

# *The Atlantic*

U.S.

## **A Conversation With Sandy Rosenthal, Founder of Levees.org**

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On August 29, 2005, when Katrina, one of the strongest hurricanes ever recorded in the Atlantic, moved across the Gulf of Mexico and slammed into the coast, more than 50 levees and flood walls built to protect New Orleans failed. With the protection down, tens of billions of gallons of water spilled into the Louisiana city, flooding over 100,000 businesses and homes and causing tens of billions of dollars in damage.

Just three months later, Sandy Rosenthal, who had been living in a Drury Inn with her family for a month after their home was destroyed, started [Levees.org](http://Levees.org), a non-partisan grassroots group that seeks to educate the public on "the true cause of the New Orleans region's flooding." Since February of 2007, the group has been pushing for the 8/29 Investigation, an

independent review of the flood protection failures that has received support from the New Orleans City Council, the National Urban League, the NAACP, the Sierra Club Delta Chapter, and many other organizations and individuals, including several members of the United States Congress. Here, Rosenthal discusses her attention to tiny details, the movement towards open data, and how astroturf groups are disparaging true grassroots workers.

### **What do you say when people ask you, "What do you do?"**

I am an activist. I lead an organization devoted to education on the true facts surrounding the worst civil engineering in U.S. history which occurred in New Orleans in August 2005 when the levees and floodwalls, designed and built by the Army Corps of Engineers, failed catastrophically. The flooding was a man-made catastrophe, not a natural disaster.

### **What new idea or innovation is having the most significant impact on the sustainability world?**

The Citizens United victory against the Federal Election Commission has dealt a terrible blow to the environmental movement and now allows big business to give practically unlimited funding to politicians. It's by changing the laws, not changing the behavior of individuals that will save the planet. The 'sky's the limit' funding of politicians by businesses is doing terrible harm to our nation's resources and critters and to the planet as well.

### **What's something that most people just don't understand about your area of expertise?**

For an activist, being right is only the very beginning in the quest to reach one's goals. Every day people everywhere are waking up just like me with a message to send. They



**Pierre-Yves  
Cousteau,  
Conservationist**

are all telling themselves the same thing, and that is "if only people would just listen and hear what I have to say." That knowledge is actually comforting to me. It lets me know I am not alone, and my only challenge is to be really good at communicating my message.

### **What's an emerging trend that you think will shake up the sustainability world?**

The movement towards Open Data, the emerging concept that certain data should be released publicly so that non-stakeholder geeky techies can massage, analyze, and number-crunch that data to discover and arrive at truths. Right now, we are encouraging the Army Corps to release LSACs or Levee Safety Action Classifications in order to determine if limited funds for flood protection infrastructure is being spent wisely or being wasted.

### **What's a sustainability trend that you wish would go away?**

Astroturf groups. Created by big businesses pretending to care about sustainability, astroturfers are fake grassroots workers who stalk, harass, and disparage true grassroots workers in community forums and blogs. Disguising their true identities, these astroturfers pretend to be engaged citizens speaking out while their goal is actually to protect the big business that pays them. They're everywhere, all around us every day.

### **What's an idea you became fascinated with but that ended up taking you off track?**

Getting political allies in states other than Louisiana where our organization



**Fred Kent,**  
**Leader in**  
**Revitalizing**  
**City Spaces**



**JR, Intrepid**  
**French Street**  
**Artist**



**Candy Chang,**  
**Public**  
**Installation**  
**Artist and**  
**Designer**

is based. We have chapters in California and Florida and we spent a lot of time and effort in 2008 trying to get support from members of Congress in those states. We found that even when our goals seamlessly meshed with those of these politicians, even when our work would help their causes, they rebuffed our request to list them as allies to our organization.

### **Who are three people or organizations that you would put in a Hall of Fame for your field?**

Frances Crowe, veteran peace and anti-nuclear activist from Northampton, Massachusetts, who I met in December 2009 when she was awarded the Joe E. Calloway Award for civic courage. I asked her how many times she has been arrested and she replied, "not enough." At that moment I felt unworthy as an activist because I have never been arrested. I would also include Aaron Viles with Gulf Restoration Network for his recognition that working together as allies to other grassroots is a critical component of success. And finally Maria Garzino, Army Corps of Engineers whistleblower who put her personal life aside to speak out when she saw corruption and fraud in her job as equipment tester.

### **What other field or occupation did you consider going into?**

Police detective work. I am by nature very observant and tend to see and remember all sorts of tiny details. This nature has served me well as an activist when, years later, I have had to recreate and make sense of sequences of events.

### **What website or app most helps you do your job on a daily basis?**

It's critical that I keep my fingers on the pulse of the narrative of the levee failures during Katrina in August 2005 and so I am constantly monitoring media stories about the disaster. For this I use Google Reader. I also use Bitly almost every day to communicate with my Twitter followers. And I use

Resize.it to create perfect pictures for my posts on the Huffington Post and e-blasts to our nearly 25,000 supporters.

## What song's been stuck in your head lately?

"Someday," by The Black Eyed Peas has been there for days. I am terrible at procrastinating and find myself absolutely perplexed when people put off acting when to act is urgent.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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