

Lisa Nee: Telling the Story of New Orleans

PERSON OF THE WEEK

By Adam Crowley
Source Staff

In the summer of 2005, people around the world saw television images of a devastated New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Nearly two years later, Madison resident Lisa Nee recently won two Telly Awards for producing the documentary *Seven Days that Changed New Orleans*, a program that focuses on the work of local reporters who created those famous images of hurricane-torn city.

"It was such a satisfying experience just meeting the people in *Seven Days*," Lisa says. "The awards were just icing on the cake. It's really the people in the show who are being honored."

Seven Days tells the story of Hurricane Katrina through the eyes of reporters with WDSU, a New Orleans NBC station. The show uses the station's footage to show how WDSU stayed on the air during the hurricane. Although the documentary centers on the work of local reporters, Lisa wanted it to have a broader affect.

"Being in New Orleans a year after the hurricane and the floods, I felt that part of the show should focus on what progress has been made in rebuilding the city," she says.

During production of *Seven Days*, Lisa made two trips to New Orleans and saw the city's condition first-hand.

"It was an eye-opening experience," she says. "I was shocked by the lack of progress in New Orleans. There are houses completely grown over with grass and walking down the street, bugs would crawl up my legs. I remember walking into the bathroom in the Super Dome and experiencing this horrible gagging smell."

Lisa says she wanted to expand the public's knowledge of the post-hurricane devastation in New Orleans.

"As a person in Connecticut, all I heard about is what happened at the Super Dome, the Convention Center, and the 9th Ward," she says. "I wanted to show that there was more destroyed than just those places."

Hearst-Argyle Television, a national media corporation, contacted Lisa last



Madison resident Lisa Nee produced *Seven Days that Changed New Orleans*. Photo by Adam Crowley

summer about producing *Seven Days*. Soon after, Lisa began reviewing footage from WDSU taken during and after Hurricane Katrina.

"We had all of this WDSU footage that needed to be sorted," she says. "There were boxes and boxes of tape to screen. We would look for hours for one piece of footage. I looked for three hours to find one shot of the tear in the roof of the Super Dome."

Seven Days tells about the difficult conditions WDSU reporters faced when covering Hurricane Katrina, including an anchor who learned his house was destroyed while on-air and reporters who participated in rescue missions.

"In making this, we realized what an amazing thing the reporters had done," Lisa says. "There was one reporter who was reporting from a hospital. She was holed up in the emergency room trying to fend off looters."

The documentary is narrated by Chris Matthews, host of the MSNBC political program *Hardball*.

"Working with Chris was great," Lisa says. "We went to Washington, D.C. where he did all of the narration."

Seven Days is scheduled to be broadcast on the National Geographic Channel in

Canada and has been seen on television stations from Maine to Hawaii.

"It aired six times in one week on all of the Heart Syndicate stations," Lisa says. "They ran it without commercials, which was great. Who needs toilet commercials interrupting an important subject like this?"

The documentary's success is the latest accomplishment in Lisa's television career. Before starting her production company Allen/Nee Productions in 1998, she was director of Original Programming at Lifetime Television where she created the successful *Intimate Portrait* series. One of the profiles she produced for that program set a record for most-watched cable documentary.

"The one that broke all of the records was our profile of [deceased news anchor] Jessica Savage," she says. "It held the record for seven years."

Lisa says telling stories such as those in *Seven Days* is one of the most satisfying parts of working in television.

"I like that with my own company I can do stuff I feel good about," she says. "I like doing shows with good take-aways for people in need. The fact that I can tell the story of Katrina is great."