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Protesters: Hold corps responsible for N.O. flood

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NEW ORLEANS - About 300 people demonstrated Saturday for better levee protection, gathering on the Mississippi River levee next to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers building. Back in the crowd, 15-year-old Stanford Rosenthal said his mother made the rally happen.

A fitness instructor and mother of three children, Sandy Rosenthal's first foray into protest politics took shape in Lafayette, her son said. It's where the New Orleans family spent more than a month, after evacuating because of Hurricane Katrina.

Every morning, Stanford said, his mother pored over news reports of how the storm overwhelmed New Orleans' levee system, flooding their hometown. "She was very angry the whole time we were in Lafayette."

When the family returned to New Orleans in October, Sandy Rosenthal channeled her anger into action, her son said.

She founded Levees for a Greater New Orleans, a bipartisan grassroots group that intends to hold the federal government and the Army Corps of Engineers accountable for repairing the failed levees. The group wants Congress to compensate homeowners for their flood-damaged homes, restore the wetlands that serve as a natural barrier against hurricanes and upgrade levees to withstand a Category 5 hurricane.

"I'm doing this because everyone I know has lost a home or a job," in the wake of Katrina, Rosenthal said. "No one escaped the levee breaks."

She said her husband, Steve Rosenthal, a businessman, demurred when asked how much the rally cost. He paid for a full-page newspaper ad on the rally as well as the green and white signs posted

on major thoroughfares. The couple turned to young Stanford to build a Web site for the group, <http://www.levees.org>.

One hour before the demonstration, forecasters were predicting a 90 percent chance of thunderstorms. By 11 a.m., however, scores of protesters assembled on an Uptown levee near the fence line of the corps' headquarters. A moving picket line waved signs and chanted: "N-O-L-A, Make our levees safe today!"

Dozens more protesters streamed toward the rally, walking along the top of the levee and the railroad tracks below.

While other protests have denounced the corps' response to Katrina, Rosenthal's group is unique for the pains it took not to blame individual employees for the flooding.

"There are many good people who are working hard to rebuild and improve our levees," she told the rally. "The failures at the corps are institutional and date back decades."

A spokesman for the corps could not be reached Saturday. The corps has said several investigations are underway to determine responsibility for the flooding. Corps officials last week announced a series of internal measures aimed at improving its emergency response to future storms.

After reading a statement, Rosenthal used a bullhorn to lead the crowd in a lengthy exchange: "Who oversees the construction of the levees?" she yelled.

"Corps of Engineers!" the crowd answered.

She concluded: "Who flooded our city?"

"Corps of Engineers!" the crowd responded.

At 11:20 a.m., she asked the crowd to face Washington. The protesters turned their backs to the gray Corps of Engineers complex and yelled: "You flooded us! Please help us!"

"Louder!," Rosenthal said.

"You flooded us! Please help us!" the crowd answered.

Emotions ran high among protesters at the rally.

Zeenat Rasheed, a mother of two, said she saw war, famine, and natural disasters in her native Bangladesh - one of the poorest nations in the world - but not the kind of flooding by Katrina that destroyed tens of thousands of homes in metro New Orleans.

Rasheed said her home survived the storm intact, but she still suffers.

"Don't tell me I'm OK; my city has gone!"

Unlike Rosenthal, at least one protester at the rally was eager to hold individuals at the corps accountable for the disaster.

Diane Dempsey, a retired military officer who lost four rental properties in the storm, noted that the corps is a civilian organization with military leadership. Referring to news reports that the corps approved of flawed levee designs for New Orleans more than a decade ago, Dempsey angrily asked: "Which generals signed off on this?"

On the top of the levee, Judy Weaver, an employee of Tulane University, wore two large signs. The one in front of her read: "Bad storm, worse government." The other sign stated: "Destroyed but not defeated."

The protest was over in an hour.

A National Guardsman who watched the rally from a distance in an armored vehicle, remarked on the large size of the rally.

But Susan Howell, a pollster and political scientist at the University of New Orleans, said, "I would have expected more than 300 people. The weather probably had a lot to do with it. But the size of the crowd underestimates the strong feelings over the issue" of levee protection.

A step-aerobics instructor, Rosenthal said she is confident of her ability to motivate crowds, though the size of the rally far exceeded the 50-person maximum in her exercise classes. "Today was just the beginning," she said.

Stanford Rosenthal suggested his mom means business. "Every day I come from school, she gives me a list of all the updates I have to make on the (group's) Web site. I change the Web site and then I do my homework."

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