOUBTEDLY THE STATE'S BEST SOURCE FOR HONEST NEWS.

YOU PROVIDE A TERRIFIC SERVICE TO OUR COMMUNITY. THANK YOU!

I WANT TO SUPPORT LOCAL JOURNALISM, ESPECIALLY FROM A GRASSROOTS AND INVESTIGATIVE ANGLE.

WHY THE LENS MATTERS




PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT US



THE LENS DOES AN EXCELLENT AND MUCH NEEDED SERVICE OF DIGGING FOR INFORMATION WHERE IT'S NEEDED. 

I BELIEVE IN INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM AND BELIEVE IN THE PEOPLE OF NEW ORLEANS... 

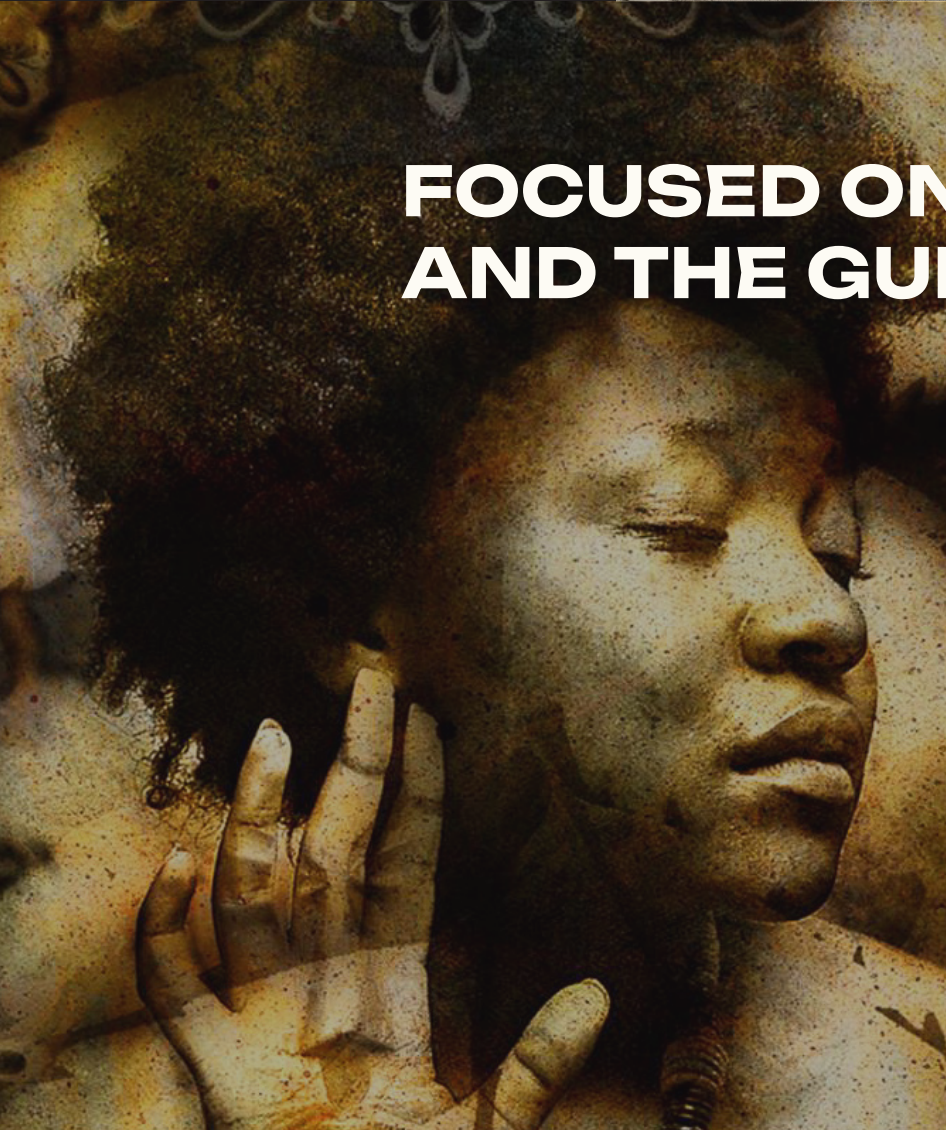
I SUPPORT INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM AND ESPECIALLY APPRECIATE YOUR REPORTING ON SPECIAL EDUCATION. 

GREAT COVERAGE OF IMPORTANT LOCAL ISSUES- I AM PROUD TO SUPPORT JOURNALISM AT IT'S BEST. 

EVERY CITIZEN NEEDS ACCESS TO DEEPLY REPORTED PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY STORIES ABOUT THEIR COMMUNITY. 

Y'ALL ARE VIRTUALLY THE LAST INSTITUTION DOING SERIOUS JOURNALISM IN NEW ORLEANS! KEEP IT UP! 

NEW ORLEANS PRODUCES A LOT OF SERIOUS NEWS, AND THE LENS COVERS IT. (FORMER LENS REPORTER) 



FOCUSED ON NEW ORLEANS AND THE GULF SOUTH





P.O. Box 13242
New Orleans, LA 70185
TheLensnola.org

NEWSLETTER



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