

By Ann M. Simmons,
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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NEW ORLEANS — On a recent sunny afternoon, a small plane towing a banner was seen flying over the city's Uptown neighborhood. Its message entreated, "Save Newcomb College."

Signs making the same plea have sprouted from lawns and appeared in windows across town. Online forums have been abuzz with calls to action over the dissolving of a historic women's college last year in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The fight to reopen H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College has swelled among students and alumnae, a year after Tulane University announced an extensive restructuring plan that ended the historic women's school's days as a stand-alone institution.

"There is quite a groundswell of support. We're not giving up," said Alicia Rogan Heard, who graduated from Newcomb in 1967 and is helping spearhead the fight to restore the college.

Newcomb was established in 1886 as a liberal arts college for undergraduate women by Josephine Louise LeMonnier Newcomb, as a memorial to her daughter Harriot Sophie, who died as a teenager. One of the nation's first degree-granting institutions for women, it was a separate college within Tulane.

Last year, Tulane's Board of Administrators dissolved Newcomb and merged it with Tulane College, its counterpart for undergraduate men. Newcomb-Tulane College was formed in July 2006.

The decision sparked outrage among Newcomb students and alumnae. A group of them sued in U.S. District Court in March 2006, charging that Tulane was failing to honor the intent of the original donation, which was to maintain a women's college.

A judge ruled against the group's claim. Then Newcomb's heirs sought an injunction in Orleans Parish Civil District Court to block Tulane from dismantling Newcomb as a women's college. This action also failed; a state judge ruled that the plaintiffs had not shown that Newcomb's closure would cause them irreparable harm.

The heirs are appealing the ruling, and on Tuesday they are to present oral arguments to the Louisiana 4th Circuit Court of Appeals. In a brief, they say the abolition of Newcomb would "irreparably damage Mrs. Newcomb's testamentary intent, her memorial to H. Sophie Newcomb, Newcomb College, its faculty, students and donors, and of those who have benefited or ever will benefit from this legacy."

It is this legacy of Southern sisterhood, rooted in academic excellence and female mentorship, that many alumnae fear will be lost.

"It is a platform for women's issues that is gone now," said Lauren Rios, 20, a senior majoring in women's studies. Her grandmother attended Newcomb, and several other relatives graduated from the school.

"I feel it's very sexist that of the two schools, it would be the women's college that is usurped and not the male college," said Lauren Ruth, 21, a junior and honors scholar who is majoring in philosophy and psychology.

One reason Ruth chose Newcomb was its reputation for recruiting talented female students.

She said she missed the frequent gatherings organized at the home of former Newcomb Dean Cynthia Lowenthal, to talk about students' progress and offer nurturing and support.

Lowenthal, a longtime member of the Tulane English faculty before becoming dean of Newcomb, left the university to become dean of humanities and arts at the College of Charleston in South Carolina.

The merged college "has become more hierarchical than Newcomb," which was "oriented toward female learning and female concentrations," Ruth said.

At Newcomb, she added, "I really felt like there was someone there who cared about my academic success."

This sentiment is shared by many Newcomb alumnae.

"The leadership was cultivating and investing in women leaders," said Tenaya Hart Wallace, 32, a 1996 Newcomb graduate who works in Los Angeles promoting organ donation.

"It was really powerful to be part of a women's college in the South," Wallace added. "As a Newcomb graduate you kind of carry that torch. I don't know if I would have given Tulane a thought if there hadn't been that Newcomb connection."

Tulane's main goal in restructuring was to ensure it could continue to pitch itself as a world-class institution after Katrina ravaged the campus, said Yvette Jones, Tulane's chief operating officer and vice president for external affairs. The university's financial stability also had to be secured. "We were looking at \$80 million to \$90 million of financial loss the year after Katrina," Jones said.