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I took my first breath in New Orleans. And now, as I stand less than five miles from where I was born, I celebrate the birthday of this Great City.

The 300th Anniversary of the birth of our City is surely a cause for celebration! We are the nation's busiest port, the birthplace of the truly unique American music Jazz, and arguably the most diverse culture of any North American city. Our Mayor aptly calls us the "City of Yes," and the nation celebrates with us our tradition of revelry, which is equal only to our reverence for those who have gone before us. Our cemeteries are not only "cities of the dead," but also ubiquitous reminders that we are, first and foremost, a City of Faith - a faith that has seen us through epidemics, wars on our soil, and devastating natural and man-made disasters.

Imbued within the celebratory nature of this exciting commemoration, is the compelling call for reflection. Part of what I love about New Orleans is the fact that it has been, through its history, a City of Refuge, a sanctuary. And though we vividly recognize the grand influence of the rich and lovely traditions brought by the French, the Spanish, and the Creoles, and their heritage into our architecture, cuisine, and in our music, we must also recognize with an abiding appreciation the influence and gifts of those who sought and fought for sanctuary in New Orleans. Those who were of lesser means, but of a most powerful will to survive and to thrive. These individuals and groups must be celebrated for their contributions as well.

Yes, New Orleans has been a refuge to so many. This sanctuary tradition must be a source of pride for those who love the diversity of New Orleans. Most of their stories and reasons for coming to New Orleans are as powerful as they are painful, and volumes could be written of their influence. The Irish, the Germans, the Vietnamese, Central and South Americans, the dispersed Acadians, the Haitians, the Islesos, and African-Americans finally freed after the vile injustice of slavery; many moved to Northern cities but even more sought refuge and a new beginning in New Orleans. For 300 years New Orleans has served as a sanctuary, knowing

this makes her beauty and this 300-year celebration even more important. People from all over America, and individuals and large groups have come from across the globe to work, to escape persecutions and famines and wars, torture, disasters, and violence, and also to study in our institutions of higher learning, and to build a new life for themselves and their families.

One such story, a true story, began in the 1940's in a rural central Louisiana town. A young girl, the third child of a large French-speaking family, dreamt of moving to New Orleans. This girl was born into abject poverty, she was abused and tortured in every way possible by her alcoholic and violent father. As the years passed the abuse worsened. The girl picked cotton for months of the year, all day every day. This girl dreamed of becoming a nurse. As she heard more about New Orleans, and Charity Hospital and Charity School of Nursing, her dreams turned to plans, and she studied and earned her high school diploma at age 16. She worked extra to earn the bus fare to New Orleans. One Summer day, she packed her few possessions into a burlap sack, told her little sister that she would come back for her someday, and she headed out from the bus station in Opelousas, headed to her future, her sanctuary, New Orleans.

Though only 17 years old, she found her way to Charity Hospital, met with the Daughters of Charity, the order of Catholic nuns who operated this, the largest public Hospital in America. She was accepted into Charity School of Nursing, studied and worked hard caring for some of the poorest and sickest citizens of New Orleans and from all over Louisiana. Her hard work and determination and compassion were recognized by the physicians and nursing administrators, and she graduated with honors! She was awarded an anesthesia scholarship and continued her studies to become a nurse educator at Charity School of Nursing, teaching a generation of student nurses while caring for the ill of her adopted City. She became a pioneer in public health nursing, leading the fight against polio epidemic and initiated, with the Sisters, a Citywide program aimed at reducing infant mortality. Later she worked as a school RN, doing health screenings for scoliosis and eye diseases, and education of teen students on the prevention and detection of skin cancer.

New Orleans had given this young woman a life free of the abuse she had suffered all the years before, the City had given her the confidence to be an independent woman, to purchase herself a small home in the Irish Channel.... New Orleans had given her the opportunity, the sanctuary to build a successful future and a happy life - marrying and raising a family and working as a beloved RN until the age of 73.

That young woman who had sought refuge in New Orleans all those years ago was my mother - and because my mother survived and thrived here, I am alive, her proud daughter. Because the City of New Orleans embraced a poor refugee girl with love all those years ago, thousands of infants, children, and adults have lived longer and healthier lives.

That's why for me the celebration of our City's birthday is also personal. However, my family's story is not unique, as every family here has a story of success and failure, joy and pain.

Though I love my hometown, I think it must've been folks from other places who gave New Orleans one of its most catchy nicknames, "The Big Easy!" Because as any resident knows, it's not always so easy to live here! More than a few years of my life have been laced with thoughts of leaving the city of my birth. After Hurricane Katrina these thoughts reached a crescendo, especially late at night on my laptop looking up Wikipedia entries of cities in Arizona, Tennessee, Georgia, Texas, New Mexico - just about anywhere; I have planned to move away.

But how could I? How could I ever leave the City that has embraced my family for so many years? I can't leave New Orleans any more than a big old droopy, knobby, five-hundred year old Live Oak tree in City Park could pull up its roots and walk away!

Whether we are here by birth or by choice, Our City has given us a home, a place to fit in, a safe haven when nowhere else would do. This is our Inheritance. I will stay here, the place of my birth, and I will celebrate Her in this Tricentennial and every year. Happy Birthday to my beloved New Orleans.