

THE BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION

# CURRENTS

Q2/2009



## 2009 Barton Award winners

KID PHILANTHROPY/TEACH FOR AMERICA GROWS/THIRD STREET POSSIBILITY/PEDAL PUSHER



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# Baton Rouge Area Foundation



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With optimism, I greet you as the newly elected chair of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. We will remain true to our mission to unite human and financial resources to enhance the quality of life across South Louisiana, even in these difficult economic times.

The Foundation and its fund donors do not have the financial resources of prior years, but we see that as a challenge, a chance to try new ideas and work harder on behalf of our region. That may sound like senseless romanticism. After all, as you might have heard at our annual meeting in March,

So what will we do in 2009? We intend to capitalize on our human resources.

The Foundation's staff is resilient, smart, focused and talented. Asked to work more efficiently and effectively, they have filled the gap with new ideas and energy. Among the tasks added to the staff was a more aggressive 2009 membership campaign. Memberships support our work, particularly short-term special projects and the longer-term civic leadership initiatives that fundamentally alter our communities, thereby reducing the need in coming years.

By raising more money from memberships, the Foundation will have the resources to maintain the gains made over 45 years of community building.

This year reminds me of another era, a time of general gloom that produced a stronger nonprofit sector.

Because the ability of fund donors to make grants this year has been hampered, the staff is contributing more technical assistance to nonprofits.

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the Foundation ended 2008 with assets estimated at \$530 million, down from \$564 million the year before. Because our operating budget is linked to our asset base, the decline means the Foundation has less money to run daily operations.

Fortunately, mid-year asset shifts and real estate assets provided a buffer to the Foundation asset base. What's more, to care for operations, the Foundation wisely reduced the number of staff through attrition.

I was on the leadership track of a large volunteer organization in the mid- to late-1980s. Our mission was promoting volunteerism and improving the community through effective action and leadership. In the oil bust of that decade, we had much less money than in years past. We challenged our membership to give more of their time and talents to compensate. The impact on the nonprofits we worked with was truly amazing. The Junior League of Baton Rouge is stronger today because of the

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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The Baton Rouge Area Foundation is a community foundation that takes advantage of opportunities to improve the quality of life in the capital region. We do so by providing two essential functions. One, the Foundation connects philanthropists with capable nonprofits to make sure the needs of our communities are met. For example, our donors support the Shaw Center for the Arts and buy eyeglasses for needy children. Two, the Foundation invests in and manages pivotal projects to improve the region. Our Plan Baton Rouge initiative spearheaded the downtown revitalization plan and now is working to revive Old South Baton Rouge. For more information, contact Mukul Verma at [mverma@braf.org](mailto:mverma@braf.org).

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creativity and teamwork exhibited then.

I see some parallels in the delivery of service the Foundation's staff is providing in 2009. To them, I am most appreciative.

Because the ability of fund donors to make grants this year has been hampered, the staff is contributing more technical assistance to nonprofits. We are helping some of them develop better and more attuned fund-raising plans that are responsive to the times.

Meanwhile, we are continuing to be fiscally responsible while maintaining our commitment to the civic leadership initiatives. Two key initiatives that began in 2008 will accelerate this year

One is the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority, which was created by the mayor's office and the Foundation. The Authority is readying to transform beleaguered inner-city neighborhoods.

The other considerable project is Plan Baton Rouge Phase II. It builds on the original downtown revitalization plan, which induced nearly \$1.5 billion in investments in our city center.

The plan will be unveiled in June. Look for more details about PBR II in the next issue of *Currents*.

Those are just two examples of how the Foundation will keep at its mission in 2009. We won't mark time until the economy turns; there is so much more to do now.

Sincerely,



Alice D. Greer



FREE concert event 6 Sundays in APRIL & MAY

# Sunday in the park

noon-3pm

brunch & music under the oaks



Seth Walker



after  
8



CEDRIC  
WATSON

## April 26th Seth Walker

An eclectic blend of outstanding blues guitar talent and rootsy, soul filled vocals that resonate with any music fan.

## May 3rd Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir

Special presentation during FestForAll— More than a gospel choir: spirituals, field songs, blues, jazz, and work songs from all over the United States, the Caribbean and Africa.

## May 10th After8

Hip groovy tunes—a wild, eclectic mix of rock, funk, hip hop, jazz and R&B.

## May 17th Cedric Watson

Grammy nominee—one of the most noted young talents to emerge in Creole music.



Linda Tillery and CHC

Face Painting & Balloon Creations  
provided by The Party Artist  
[www.thepartyartist.com](http://www.thepartyartist.com)

Special thanks to:



Baton Rouge  
Area Foundation



Lafayette Park @  
Shaw Center  
DOWNTOWN BATON ROUGE

# About Us

## *Baton Rouge Area Foundation*

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation is among more than 700 community foundations across the country. We work to improve the quality of life for all people in the region. We do so in two ways.

First, we connect philanthropists with exceptional nonprofits to make sure the needs of our neighbors are met. Our donors, for instance, fund safe havens for abused women and children, provide vaccinations to prevent cancer and pay for teacher supplies. Last year, we provided thousands of grants worth \$15 million.

Second, the Foundation invests in and manages pivotal projects. Working with partners, we have revitalized downtown Baton Rouge, are rebuilding neighborhoods between downtown and LSU, supporting the improvement of public education through experimental schools, creating an economic corridor across South Louisiana and much more.

**Who we serve:** We conduct projects and provide grants in eight parishes in South Central Louisiana: Ascension, East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, West Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston and Pointe Coupée.

The Foundation also works in St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Washington and St. Helena parishes through the Northshore Community Foundation, a support organization that operates independently from a home base in Mandeville. This year, the Foundation started providing support services to the Community Foundation of Southwest Louisiana. Based in Lake Charles, that foundation serves Calcasieu, Beauregard, Allen, Cameron and Jefferson Davis parishes.

**How we work:** The Foundation is funded in several ways. One key way is through generous people who choose to start donor-advised funds at the Foundation to provide grants to nonprofit groups and community projects. Philanthropists can start a tax-deductible charitable fund for \$10,000. *To learn more about charitable funds, call Stewart Jones at 225.387.6126.*

The Foundation also is funded through earnings on unrestricted assets, which were donated by philanthropists and grow over time.

Among Foundation assets is the Wilbur Marvin Foundation, which is comprised of real estate left by the late Wilbur Marvin. Those real estate assets include the Hilton Capitol Center Hotel in Baton Rouge, as well as shopping centers in Louisiana, Florida and Puerto Rico. The real estate assets are managed by Commercial Properties Realty Trust.

**What's our size:** At year-end 2008, the Foundation had estimated assets of \$530 million, making it among the top-30 largest community foundations in the country. Donors of the Foundation have provided the assets over more than 40 years. Since 1964, the Foundation has issued \$225 million in grants to support our community. Also, the Foundation has contracted with for-profit organizations to provide social benefits to the region, such as guidance on health care reform and direction on whether to build a new airport or invest in our existing ones.

More information about the Foundation is available at [BRAf.org](http://BRAf.org) or by calling Mukul Verma at 225.387.6126.



**Good eats in the burbs >>**

The suburbs aren't what they used to be.

The folks who put on the downtown farmers market—and a branch on Goodwood Boulevard at the Unitarian Church—have landed near Kenilworth subdivision.

Despite a threat of tornados and thunderstorms, more than 100 people visited the opening of the new market, which focuses on fresh produce and products from the region. The market is operated by the Big River Economic and Agricultural Development Alliance. Each Thursday, it will open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. next to Olympia Park on Perkins Road.

The first market featured strawberries, dairy products, Brussels sprouts, carrots, turnips, Swiss chard, radishes.



BREADA also operates the Main Street Market in a downtown parking garage. •

**Ready to shine**

**>>** The East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority is moving swiftly in its first full year. Created by Mayor Kip Holden and the Foundation, the public authority expects to get \$6 million from the Louisiana Recovery Authority and is looking for \$125 million in federal tax credits for projects to spark low income neighborhoods.

The authority wants to use the \$6 million to build affordable housing and for redevelopment projects in Gustav blighted areas.

The \$125 million sought is under the New Market Tax Credits program. Those credits can be used as incentives to lure private developers to build in struggling neigh-

Linda Hebert of Papa John's Family Farm of Ponchatoula unloads explosive cherry tomatoes at the new market.

borhoods. The federal government is expected to announce the next round of credits in September.

Meanwhile, the authority is asking the city-par-

ish to increase the number of code enforcement officers to 12 from 4. Other cities have shown that enforcing codes is among the best strategies for removing blight. Some cities even levy big fines to prompt property owners to fix up dangerous properties. •

EAST BATON ROUGE  
REDEVELOPMENT  
AUTHORITY

**EKL transformation begins >>**

After years of back-and-forth, the public health care system in Baton Rouge will begin a dramatic transformation. In June, LSU's health care division, which runs the charity system, will open a 42,000-square-foot clinic next to Earl K. Long Hospital.

The clinic will provide services from obstetric care to cancer treatment and management of chronic diseases.

# 26%

The percentage of U.S. charitable contributions given by families earning at least \$500,000. Those families account for 1% of the population.

Source: Boston College Center on Wealth and Philanthropy

It will also take over a vast number of cases that now are managed at EKL, which will focus on surgeries and other treatments that require overnight stays.

But EKL's days might be numbered as well. LSU and Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center are negotiating a deal for the Lake to collaborate on an LSU teaching hospital. If so, patients of EKL would be treated across town on Essen Lane.

For its deal with the Lake, LSU wants the Legislature to approve \$120 million for a trauma center, 60 hospital beds, a medical education building and more. The new construction would be at or near the Lake.

State Sen. Sharon Weston Broome, whose legislative district includes the new clinic and the existing hospital, said the Baton Rouge Area Foundation's support for the clinic was essential in building early momentum and support for it.

Broome was among many who worked on the project. She was instrumental in securing state funding for the clinic and building support



The new clinic will handle about 200,000 patient stays each year.

among users of EKL.

Finding a way to provide primary care through the clinic in North Baton Rouge was critical to discussions about EKL's future because most visits to the existing hospital involve primary care, said Dr. Fred Cerise, who runs LSU's health care division.

The clinic will provide outpatient services in a modern, more efficient setting, Cerise says. It also will offer a setting that better supports ongoing relationships between patients and doctors that experts cite as essential to im-



proved preventive care—and better health outcomes.

Clinics that support that relationship between doctors and patients represent the future of health care, and not just for Baton Rouge, says Weston Broome. "That's the future, not just for Louisiana, but for the nation," she says. •



Members of the Center for Planning Excellence and LSU students painted a house in Old South Baton Rouge in March, continuing work in the area that was begun by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. New homes and condos have been built and are occupied in Old South Baton Rouge, an area between LSU and downtown. The neighborhood and other struggling ones will get more focus from the new East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority, which is seeking millions in grants and tax credits to speed up rehab work.

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**Flat tire >>** The path to somewhere is going nowhere.

BREC wants to build the first path in a new initiative but Ted Jack, planning director for the parks system, says there are hang-ups. The lack of a legal agreement with the Mall of Louisiana and the delay of a proposed bridge by a private developer have punctured the path for now.

BREC planned the path along waterways between Siegen Lane and Bluebonnet Boulevard. The mall was not responding to requests for meetings with BREC, and the economic slow-down has caused developer Richard Carmouche to delay a bridge that is needed to build the path over a creek.

But Jack is an optimist. A pedestrian bridge over a creek could be an alternative to the bridge glitch. Jack also has his fingers crossed that mall owners will begin negotiating. BREC needs an agreement to link the mall to the path.

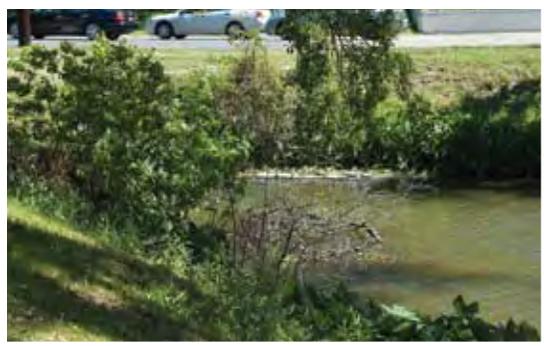
BREC has set aside \$4 million to begin building paths, which are linear parks with sitting areas. It wanted to demonstrate the value of paths—both for walking and biking—by building in a visible area where use would be heavy. The parks system chose the link between Bluebonnet and Siegen because it would connect apartments, homes, the Mall of Louisiana and Perkins Rowe. It would run along Ward and Dawson creeks on Carmouche's property, which can be seen from I-10.

BREC also wants to do a master plan for paths, but Jack said that has not begun yet. •

**Idling at LSU >>** The economy has caused a glitch in an LSU redevelopment.

Last year, the university began talking about remaking 37 prized acres on Nicholson Drive, where outdated student housing, the former baseball stadium and a parking lot are now situated. A committee continues discussions about the project, but Staci Pepitone, a panel member, says economic turmoil is complicating potential partnerships with the private sector and “there hasn’t been substantive progress...” She adds that the university remains committed to replacing the housing.

A handful of other universities have created dense mixed-use projects that provide a revenue stream to the university. Ohio State, for instance, has a \$150 million gateway project on 7.5 acres near the university. It includes a movie theater, Barnes and Noble, restaurants and housing. LSU officials say they are considering retail on their site. •



**Stuck in mud >>** The dream of a continuous walking trail and more park space around the lakes—as well as fewer fish kills and a healthy waterway—have been sidelined.

It appears that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers won’t be dredging the lakes as expected in the next couple of years. So the silt

from the lakes, as was schemed, won’t be available to build pathways around the lakes and to expand park space.

A corps representative could not be reached for comment, but BREC’s planning director says the cost of dredging alone was an estimated \$12 million to \$15 million, and the corps says that only \$5 million is available for the project. LSU, the city-parish and BREC don’t have funds to cover the shortfall and to pay for more recreational areas, said BREC’s Ted Jack.

The new strategy is a longer shot. Jack says the parties may seek a direct federal appropriation. They will gather again to discuss the next step. “We need to step back and think about this,” Jack said. •



## Howard wins Gaines award

Ravi Howard read from his award-winning book, *Like Trees, Walking*, at a January celebration of the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence.

More than 200 people attended the event to celebrate his book, which offers a fictionalized account of the effects of a 1981 Mobile, Ala., lynching. The \$10,000 book award, created and funded by donors of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, promotes African American literature and honors Gaines, a Louisiana native who is world-renowned for his writings, which include *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Gathering of Old Men*.

An independent panel of judges chose *Like Trees, Walking* from 22 entries. The award is given each January.

Actor Courtney B. Vance, above left, was master of ceremonies. Gaines is seated; Howard is pictured with his wife, Laura. •

## Baton Rouge Area Foundation

### New board members elected

Members of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation elected Dr. Carl Luikart and Suzanne Turner to first terms on the board of directors at the March 18 annual meeting.

Luikart has worked at Louisiana Cardiology Associates for nearly 25 years. He also serves on the board of the Pennington Biomedical Foundation. Turner is a landscape architect and consultant. She is a co-founder of BREADA, which runs the Red Stick Farmers Market in several locations and Main Street Market in downtown.

Members also elected officers of the board. Alice D. Greer is board chair, Matthew G. McKay is vice chair, Lee Michael Berg is secretary and Candace E. Wright is treasurer.

Members learned that the difficult economy reduced the Foundation's asset base, the first decline since 2001. Foundation assets dropped to an estimated \$530 million at year-end 2008 from \$564 million the year before. The Foundation was somewhat insulated because its real estate assets continued to perform well in 2008.

To join the Foundation as a member, visit [BRAAF.org](http://BRAAF.org) or call Stewart Jones at 225.387.6126. Memberships start at \$100. •



## Indicators project launched

Do we believe racism is a problem? Do we want more roads or more mass transit? How do we rate BREC and other public services?

For East Baton Rouge, the answers to those questions and others are in the Foundation's first indicators project report. Baton Rouge CityStats was released in March. The annual report measures the quality of life in East Baton Rouge, a vehicle to tell us how far we've come, where we are and where we need to go.

CityStats adds to a growing number of statistical indicator projects around the country. They are used as guidemaps for community improvement.

The Foundation began its indicators project last year. Three community meetings were held to create a vision for what East Baton Rouge wants to be. Then the indicators were chosen to propel the community to the shared vision.

The Foundation hired the Baton Rouge Area Chamber to gather the data. The chamber enlisted Survey Communications Inc. of Baton Rouge to provide a parishwide survey that adds some indicators to the project. The Foundation led and paid for the project and wrote and released the report and a companion website.

The Foundation and its fund donors will use the indicators to guide millions in annual grants to nonprofits and to choose projects to improve life in East Baton Rouge. We hope other nonprofits, business interest and local government rely on the indicators for their work as well.

The report does not compare East Baton Rouge to other parishes or counties. That's because the indicators are for charting progress in Baton Rouge, not to evaluate progress against other areas. Also, indicators for East Baton Rouge let residents focus on enhancing the parish.

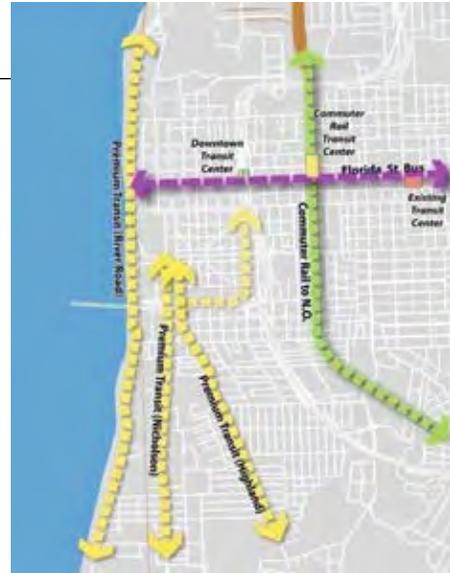
The report has about 50 indicators. They are not static. As the community changes, the indicators might as well, though a core set of indicators will be measured each year. The entire report is available at [BRCityStats.org](http://BRCityStats.org). If you would like a printed copy, send your mailing address to [mverma@braf.org](mailto:mverma@braf.org).

### HERE ARE SOME SELECT FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST REPORT

- Residents are checking out fewer books from the library. Circulation has declined 13% since 2004.
- Baton Rouge's economy is doing well. The average unemployment rate was 4.4% in 2008 and was below 4% in 2007 and 2006. Meanwhile, the number of jobs in the parish has grown each year since at least 2003.
- The income disparity is substantial among races. Median family income for whites was \$81,513 in 2007, compared to \$32,889 for African American families.
- Curbside residential recycling has soared 47% since 2005. The city-parish switched to rolling recycling containers, which caused a boost in recycling.
- In a survey for CityStats, residents rated fire department services at 4.41 on a five-point scale, where 5 is excellent. They rated public schools an average of 2.55.
- The survey showed that about 17% of residents spend at least 31 minutes on their longest one-way work commute. About the same percentage spend less than 10 minutes to get to work.



Connect downtown to surrounding neighborhoods and the universities. The planners recommend River Road, Highland Road and Nicholson Drive as transit corridors that connect downtown to LSU. Light rail or some other mass transit should be considered for making the connections.



Chan Krieger says a second entertainment anchor on Third Street that bookends the existing Shaw Center for the Arts would spark street life. Just as malls have anchor stores, Third needs the two entertainment destinations to pull pedestrians to and fro between them.



## The Next 10

Having drawn nearly \$1.5 billion in projects over 10 years, planners say downtown can get even more in the next decade, including new parks, an entertainment anchor on a rebounding Third Street and a new neighborhood rising in an area that is dotted now with street parking.

In March, Chan Krieger Sieniewicz showed off near-final plans for downtown. The company, working with design partners, is delivering Plan Baton Rouge Phase II, which builds on the original downtown revival plan led by Miami town planner Andres Duany a decade ago.

The current set of planners are enthusiastic about how far Baton Rouge has come

with its downtown. But they are also blunt about needs, saying that more parking garages are necessary to trigger housing and subsequent retail, and that Baton Rouge needs to invest much more to keep downtown clean and safe. As an example, the downtown authority in Baton Rouge has a budget of \$573,000, compared to \$3 million for a comparable Shreveport group, which serves a smaller footprint.

The final plan will be unveiled in June. Look for a review of Plan Baton Rouge Phase II in the next issue of *Currents*. Meantime, here are some ideas that are likely to make it to the final report. •





Establish a tree canopy to shade downtown, and make sure resources exist to take care of the trees and plantings. Many large cities have aggressive green plans; Baton Rouge could become a model for similar-sized cities that want to be greener. Above, Laurel Street with trees.



Because reaching the river can be difficult, the plan calls for more pedestrian crossings over River Road. Florida Street is a good place to start. Other streets that need pedestrian crossings to the river include North Boulevard and North Street.

Downtown's key need is more residences. Build Victory Park at Convention and Fourth streets and gather property to create a mid-rise neighborhood around the park, say planners. The park and the new neighborhood would link existing neighborhoods—Spanish Town and Beauregard Town.



ON THE GROUND



Aubrey Allison, center, embraces Ben LeBlanc. Together, they have teamed with SJA and Catholic High students to raise money for digging a well in Kenya. By mid-March, their Helping Hydrate Others project had raised more than \$4,000. To donate, call Stewart Jones at 225.387.6126 at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

“I hope to get to see our hard work in the smile on a kid in Kenya.”

—AUBREY ALLISON, SJA JUNIOR, PHILANTHROPIST

# Water of love

SJA AND CHS STUDENTS HAVE BEGUN PHILANTHROPIC JOURNEYS, RAISING MONEY FOR AN AFRICAN WELL >> by **SARA BONGIORNI** photos by **TIM MUELLER**

**A**ubrey Allison, blond and 17, sits at a small table in a local coffee shop, blue-green eyes flashing and hands dancing through the air as she describes the project that has become the focus of her young life.

“It’s so awesome,” she says. “It’s the coolest thing I’ve ever done.”

The St. Joseph’s Academy junior could be talking about a school play—she’s a member of the drama club—or Saturday night gatherings with her friends, another passion.

But when Allison mentions articles of incorporation, grant applications and buying the rights to produce a theater production on human rights, it’s clear the young lady in braids has extraordinary

plans for the coming year.

“This is what I hope to do with the rest of my life,” she says.

Allison, along with 18-year-old Catholic High senior Ben LeBlanc, co-directs Helping Hydrate Others, a local student-driven effort to raise \$50,000 to drill a fresh-water well for a village in Kenya. The group’s 20 or so members range in age from 17 to 23, and nearly all are students at Louisiana State University or current or former students at St. Joseph’s or Catholic.

Helping Hydrate Others plans to hit its financial target through traditional events like bake sales, car washes and a dance-a-thon, but is also looking to raise funds through quintessentially modern

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tools like its Web site ([www.helpinghydrateothers.org](http://www.helpinghydrateothers.org)), a Facebook group and corporate sponsorships. In January alone, during its first three weeks of official operation, the group raised roughly \$1,600 through sales of T-shirts that members had purchased with their own money, including Saturday night spending money pooled for the cause.

“For me, the best thing has been watching my friends come together for something that is bigger than all of us,” LeBlanc says. “It’s one thing to get together for a movie, but it’s something else to get together to plan fund-raising for something like this.”

## CALL TO ACTION

The teenagers’ source of inspiration was likewise contemporary. One night last fall, when he was supposed to be studying for exams, LeBlanc was playing around on the video sharing Web site YouTube, when he stumbled upon a statistic that stopped him cold. It would take \$10 billion a year to provide clean drinking water to the entire global population, a fraction of what Americans spend each year on Christmas, he recalls reading.

Over the next several days, as LeBlanc and Allison met to rehearse a play, the two could not stop discussing the issue of world thirst, including the more than 1 billion people without access to clean drinking water.

“We kept talking about how outrageous it is that

we have so much more than we need, and that there had to be something that we could do about this,” she says. “Teenagers like to talk about peace

and love and saving the world and we thought, ‘Why don’t we do something more than talk?’”

The first stop was the Facebook Web site, where Allison and LeBlanc put out a call to arms among their friends, many of them also members of the drama clubs at St. Joseph’s and Catholic. The group met for the first time in December, and within a couple of

weeks they had a name and a mission: They would raise money for 410 Bridge, a Christian organization that builds wells in Kenya by connecting American churches with villages in that African nation. LeBlanc was familiar with 410 Bridge through his Baton Rouge church, Church of the Highlands. Helping Hydrate Others decided to follow the established model of American churches that raise money for the organization, which contracts with local parties in Kenya to drill the wells and oversees the local work, Allison says.

## NUTS AND BOLTS

For LeBlanc, Allison and other members of the group, the effort has been a blend of youthful enthusiasm and hands-on lessons in the complexities of fund-raising. Participants meet weekly to exchange ideas and plan events. One young man donated his birthday cash to the cause. Allison says Saturday nights have become occasions for bargain get-togethers at friends’ houses instead of



## WATER FACTS

# 90%

Percentage of untreated sewage dumped into surface water in developing countries.

# 50%

Percentage of hospital beds in developing world occupied by people suffering from preventable diseases caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation.

# \$208 million

Estimated annual cost to Indian economy from women fetching water.

# \$11.3 billion

In 2004, amount of additional investment needed worldwide to meet internationally agreed targets for water supply and sanitation.

# \$34

The return on each dollar of investment in water supply and sanitation.

Source: United Nations

the costly dinner-and-a-movie routine of old. Once a month, members pool money they have set aside from limits on their own spending, “whether that’s 50 cents or \$50 for the month,” she says.

Meanwhile, the group briefly considered forming its own 501(c)(3); later, on the advice of one of the member’s parents, Allison and LeBlanc met with representatives of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation about how it might provide organizational support.

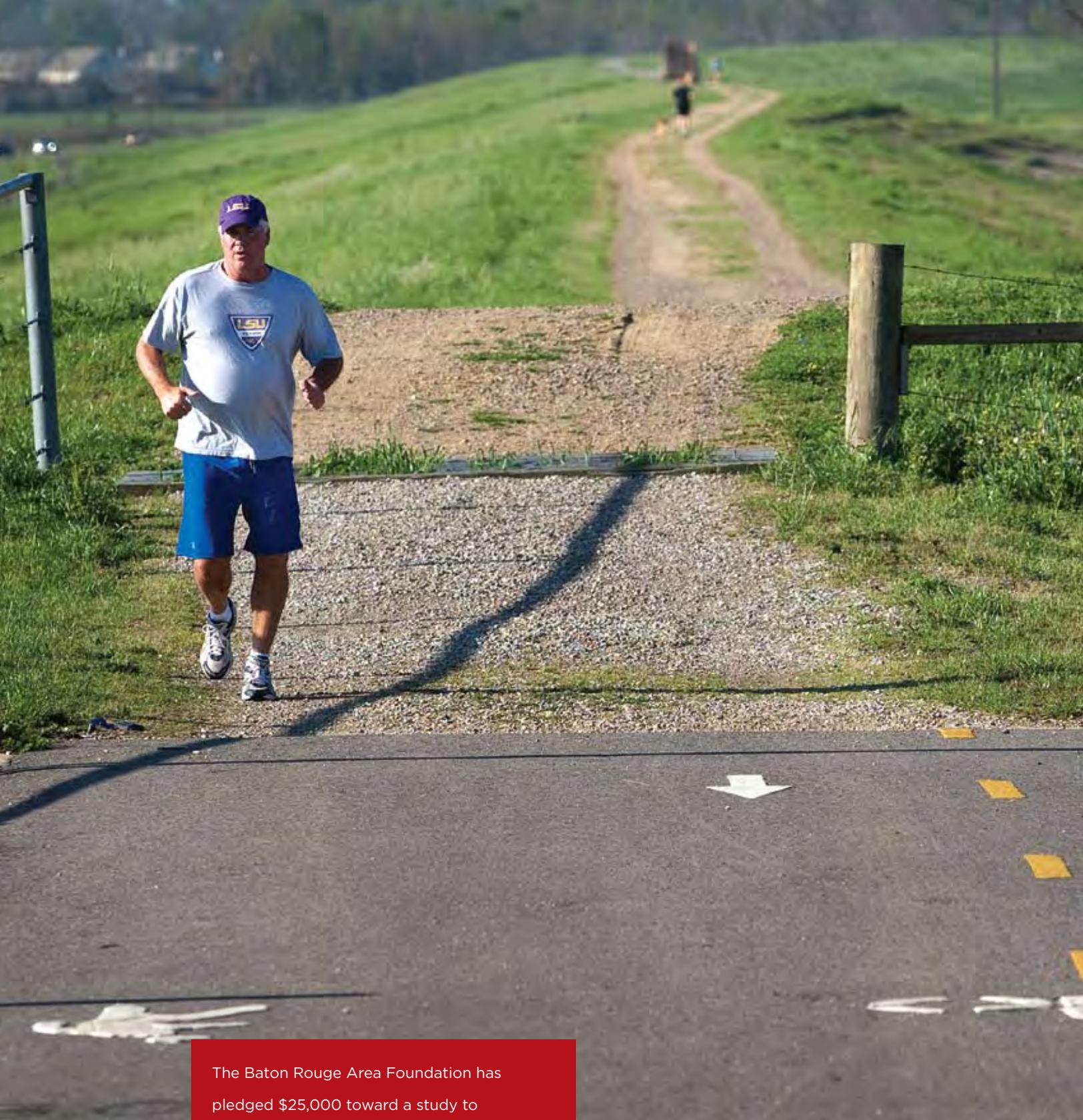
“We brought our parents to the meeting with the Foundation,” says Allison.

Neither Allison nor LeBlanc could say how long the fund-raising effort is likely to take, but they are hoping the project will gain momentum as more members graduate from high school and leave for colleges and universities across the state and nation.

In any event, they already have a plan for how they will celebrate after the well in Kenya has been completed. They hope to travel to Kenya to meet the families whose lives they have changed—and who are changing their lives, too.

“I’d love to actually see the well, and see the people whose lives it has changed,” says LeBlanc. Adds Allison: “I hope to get to see our hard work in the smile on a kid in Kenya.” •

# 19



The Baton Rouge Area Foundation has pledged \$25,000 toward a study to determine whether a trail to New Orleans is feasible.



Jack Norberg of California runs on top of the Mississippi River levee where the paved section ends near the LSU campus. Supporters want to build a 110-mile levee-top trail that would link Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

# River ride

A PROPOSED LEVEE TRAIL COULD CONNECT BATON ROUGE TO NEW ORLEANS >> by **MAGGIE HEYN RICHARDSON**

photos by **TIM MUELLER**

It's a cyclist's dream: a 110-mile levee-top trail connecting Baton Rouge to New Orleans. The scenic thoroughfare would attract walkers, birders, runners and, especially, serious cyclists eager for a scenic stretch separate from the speeding cars below. The asphalt trail, say its champions, could reconnect Louisiana residents with the Mississippi River, provide a free vehicle for exercise, spark economic development in the chain of small towns along River Road, and even serve as an alternative transportation route for emergency vehicles during a hurricane.

The project, called the Mississippi River Levee Multi-Use Trail, is being proposed by the Pontchartrain Levee District, which oversees levee boards along the river's east bank, which includes East Baton Rouge, Iberville, Ascension, St. James, St. John the Baptist and St. Charles parishes. Once completed, the trail would snake from East Baton Rouge Parish to the St. Charles Parish line.

Discussed by local parish governments and the levee district since 2004, the project may finally be gaining traction. Most of the contributions toward a \$250,000 feasibility study are in place, committed by the district, the six participating parishes, the State of Louisiana and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. State support came last year when then-Sen. Bill Cassidy sponsored a request for \$100,000 in capital outlay funds. The group hopes to complete fund-raising and begin the study in the next few months, says coordinator Eric Poche of SJB Group in Baton Rouge.

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Champions of levee-top trail systems around the country say that such projects are replete with community wins and that they're worth the time and public investment required to pull them off.

"Unlike projects that benefit one small town, these benefit several small towns at once," says Terry Eastin, executive director of the Mississippi River Trail, a nonprofit based in Arkansas that advocates expansion of levee trails along the Mississippi River. "A cyclist's average salary is \$80,000 a year, and he makes significant purchases on cycling trips. The State of Iowa is completing a 335-mile trail that is expected to bring \$200 million a year in economic impact."

Eastin points to other examples of trails sparking substantial economic development, including Lanesboro, Minn. The dying small town was revitalized into a thriving tourist magnet in part by the 60-mile Root River Bike Trail, which runs through it.

A recently completed 2.5-mile stretch of levee-top trail connecting downtown Baton Rouge to Skip Bertman Drive on LSU's campus provides a good example of what the Louisiana project could look like. The smooth paved trail is wide enough for bikers, joggers and walkers and it's one of the few areas in Baton Rouge along the Mississippi River that actually provides a clear vista of the river. In fact, Downtown Development District Executive Director Davis Rhorer, who helped coordinate the trail's execution for the City of Baton Rouge, says one of the most important features of the \$2.5 million project was its placement on top of the levee, rather than as a bike lane on River Road.

"It was so important to get it off the road for the sake of safety," Rhorer said.

Construction on another 2.5 miles of trail, which will connect the current terminus at Skip Bertman

Drive to BREC's Farr Park, begins soon. Rhorer says that the trail's new end point will feature perpendicular feeder trails connecting the River Bend neighborhood to the levee and the levee to Farr Park.

That sort of ancillary connectivity is what you might find along the Mississippi River Levee Multi-Use Trail, says Poche. "We will look at potential nodes of activity—where it might make sense to put parking lots and restrooms that could also sup-

**"The State of Iowa is completing a 335-mile trail that is expected to bring \$200 million a year in economic impact."**

—TERRY EASTIN

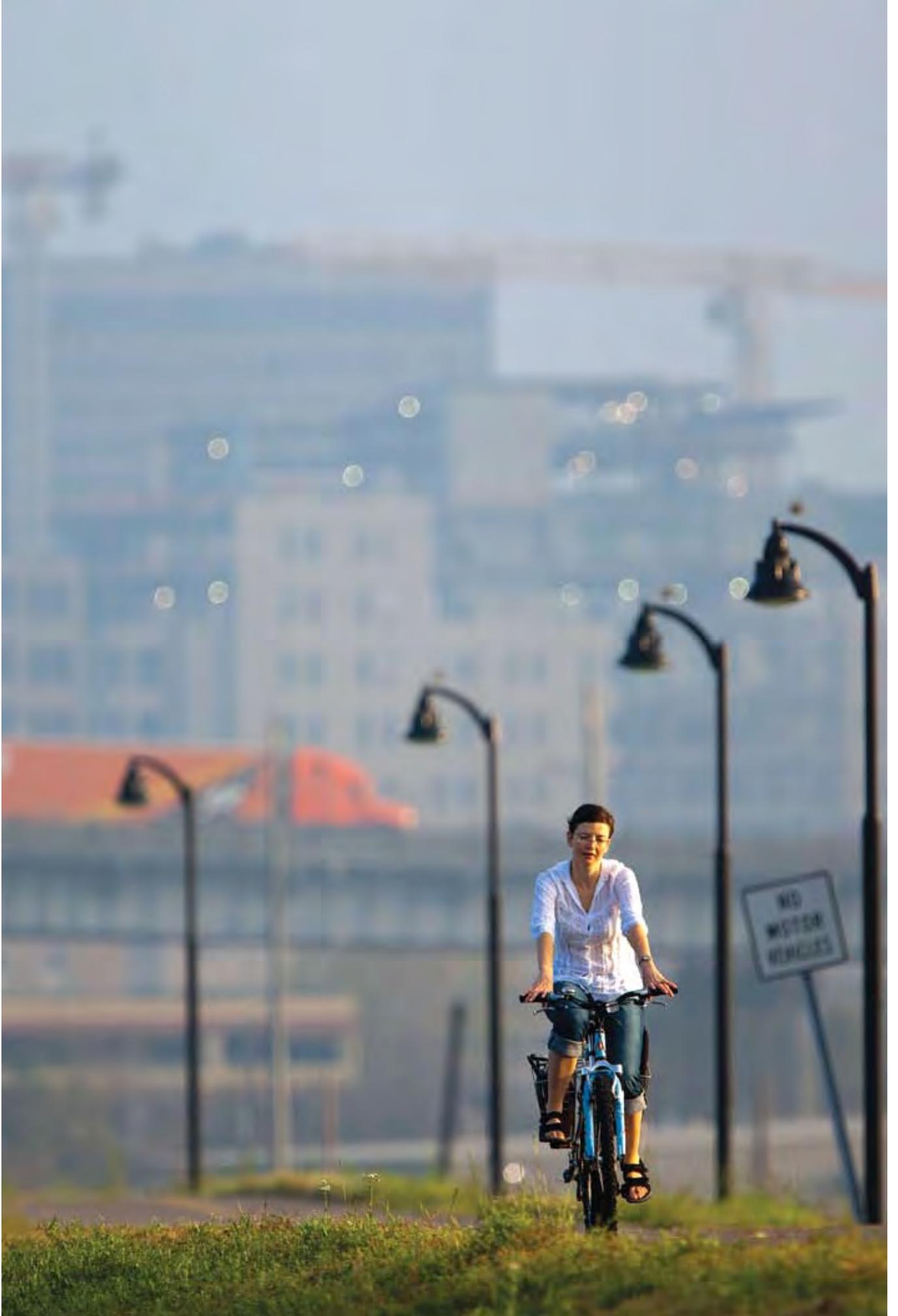
port other things," he said.

Poche says one challenge will likely be getting public and private entities with levee interests to allow pedestrian access. Plants along the river control traffic in many spots to protect their transfer of materials from cargo ships to facilities.

But those problems are not insurmountable, says Eastin. Trails can be malleable.

"This is the kind of economic development project that pays for itself and has the potential to actually save dying towns," she says. There are hundreds of miles of trails in states along the Mississippi, but we need to see more in its southern portion." •

Walkers, runners and bikers use the paved trail on the top of the Mississippi River levee between downtown Baton Rouge and the LSU campus.





Derek Gordon loves to sing.

Ginger Hunt wants trails around here.

Liz Betz would hear the trumpets and drums playing the LSU fight song near the finish line of a marathon.

Together, the three are this year's winners of the **John W. Barton Sr. Excellence in Nonprofit Management Award.**

photos by **TIM MUELLER**



They were awarded \$10,000 apiece at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation's annual meeting. They were recognized for their diligent and successful service to the Baton Rouge region.

## **DEREK GORDON**

### **CEO and President**

*Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge*

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Many successful people opt to climb the ladder in larger markets. Derek Gordon turned convention upside down, choosing to build the arts community here after rising within the New York arts scene.

He's back home after running the prestigious Jazz at Lincoln Center program in New York. As CEO and president of the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, you can see his imprint around town. He has reinvigorated the Community Fund for the Arts, which has distributed nearly \$800,000 to arts groups since his return.

Gordon has expanded programs of the Community School for the Arts to include kids and adults. With jazz enthusiasts, he launched the River City Jazz Masters series. He has partnered to create Sunday in the Park, the fall concert series in downtown. He's developing a public arts program.

All that in just two years back in his hometown.

### **Which moment was the most rewarding in your nonprofit career?**

Such moments are always a moving target, because life is always presenting new and valuable experiences. While it would be difficult to give you a single event, presiding over the opening of Jazz at Lincoln Center's new performance facility was quite rewarding. The opening was important not just for the organizations, but for the field of jazz and everyone who participates in the business. To be honest, I have a similar feeling every time we present an artist at the Manship Theatre or raise the curtain on young people performing in

the Debbie Allen dance programs. What is most rewarding are the moments I get to share something new and exciting with an audience.

### **What is your favorite place in the Baton Rouge region?**

The campus of LSU is definitely my favorite place in Baton Rouge. I feel like I grew up there, being associated with the university since I was in the 8th grade through receiving my master's degree in music! It is certainly a beautiful spot, but it was also the place where I was introduced to so many people and ideas that have helped shape my future and my heart. And yes, I bleed purple and gold just like everyone else in Baton Rouge.

### **What is your idea of earthly happiness?**

Real community and let's stress the "unity" in community. People living, working, playing and living with respect and compassion for one another. Wouldn't that make you happy?

### **Other than America, in what country would you like to live and why?**

I guess I would have to say France, with Spain being a close second. France has such a rich culture and, of course, they love food, drink and celebrations just as we do. Both its cities and the countryside have great charm and much to offer the resident or the visitor. I'm also a fan of French opera and all those lovely museums. C'est magnifique!

### **What natural gift would you most like to possess?**

In the tradition of the other man's grass al-

25



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“In the tradition of the other man’s grass always being greener, I would love to have talent in the visual arts.”

—DEREK GORDON

ways being greener, I would love to have talent in the visual arts. I am a musician by training and inclination, but I truly envy those who can capture so much beauty and emotion in two and three dimensions.

**What was your favorite subject in school and why?**

Music, of course. Need I explain why?

**What is your first memory of life?**

Growing up on McKinley Street and singing in my backyard.

**What is your perfect day in Baton Rouge?**

Waking up to public radio, enjoying a cup of coffee at CC's, a productive day at the office and an exciting arts event along with a great meal to share with family and friends. If time permits, preparing the meal would make it even more perfect.

**You are running in slow motion, winning the New York Marathon; what song—other than the theme from *Chariots of Fire*—is playing in your head?**

Carly Simon singing "Let the River Run."

**If you had \$1 billion, how would you spend it to improve the region?**

I would build a TND focused on the arts. A complete neighborhood environment that celebrated creativity, including housing and studio space for artists, performance, rehearsal and exhibition space and lots of access to public art and free and affordable performances. Gosh, does that sound like an arts and entertainment district? Well, can you blame me?

## GINGER A. HUNT

**Executive Director**

*Primary Care Providers for a Healthy Feliciana*

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She put her own money at risk to help others. Ginger Hunt used her line of credit to start two rural health clinics in 1999. Then, as a nurse practitioner, she worked full-time in Baton Rouge to support the clinics.

Ten years later, her nonprofit—Primary Care Providers for a Healthy Feliciana—operates three clinics to serve 9,000 patients each year.

Unstoppable, she has launched other projects. They include a program to fight obesity among children and collaborative agreements to provide counseling for schoolchildren and their families.

**Which moment was the most rewarding in your nonprofit career?**

Every day and every event in my nonprofit career has been rewarding. I recall a day when a mother and her 4-year-old son, who was in great pain, left Texas and rode a bus 10 hours to get back to, as they called us, the "Ladies on the Hill." The mother was quite certain that, despite the fact that no one had been able to identify the cause of the pain, we would be able to help her son. Upon examination, he was found to have a large abdominal mass. We immediately found a specialist for the child and admitted him to the Baton Rouge General Medical Center. The tumor, a rare form of cancer, was removed and chemotherapy was administered. The child is now free of pain and has been free of cancer for four years. More recently, shortly after the opening of the new West Baton Rouge Primary Care Clinic in Port Allen, the staff received an emergency call from the bank across the street. The clinical staff gathered up emergency equipment and responded to the plea for help. The bank vice president was found unconscious. The clinic staff performed CPR on him until the ambulance

arrived. He is alive and well today and the staff is looked upon as a vital, trusted part of the community. I believe that the most rewarding thing to me is when a patient looks you in the eye and says,

“I believe that the most rewarding thing to me is when a patient looks you in the eye and says, ‘Thank you for caring so much.’”

—GINGER HUNT

“Thank you for caring so much for me and my family. I can always count on you.”

### **What is your favorite place in the Baton Rouge region?**

The rolling hills, green pastures, sprawling oaks and historical landmarks of East Feliciana Parish provide a quiet tranquility that is second to no other place in the area. Specifically, the historical East Feliciana Parish Courthouse, which is located in the heart of the parish, in Clinton. It is the oldest operational courthouse in the United States.

### **What is your idea of earthly happiness?**

Happiness on this earth to me is serving a risen Savior, one who sought me out and found me in my hopeless and helpless state, carried my sins to Calvary, covered me with his precious blood and righteousness and set me free. We read in the book of Matthew that it is but folly for a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul and God reminds me that what is done for the least of

His children is done for Him. He assures me in His Word that all things work to the good of those who love the Lord and who are in His will and purpose. Staying in His will and purpose, for a sinner such as I, is a continuing battle. However, St. Paul in the book of Philippians clearly tells me that I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me. Therefore, I can be happy and content in whatever situation I find myself. I know in whom I have believed and that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.

### **Other than America what country would you like to live in and why?**

There is no other place on earth that I would rather live than in America—the home of the free and the brave. God showered his blessings on America and on those of us who were born and live here. I often wonder why I was so privileged as to have been born in America, when others were born in countries filled with strife and war and have so little.

### **What natural gift would you most like to possess?**

The patience and perseverance of Job would be the natural gift I would most like to possess.

### **What was your favorite subject in school?**

Reading was my favorite subject. My mother, father and grandparents read to me as a child. That quiet and special time every day very much played an important role in my ability to learn and apply what I learned to everyday life. I still am an avid reader and glean as much joy from it now as I did then.

### **What is your first memory of life?**

One of my first memories is when I was about three-years-old and my grandfather bought me a pair of red cowboy boots, a pair of brown jodhpurs



and a cowboy hat. After that, I would wear them whenever I went to the stockyard with him to buy cows. His love for me was unconditional as mine was for him.

**What is your perfect day in Baton Rouge?**

Visiting the zoo and State Capitol grounds on a sunshine-filled day with my grandchildren would be just about perfect.

**You are running in slow motion, winning the New York Marathon, what song—other than the theme from *Chariots of Fire*—is playing in your head?**

“Amazing Grace” would be the song playing in my head if I were winning a marathon because, even when I was young, I never had the stamina or the desire required to run long distances.

**If you had \$1 billion, how would you spend it to improve the Baton Rouge region?**

If I had \$1 billion, I would design a walking/jogging/bicycle/skateboard trail for East Baton Rouge Parish, West Baton Rouge Parish and for East Feliciana Parish. I would use the Greenways in Knoxville, Tenn., as a model. The trail would tie the downtown areas, schools, university campuses and sites of interest together. The trails would assist in combating the problem of inactivity and obesity in our children and adult population, promote health and provide wholesome family activity. Families could be encouraged to donate memorial rest areas, flower beds, trees and shrubs, water fountains, play areas and picnic areas.



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“My mother had six siblings and, on Christmas Eve, all the families would gather at one house. The tree was huge with gifts spilling from beneath and the smell of holiday food filled the air.”

—LIZ BETZ

## ELIZABETH A. BETZ

### Executive Director

*Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)*

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When abused children stand before a judge, Liz Betz and her CASA volunteers are beside them. They represent the interests of children, leaning hard on the courts to place the children in permanent—and safe—homes.

Consider that Betz has been taking on this challenge for about 16 years. She was named executive director of Court Appointed Special Advocates in 1993.

She has helped CASA grow to more than 600 volunteer advocates representing more than 1,200 children. Last year alone, the brigade of more than 100 CASA volunteers found permanent homes for 110 children.

Betz started Casa for CASA, an annual playhouse fund-raiser designed to boost awareness of the organization and to raise more than \$30,000 per year. CASA just finished a \$2 million capital campaign for more room to provide more services.

### **Which moment was the most rewarding in your nonprofit career?**

When CASA was able to serve 100% of the abused children in East Baton Rouge Parish who needed an advocate. That had been our goal since day one and we couldn't have reached it without our absolutely amazing staff and volunteers.

### **What is your favorite place in Baton Rouge?**

Downtown—especially the view of the Mississippi River. Downtown was the center of town when my parents were young, and I love that it is again a vibrant part of the city.

### **What is your idea of earthly happiness?**

A healthy, happy family and a slower pace.

### **Other than America, in what country would you like to live and why?**

There are lots of other countries I'd like to visit but I can't imagine living anywhere else. I feel fortunate to be an American.

### **What natural gift would you most like to possess?**

I wish I could sing!

### **What was your favorite subject in school and why?**

I loved school—all subjects and especially the social aspects! I've always loved learning new things.

### **What is your first memory of life?**

My mother had six siblings and, on Christmas Eve, all the families would gather at one house. The tree was huge with gifts spilling from beneath and the smell of holiday food filled the air. Sometimes there would be more than 20 cousins there. As a child, the anticipation of that night was almost unbearable!

### **What is your perfect day in Baton Rouge?**

Working in my garden on a crisp autumn day and then spending the evening with family and friends.

### **You are running in slow motion, winning the New York Marathon, what song—other than the theme from *Chariots of Fire*—is playing in your head?**

The LSU fight song.

### **If you had \$1 billion, how would you spend it to improve Baton Rouge?**

An excellent education and affordable health care for every citizen would go a long way in eradicating many problems—poverty, hunger, homelessness, abuse. •

# 31



Volleyball Baton Rouge practices in winter. Organizers formed a diverse team that aims for victory.

# Team colors

IN VOLLEYBALL, A RACE TO BE DIVERSE—AND TO WIN

>> by **LEE FEINSWOG** photos by **TIM MUELLER**

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**M**any want to make the world a better place.

In our case, we're trying to do it one girls volleyball team at a time.

Well, actually two, but more on that later.

A little background: Louisiana is a great girls volleyball state. Top-level players from here have excelled on the collegiate, national and even international levels. Two were on the Olympic Team last year.

In Baton Rouge, as in other cities, the key has

been club volleyball, which is for elite, dedicated players who take themselves to the highest levels in the sport. But to play at that level requires thousands of dollars a year per player.

My wife, Brenda LeBlanc, built a volleyball dynasty at St. Joseph's Academy. With her and other talented coaches, we operated Volleyball Baton Rouge. Our shining moment came in 2002, when our VBR 15s team won a national title.

Most everyone involved in the sport in the Baton Rouge area was part of VBR in one form or an-

other. However, it was always troubling that very few of them were girls of color. Not that we didn't try to recruit minorities. Over the years, Bonita Johnson, an African American teacher and coach at University High, tried to get more black girls interested in VBR but it was difficult to get players started before high school. Money was often an issue; fees were more than \$1,000 per year and travel costs mounted because club volleyball is competed on a regional level.

Being mostly white was not unique to VBR. At any large girls volleyball tournament in America, there are very few black girls participating. But consider this: Five of the 12 players on the U.S. Olympic team that won the silver medal last summer were black. Two of the black players were from Louisiana—Danielle Scott-Aruda of Baton Rouge and Kim Willoughby of Napoleonville.



After the 2006 season, Brenda and I gave up the grind of VBR.

But just a year later, while sipping beers in a little town called Ribe in southwestern Denmark, we began talking about, of all things, volleyball. We wanted something different this time. Our plan for a new squad included more minorities.

## We wanted something different this time. Our plan for a new squad included more minorities.

So the new VBR was formed. The idea: We would field one team in 12-and-unders, but pick girls young enough to play in 12s for two years, meaning they would only be 11 for the 2008 season. They had to be athletic and either be tall or projected to be tall. The hope was to form a team that we could take all the way through to 18s. To make it easier to find girls from every walk of life, there would be no fees.

To recruit a team, I shamelessly asked every tall woman I met if she had a 10- or 11-year-old daughter; I would introduce myself first so I wouldn't get slapped. We also partnered with the YMCA for a fall clinic and searched for players by sending out emails to our old VBR community.

Ultimately, we invited 13 girls to join us. Seven were black.

We had rich whites, poor whites, rich blacks and poor blacks. By the third practice, it appeared the girls had known each other their entire lives.

It took longer for the parents to get together. But by mid-season, they became friends and began hanging out together, thanks to their daughters' volleyball team.

Our team, however, was awful. All year long our friends in the volleyball world told us how good the girls were going to be. We knew they were right, but the process was torturous. Especially when we took them to Orlando for the season-ending AAU national tournament at Disney World, where we finished tied for dead last.

But the season was the most rewarding experience I had in sports. Even the begging for money for VBR, a nonprofit, wasn't bad. Friends, former

VBR families, businesses and a couple of foundations helped us out.

But finishing last in the nation was painful.

So we took a somewhat different approach for the 2009 season. We again partnered with the YMCA for a fall clinic. I continued to ask tall women

if they had daughters; I have yet to be slapped.

Brenda and our assistant coach, Marisa Frye, kept an eye out for potential players. One of the 13 from 2008 had moved away. We kept 10 of the 12—cutting two of them was terribly difficult—and brought in nine new ones. Our mix was nine white, nine black and one named Mohamed, all led by a Cajun coach and a Jewish director. We added two coaches, Mollie Nannie and Jessica Manning, and fielded a first team and a second team.

This year we're good.

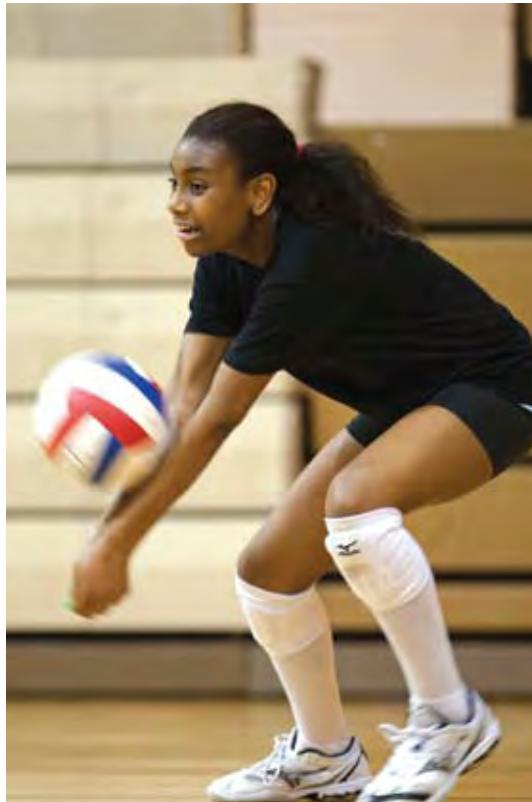
We're gonna be great.

Our first team is slowly becoming one of the best in the region, while the second team, midway through the 2009 season, had won three times as many matches as the 2008 team did all year.

Many of our girls are big. One is 5-11. Two others are 5-8. A bunch of them are 5-4 or 5-5 and will push toward 6-feet when it's all said and done. But not all the girls are tall—for example, one, who is barely 4-10, was proud to finally weigh 60 pounds. The short ones have promise, too. They're quick

and athletic and competitive and extremely well-coached.

And they're all held to high standards on and off the court. We know they'll be great volleyball players; we expect good grades, outstanding citizens and classy, caring people.



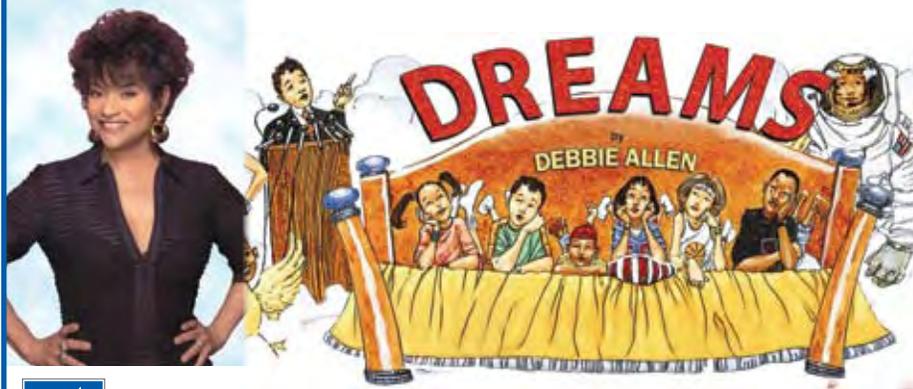
Leah Williams of Volleyball Baton Rouge digs for the ball. VBR's goal is a national championship.

Money is always an issue. You have tournament entry fees, uniforms and equipment, coach pay, travel expenses and a handful of other things. So I still beg for money and ask everyone involved to do the same. The girls pay a nominal fee and those who can afford it make donations to the club. Those who can't, we help.

We do things the old-fashioned way, sending forms and self-addressed stamped envelopes to potential contributors, but have also used the Internet, from Facebook to our web page, [www.volleyballbr.net](http://www.volleyballbr.net). That's been very helpful. We've had donations in the many thousands to one man giving 10 \$1 bills.

So we'll continue to work hard, teach them all we can on and off the court, and, if we're good enough, one day we'll tell all the big volleyball clubs in America that, hey, you can do what we did.

After all, take a look at our Olympic team. •



Presented by the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge  
in association with the Baton Rouge Community College

**DREAMS**, a delightful production written and choreographed by Debbie Allen, takes you to the magical world of childhood dreams. From grown-up dreams of careers in fashion and marine biology to wishful hopes of becoming a duck, everyone will enjoy this fun exploration of children's imaginative aspirations.

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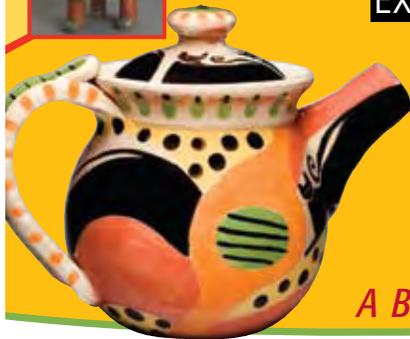
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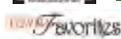
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ONSITE



Allison El Koubi, center, turned a two-year Teach for America stint into a mission for her life. Now principal at Jackson Middle School, El Koubi's staff includes TFA corps members, from left, Mary Feighery, Alex Salinsky, Sarah Whittington, Erik Maag and Laura Shoemaker.

# 36 Magnificent Obsession

TEACH FOR AMERICA EXPANDING ACROSS THE REGION

>> by **MAGGIE HEYN RICHARDSON** photos by **TIM MUELLER**

If you told Allison El Koubi, a bright student at New York's Houghton College, that her dream job would be principal of a poor middle school in rural Louisiana, she might not have bitten. Eight years later, that's what happened.

A college senior in 2000, El Koubi decided to delay traditional job options for service. She and her like-minded roommates wanted to give back before the pressure to make money set in, and they began researching programs, including AmeriCorps and CityYear, which promised to channel their idealism into the greater good. For El Koubi, one option emerged.

"Teach for America really appealed to me," she recalls. "My parents are educators, and I liked the idea of teaching. I saw myself teaching French in Acadiana." She applied, and was among the 10% of applicants the national teacher corps accepts annually. Late that summer, fresh out of a grueling five-week training camp in Houston, El Koubi began a two-year commitment to teach in Louisiana—not in Acadiana, but in Jackson, where the underperforming Jackson Middle School needed an English teacher.

Founded in 1990, Teach for America places top college graduates in urban and rural schools around the country, including ones in Baton Rouge, New Orleans and their surrounding areas. More than 500 young men and women have served in Louisiana. Like their counterparts nationwide, they come with sharp leadership skills and a drive to succeed.

But they say teaching is the most difficult thing they've attempted.

"I would start every morning with a stomach-ache," recalls El Koubi. "I felt like I was floundering, like I wasn't reaching them at all."

"I would start every morning with a stomach-ache. I felt like I was floundering, like I wasn't reaching them at all."

—ALLISON EL KOUBI

Then, El Koubi found her footing, and fear was trumped by another emotion.

"I just fell in love with my students and the community," she says. Buoyed by a sense of unbridled optimism and what she calls "massive indignation" at the country's education inequities, she relentlessly sought opportunities for her students, landing grants for artists-in-residence, helping eighth graders craft an original play called "What's race got to do with it?," and organizing a field trip for choral students to perform at a music festival in her hometown, St. John's, Newfoundland.

Her two-year commitment at Jackson Middle quickly turned into five years.

"I knew then I was going to devote my entire professional career to education," she recalls.

She beefed up her management skills by earning back-to-back accelerated master's degrees in education and business, then taught math at the KIPP Center City Academy in New Orleans just to learn more about the school's well-regarded methodology. When she heard about an opening for a principal back at Jackson Middle, she said she made a beeline.

"I put all other options on hold," she says.

El Koubi got the job last year, and in her short tenure, she has instituted new systems, set clear

Donors of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation have made nearly 200 grants totaling \$1.2 million to Teach for America.

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TFA's Sarah Whittington teaches a seventh-grade English class at Jackson Middle School. TFA will have 200 teachers in Baton Rouge soon.

expectations and developed a thorough incentive program that has dramatically improved discipline. She has also set aggressive goals to improve performance substantially over the next three years.

El Koubi's powerful calling to remain in education is common among Teach for America alumni. In fact, despite the prevailing image of active teachers, TFA's secret weapon is its alumni, a massive group now forming a comet tail of community change. Currently, there are 14,000 Teach for America alumni nationwide, and three-quarters of them actively work in education once their two-year term is complete, says South Louisiana Executive Director Michael Tipton, a Baton Rouge native who taught through TFA in the South Bronx.

"That's impressive, when you consider that on day one, only about 7% say they will remain in education," says Tipton. "These are people who were going to succeed no matter what, so to have them in education is an incredible force."

Many remain in the classroom; others are drawn to management or policy. Like El Koubi, some have become principals. Others have run for office, joined think tanks and launched progressive initia-

tives. Their common ethic is to apply fresh ideas and relentless energy to what they see as an "absolute injustice," say El Koubi.

The effect on their former students is also palpable. As a high school student in Franklin in 2001, Megan Scelfo says TFA teachers transformed her perspective.

"They were the first people I had met who truly believed that working hard and learning as much as possible are the best ways to succeed," she recalls. "Once I had been given a taste of good education by my TFA teachers, I developed a drive to be a life-long learner that still exists in me today."

Scelfo went on to the LSU Honors College. In 2006, she was accepted to Teach for America and placed in Philadelphia, where she is still teaching.

TFA is consistently regarded as one of the country's most successful examples of social enterprise, or the practice of confronting a social problem with the ingenuity and innovation traditionally seen in entrepreneurial ventures. The program's oft-told founding goes like this: In her senior thesis, Princeton University student Wendy Kopp proposed that high-caliber college graduates would

## THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Inspired by their two years in the classroom, three-quarters of Teach for America's 14,000 alums have made education the focus of their professional careers. Below are five TFA Louisiana graduates and what they are doing now.

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### >>Mark Comanducci

*Then:* 2004-2006 Glen Oaks Middle School, East Baton Rouge Parish

*Now:* Director of school reform, Louisiana Resource Center for Educators, Baton Rouge

Comanducci developed the LRCE's Charter School Incubator, a leadership development program for teams interested in forming charter schools or reforming failing schools.

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### >>Kristin McSwain

*Then:* 1991-1993 Fifth Grade Teacher, St. Mary Parish

*Now:* Chief of program operations for the Corporation for National and Community Service, Washington, D.C.

McSwain has spent her entire professional career in national and community service, currently overseeing nationwide operations for AmeriCorps, VISTA, NCCC, Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America, which engages more than 4 million Americans in community service.

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### >>Mike Wang

*Then:* 1999-2001 Glen Oaks High School, East Baton Rouge Parish

*Now:* Executive Director, Teach For America, Greater Philadelphia-Camden

After TFA, Wang served as education policy advisor under Louisiana Gov. Mike Foster and later as executive director of the Louisiana Serve Commission. He took the helm of TFA's Greater Philadelphia program after working

at international consulting firm McKinsey & Co. Wang is nearing completion of a JD at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

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### >>Allison Lewis

*Then:* 2004-2006 Creswell Elementary, St. Landry Parish

*Now:* LSU Law Student

After two years of teaching second grade in Opelousas, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill graduate headed for law school at LSU, where she is a member of the Louisiana Law Review and a coordinator for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program. She plans to work and volunteer in Baton Rouge.

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### >>Sarah Newell Usdin

*Then:* 1991-1993 Red Oaks Elementary, East Baton Rouge Parish

*Now:* President and CEO, New Schools for New Orleans

Usdin has spent the last 15 years in education reform and is a voice behind the progressive experiments currently under way in New Orleans. The former executive director of TFA South Louisiana, Usdin later served with The New Teacher Project, a national nonprofit focused on teacher recruitment and training. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, she formed New Schools for New Orleans to help public education recover and reform.

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Teach for America teacher Laura Shoemaker teaches eighth-grade science at Jackson Middle School. Next to Shoemaker is student Jordan Hills.

opt for teaching over typical first jobs if given a chance to join a national teacher corps. She raised \$2.5 million in start-up funds and, in 1991, launched a class of 500 determined optimists who were sprinkled in willing districts throughout the country.

The concept caught on, and expanded dramatically. This academic year alone, 6,200 corps members are teaching in 1,600 public schools across 29 regions.

TFA corps members, says Tipton, are selected on the basis of their ability to lead, problem solve and demonstrate excellence. With rigorous training to back them up, and with a constant eye on indicators, they have generally outperformed veteran teachers. They don't just fill gaps, says Tipton, they raise the bar so high that they trigger systemic change.

"The big difference with our teachers is not accepting the norm, but pushing beyond it," he says.

"Corps members truly believe that this is the civil rights issue of their generation."

The program is in the midst of a massive expansion, including the operation in South Louisiana, which, despite its tenure, has remained small.

Tipton says two years from now, the state's two combined programs in Greater Baton Rouge and Greater New Orleans will be the fourth largest TFA region in the country, behind New York, Los Angeles and Texas. By then, 500 corps members will be teaching in New Orleans, and 200 in Baton Rouge.

Tipton is hopeful about how a new critical mass of active corps members and alumni in Greater Baton Rouge will champion innovation and breathe new life into the region's public schools.

"The stakes are too big," he says. "Yes, it's brutally hard work, but we can change education with great teachers, great leaders and high expectations." •

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# Two-Way Street

A REDO OF THIRD STREET COULD CREATE A DESTINATION >> by MUKUL VERMA

Third Street is on its way to becoming a centerpiece of Baton Rouge life. A scheme percolating among land and traffic planners could be implemented to make the road an even more desirable destination.

Consider this idea: Third could be transformed into a thoroughfare that doubles as a place for civic events.

Festival streets are a relatively new tool for urban planners. Designers use new methods to create a hybrid space—a conventional street that doubles as a plaza. Proponents say festival streets lure more people, which draws retailers.

What are the ingredients for a festival street? Traffic calming and unique streetscape features are installed to fashion a road that can be con-



“What we have tried to do is create hybrid streets that function for cars, function for parking, but, at the same time, can be closed off and serve as a small plaza, a piazza for festivals and functions that the local neighborhood can engage in,” says Lloyd D. Lindley, urban designer in Portland. Above, Davis Street before and after.

It has happened in a handful of cities, where a jolt of life has been added to select streets by turning them into so-called festival streets. You may have enjoyed an outdoor meal or listened to music on one of them. Clematis Street in West Palm Beach, Fla., is among the best-known festival streets. Portland, Ore., recently opened two festival streets. Orlando is designing two of them, one in front of a new basketball arena.

verted to public use on weekends or for special events. Festival streets are on one grade; there are no curbs keeping cars separated from pedestrians. Instead, bollards and striping keep people safe from vehicles. During a civic event, the bollards are put away to offer a gathering space.

Troy Russ knows of at least 10 festival streets in the United States, all created within about the last decade. He estimates there are three times that

many around the country.

Russ, a transportation planner with Glatting Jackson, which is on a team developing a second phase for Baton Rouge's downtown strategy, says Third Street is a candidate for a festival street conversion. But he's cautious: A thorough examination with resident input is required before breaking ground.

There is expected to be a hint of festival streets in Baton Rouge's town square, says Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District. He's enthusiastic about the idea of considering Third for a festival street.

In the town square, which will run from River Road to Fifth Street along North Boulevard, the road and sidewalks will mesh in wide expanses along the intersections, says Rhorer. The city-parish has set aside \$4.5 million to build the town square, a gathering place for events, such as road races, concerts, festivals. Because it will be flexible, the square will accommodate a variety of community gatherings while also offering a place for creative loafing when nothing is planned.

Portland has converted two streets into festival streets in the Chinatown neighborhood. If the experimental streets are successful, other neighborhoods could get festival streets. The streets are at one grade; planters are used to separate cars and people; light poles and other utilities have been moved to form open spaces.

"The making of this place is more than just about the concrete and granite and the other surfaces we are putting here and the beautiful design we have," says Ellen Vanderslice, a Portland urban planner who worked on the project. "It's really about finding a way to create community. The activity of managing the street and the fact that the community has to form an entity to manage the festival street, that is part of building this community."

Portland's festival streets were a response to

scant open space in Chinatown. Art and planters are incorporated to slow down traffic. Because the street is nearly at one grade, people in wheelchairs can easily use the plaza. The plantings are an extension of the existing Chinese gardens. Bike racks bait travel to the space on two wheels.

Third Street could become such a vibrant space. It already has the most important feature of a festival street. "You think of Third, it has the building type and style for retail and vibrant activity," said Russ.

"There is a problem; it's a one-way street, which is not inviting for retailers," said Russ. What's more,



the drainage is among engineering features to be investigated to determine whether a conversion is possible. Russ recommends a public process in which the future of Third is debated and a collaborative design is created.

"I think it absolutely should be discussed," says Russ. "The town square is a huge step in the right direction. Where do you go next? Third Street is tired from a physical design perspective. A new design could reinvigorate and create a rich public space." •

## Where's the bus?

The waiting is the hardest part. A new service makes that burden bearable for bus riders in Pittsburgh. The Port Authority of Allegheny County is testing a service from RouteShout that sends bus schedules by text message. Passengers simply text a stop ID printed on a bus stop sign near them, and they receive information about the next buses scheduled to come their way. RouteShout taps into the bus system's database to serve up the information. The port authority is testing RouteShout at 22



stops around colleges. LSU students could see a similar or superior service. Angling for its own bus service, the university has talked of high-tech features. •

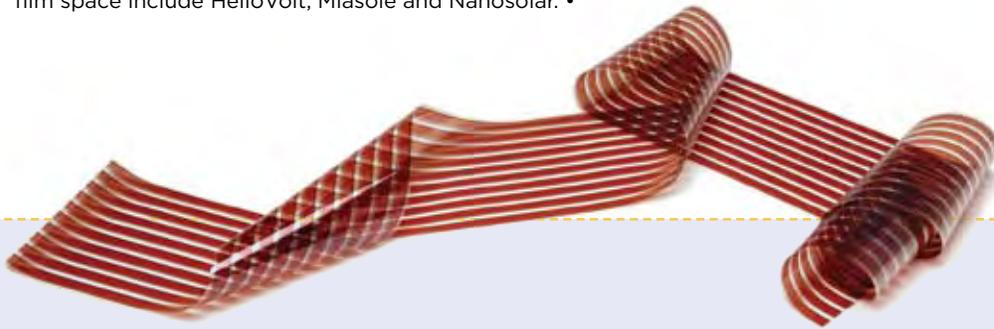
## Behold the future

The number of tech breakthroughs can overwhelm. To comprehend them, MIT's *Technology Review* magazine provides an annual list of 10 emerging technologies. This year's list includes Siri, a "do engine" that is akin to a personal software assistant. In early stages, Siri will take your instructions and tease out a result. For instance, if you are searching for a mid-priced Thai restaurant in a city, Siri will find one near you and make reservations.

Also on the list is BioNanomatrix, a startup firm with a nanofluidic chip that could reduce the cost of human genome mapping to just \$100, making customized medical treatments more affordable. And a Harvard researcher has created medical diagnostic tests from paper, potentially reducing the cost of testing to just pennies. For the entire list and related stories, visit [TechnologyReview.com](http://TechnologyReview.com). •

## Plastic power

Venture capital keeps flowing to thin film solar cell firms. The latest is Konarka, a Lowell, Mass.-based firm that is named after a Hindu sun god. Konarka is offering a lightweight solar cell that is flexible enough to be used on outdoor umbrellas and handbags. Konarka has converted a shuttered Polaroid printing press to produce its cells. The press prints a secret polymer ink that absorbs light and emits electrons. The product has a bright future. It could be embedded, for instance, in windows to produce electricity for homes and buildings. Thin film solar cells are cheaper, but silicon cells produce more energy. Other companies in the thin film space include HelioVolt, Miasole and Nanosolar. •



## Government works

As presidential candidate, Barack Obama set new standards for online campaigning. Now his administration is set to remake government use of technology. The president has hired Vivek Kundra as the U.S. government's chief information officer. In his previous job as chief technology officer for Washington, D.C., Kundra was known for making public data much more accessible over the web. The hope among techies and good government groups is that he does the same for the federal government. Helping him get a start was Wired.com, which established a wiki site to gather advice for Kundra. And the ideas came pouring in. Make data release the rule, rather than the exception. Make the National Center for Education Statistics data available in bulk download. Fund data reanalysis projects.

Kundra wants vast amounts of government data online at [data.gov](http://data.gov). If it's easy to use, the transparency should improve how the government works. •

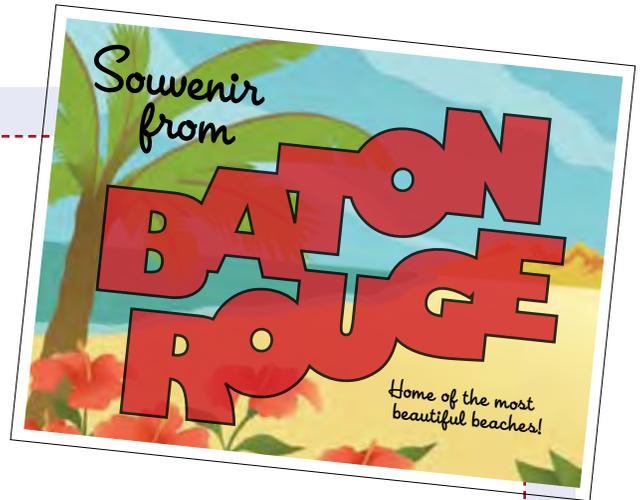


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## Baton Rouge beach

Gathering more and more information, climate scientists keep upping their predictions on how high the seas will rise because of global warming. In March, climate scientists led by Stefan Rahmstorf predicted seas would rise at least 3.26 feet by 2100.

"Even for a low emission scenario, the best estimate is about one meter," Rahmstorf, a Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research professor, told a gathering at the International Scientific Congress on Climate Change in Copenhagen. His estimate is at least one foot more than the latest U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change prediction, which itself was revised higher at a meeting last year.



Under Rahmstorf's scenario, South Louisiana would become submerged—not counting any levees or other structures built over the next 91 years. Sea level maps generated by the University of Arizona show that New Orleans, Houma and parts of the Northshore would disappear. Hammond, Lafayette and areas near Baton Rouge would be the new shoreline. •

## Next economy

The solar, biofuels and wind energy industries will produce more than 2 million new U.S. jobs by 2018, says Clean Edge, a high-tech consultancy based in Portland, Ore. The firm projects the three industries will have 2.65 million workers in a decade, up from 600,000 now.

Clean Edge estimates global revenues for solar power, wind power and biofuels expanded from \$75.8 billion in 2007 to \$115.9 billion in 2008. For the first time, one sector alone, wind, had revenues exceeding \$50 billion.

Last year's global wind power installations reached a record 27,000 megawatts. In the U.S., which accounted for more than 8,000 megawatts, wind installations represented more than 40% of total new electricity generating capacity brought online in 2008—and moved the U.S. ahead of Germany as the world's leading generator of wind energy.

Meanwhile, worldwide solar power will grow from a \$29.6 billion industry in 2008 to \$80.6 billion by 2018, says Clean Edge. •





## No stem cell reversal?

President Obama's reversal of restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research could mean nothing in Louisiana. Last year, Louisiana passed a law limiting embryonic stem cell research to the cell lines permitted under former Pres. George W. Bush.

The state's attorney general could be asked for an opinion on whether the state ban is valid now that the federal one has been overturned. Meanwhile, scientists say that the state ban hurts the image of Louisiana, making it more difficult to do research that can generate New Economy jobs. •

## Look inside you

Self-interest could lead to an understanding of Parkinson's Disease. Google founder Sergey Brin is investing millions into 23andMe.com, which will recruit more than 10,000 people and type their DNA to look for genes that may cause the disease.

Brin has a genetic mutation that puts his risk of getting Parkinson's at 50%, and his mother has the disease.

Brin's wife is co-founder of 23andMe. The firm charges \$400 to type individual DNA, revealing propensity for diseases, heritage and more. People participating in the Parkinson's research will only have to pay \$25 for the service.



## 5 minutes

Promised recharge time for lithium ion batteries under a breakthrough by MIT researchers Gerbrand Ceder and Byoungwoo Kang. If the technology works, it would permit rapid charging of battery-powered vehicles, cell phones and other devices. Electric vehicles could become a reality. The researchers say the technology is just two to three years from market.

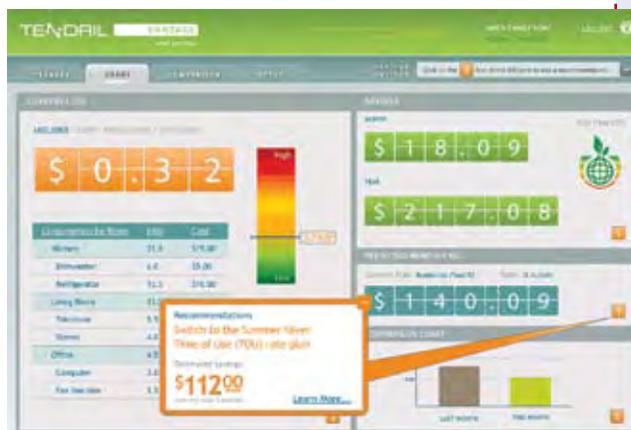
## Smarter meter

A Colorado startup's device turns electric meters into smart meters, opening a chance for users to curb energy use and cut pollution.

Tendril's device piggybacks on newer meters that wirelessly relay usage data to utilities. Tendril's gadget transmits the readings every few minutes to utilities, which can send the usage and pricing to customers over the Internet. Customers can use Tendril software to use power more efficiently.

"We touch consumers in one of three ways, through an in-home display, Internet portal or now on your mobile device," says Steve Propper, a spokesman for Tendril.

Tendril's service could bypass the need for new smart meters. The firm will begin testing its service this year in hundreds of homes. •



## TVs get even better

Repeat after us: TV is good. But the device that blows entertainment and knowledge at your eyeballs also consumes huge amounts of energy. That's particularly true of HDTVs, which eat up three times the electricity of cathode ray tube sets. California is even considering a ban on energy-hogging sets.

Not so fast. TV manufacturers are countering with eco-friendly sets. Sony, for one, debuted a set that has two new power-saving technologies and one from the old school. The Sony WE5 has a backlight that cuts power consumption by 40% over its standard set without dimming picture quality. The set also has a presence sensor that turns of the picture when a room is empty and switches to standby mode a while later. The sensor measures motion and your body heat to trigger the power-saving mode. Topping off this technology blitz is a power switch, which saves 5% over sets that switch only to standby when they are "powered down." Sony estimates the eco-friendly features save about \$50 per year. •

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# Words of hope

PROGRAM LETS PRISON DADS READ TO THEIR CHILDREN

>> by **SARA BONGIORNI** photos by **TIM MUELLER**

A young man seated in a chair surrounded by stuffed animals looks into the camera, grins broadly and says hello. Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat* waves from a poster on the wall behind him.

He lifts a book and begins an animated reading of "The Little Engine that Could," a favorite story from his own childhood.

Three or four minutes later, he completes the story, closes the book and again looks into the camera.

"Daddy loves you," he tells an unseen viewer.

The young man is speaking and reading to his young daughter via video for this reason: He cannot hold her on his lap and share a story with her like other fathers do. He is serving time in Phelps Correctional Center north of Lake Charles.

An initiative funded by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation allowed the young man and 18 other incarcerated fathers and grandfathers, including

several from the Baton Rouge region, to share the joy of a story with their young ones. The effort involves a unique reading-by-video project created by Refined By Fire Ministries, a local nonprofit organization that provides spiritual, life skills and relationship training and support to prisoners at Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson and at other facilities across the state.

The purpose of its "Read to Me Daddy" project is to nurture family bonds that can easily be broken while a parent is imprisoned, says Elain Ellerbe, Refined By Fire's president and chief executive and the creator of the reading initiative. Keeping those bonds strong can help offenders who have served their time remain out of prison for good.

The men selected for participation by Phelps officials were all due to be released within a year, meaning they would soon have the opportunity to reconnect with their families in person. "There's



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Elain Ellerbe of Refined By Fire Ministries shows a video of a father from Phelps Correctional Center reading to his child.

growing recognition in the corrections industry that the family is part of the offenders' strength base, and that it's important to work to keep that connection between offenders and their families alive," Ellerbe says.

Kendell Hinton, 30, selected a Dora the Explorer book to read to his 1-year-old daughter, a choice that required the extra effort of learning some Spanish words. "It made me feel good to be able to reach out and do that for her," said Hinton, of

New Orleans, adding that his daughter regularly watches the DVD.

The reading project is part of Refined By Fire's efforts to prepare offenders for greater success in work and family life upon their release. Participants must complete a parenting or relationship class prior to the filming, and the children's mother or guardian also must give permission for the child to accept a DVD of their father reading to them, along with an inscribed copy of the book selected by the

inmate. Many of the men participating in the program have not had face-to-face visits or other regular contact with their children for an extended period, Ellerbe says.

“This is a way for them to reconnect with their kids,” she says.

Rebuilding that bond was a priority for Phelps officials. A 2008 examination of its records found that 109 of its roughly 940 offenders had not been visited by a family member in more than two years, says Assistant Warden Jolene Constance. “These men were getting ready to be released, and ‘Read to Me Daddy’ helped them bridge that bond.”

The “Read to Me Daddy” project received funding from the Foundation in 2007 to pay for video equipment and personnel to film its first group of 19 offenders, including men from the Baton Rouge region who were incarcerated at Phelps. Offenders chose the stories they wanted to read from a collection of books donated by Baton Rouge Community College’s criminal justice program.

To date, 25 children, ages 3 to 12, have received books and DVDs from the first filming in 2008, but that number will grow as the program expands to Dixon and other facilities this year, Ellerbe explains.

And the concept could be traveling out of state, too. In February, Michael Ellerbe, Ellerbe’s husband, founder of Refined By Fire and director of the Pre-Release Program at Dixon, co-presented the project at an international gathering of nonprofit groups that provide family-focused programs to offender populations. With him was Phelps’ Constance.

For the Ellerbes, work with Louisiana offenders has long been both a spiritual and professional mission. The couple, along with now-grown daughter Ari, began performing Christian rock—they

have three albums to their credit—in the early ‘80s. From the beginning, the family connected with offenders whose life experiences were vastly different from their own.

What struck the Ellerbes from their early interac-

“It made me feel good to be able to reach out and do that for her.”

—KENDELL HINTON, PRISONER

tions with incarcerated men in Louisiana and other states was the great need for what Mrs. Ellerbe describes as the “human connection,” and emotional nurturing. “There is a rapport there, a synergy, because I think the offenders connect with our being a family and want that connection for themselves,” she says.

The chance to nurture their children through “Read to Me Daddy” is one of the project’s benefits to offenders and children alike, Mr. Ellerbe says. The idea of caring for their children in this way sometimes feels foreign to men whose fathers may have been absent from their own childhood, he says. The program also contributes to the literacy skills of offenders who may not be strong readers.

“For some, this has given them the motivation to learn to read because they wanted to be able to tell a story to their child,” he says. “Nothing breeds success like success, so the hope is that if they read one book for the program, then they are going to want to keep reading.” •

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# Across the tracks

STRATEGY TO FOCUS ON LIFTING COVINGTON NEIGHBORHOOD >> by SARA BONGIORNI

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The Baton Rouge Area Foundation's effort to revitalize Old South Baton Rouge is serving as a model for a similar effort to bring new life to a little-known pocket of poverty in the city of Covington.

The West 30s neighborhood lies just blocks from Covington's artsy downtown and local courthouse. Million-dollar homes stand perhaps a mile away. But the roughly 85-block West 30s area—which gets its name from the numbered streets that run through the mostly residential neighborhood—offers a legacy that is much different from Covington's high-profile charm.

Violence and poverty pervade the West 30s,

where the lives of its mostly African-American residents got tougher still when Hurricane Katrina battered an area where most residents rent deteriorating homes owned by absentee landlords. Holes in roofs, some covered by blue tarps, still dot the neighborhood more than three years after the storm.

"People don't realize that a few blocks north of charming downtown Covington, you have real poverty," says Frank Saxton, director of community development for the Northshore Community Foundation. He attributes the neighborhood's decline to decades of "disinterest and disinvestment."

Life in the West 30s became harder after Katrina,



Public and private investments have created new housing and spurred business in Old South Baton Rouge, an area between LSU and downtown. A strategic plan for rebuilding Old South Baton Rouge will be a model for a similar plan in Covington.

including the loss of already scarce affordable housing. That increased a sense of urgency to address the dire social and economic issues at play there, Saxton says.

“It was the straw ... that hit those who are most susceptible to economic hardship,” he says.

Now, the Northshore Community Foundation is leading the effort to create a comprehensive plan to revitalize the West 30s through additional affordable housing, Smart Growth planning strategies and new incentives for private investment. Although a final plan is still a year away, it will likely stress pedestrian-friendly blocks and possible zoning changes to support mixed-use development

that blends commercial and residential needs.

Whatever the final details, the plan will place the needs of existing residents, including the quality of residential housing, at the top of the list of priorities.

“The idea first and foremost is to strengthen residential areas and make this a safer and healthier neighborhood,” Saxton says.

The effort will borrow heavily from the strategic plan for Old South Baton Rouge, the mostly residential neighborhood that lies between the Louisiana State University campus and downtown Baton Rouge.

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation provided

funding and spearheaded the creation of the plan for Old South Baton Rouge. Now, it is also serving as a model for the role of the Northshore Community Foundation as it addresses the needs of the West 30s. "It provides us with a model to follow," he says.

The plan for Old South Baton Rouge is a sound

The support and involvement of the Northshore Community Foundation in creating a revitalization plan for the West 30s "is the only hope for its future," says Maureen Clary, president and chief executive officer of Habitat for Humanity St. Tammany West, which has been building homes in the West 30s since the early '80s.

**"People don't realize that a few blocks north of charming, downtown Covington you have real poverty."**

—FRANK SAXTON

model for the West 30s because of numerous similarities between the two areas, Saxton says. Although the West 30s comprise a smaller geographic area, like Old South Baton Rouge it lies just blocks from prosperous neighborhoods and busy traffic arteries. Moreover, the West 30s lack a unifying blueprint to guide existing momentum on issues like affordable housing—as Old South Baton Rouge did before the completion of its own revitalization plan.

Unity of purpose provided by a clear, overall plan strengthens local projects while better positioning local organizations' pursuit of various funding sources, Saxton says.

"We see our role as facilitating a process to bring the synergies in the area together, because there is a risk of losing those synergies without that," he says.

Current momentum in the West 30s includes a \$20 million, 94-unit affordable housing joint venture by Habitat for Humanity and Volunteers of America and a land trust operated by the Northshore Housing Initiative, which has built numerous houses in the neighborhood, Saxton says.

The comprehensive neighborhood assessment that will take place over the coming year is part of what makes the planning process itself so valuable, says Clary.

"This is a chance to really look closely at the problems in the neighborhood," she says.

As in Baton Rouge, community leaders in the West 30s will play a critical role in the formulation of the plan. The foundation's initial focus has been identifying and recruiting local leaders from the West 30s to serve on a steering committee to guide the planning process—and the end result.

"This is a neighborhood revitalization plan and it has to be led by the neighborhood," Saxton says. "This can't be a foundation plan, but a plan driven by the community and the West 30s itself." •

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## Mark Martin

PEDAL PUSHER

TIM MUELLER

**Y**our bike riding childhood was about wind blowing through your hair and adventures. But the two-wheel ride sparks a different scenario to Mark Martin.

He knows it's the best way to see a city: "You know what's blooming." But in a place laced with few crosswalks or bike paths, Martin also realizes it's practically written in concrete that navigating without an internal combustion engine is difficult, even treacherous. He has endured honking and yelling, and motorists in motion have even grabbed his arm while screaming at him to get on the sidewalk.

With gauged ear piercings, tattoos and a salty beard, Martin looks like a motorcycle rider. But he hasn't owned a motor vehicle in 20 years. Instead, he loves his two wheels so much that he's become a leading advocate for bicyclists.

The message he promotes is that bikers legally have the right to use a full lane of the road.

Beyond sharing public thoroughfares, Martin says it's about keeping bike riders from harm. In 2006, he founded BRASS, Baton Rouge Advocates for Safe Streets. The group focuses on key aspects of cycling, such as safety, education, recreation and sustainability.

With a growing membership, BRASS has been working with the city to improve safety and to develop more options for transit. Martin says there is a sincere desire, both among residents and government, to transform Baton Rouge into a model for other cities. He sees his hopes coming to fruition as the city adds bike lanes.

Among many accomplishments of BRASS, he recalls the most memorable with an infectious smile: "At the end of a group ride, a woman in her 70s said 'I wish I could do this every month'... you know, hearing that made me believe it's not just me, I'm not that crazy." —Sarah Landry

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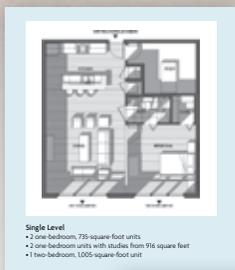
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# Sweet dreams in the heart of downtown



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• 2 one-bedroom, 735-square-foot units  
• 2 one-bedroom units with studies from 916 square feet  
• 1 two-bedroom, 1005-square-foot unit



Split Level  
• 6 one-bedroom units from 860 square feet  
• 1 two-bedroom, 1380-square-foot unit



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