

# CURRENTS

*first quarter twenty-eighteen . baton rouge area foundation*



*Boy Scouts' big dream could  
draw thousands to Louisiana*

*Learning to  
love the swamp*



Tim Mueller



A worker cuts a metal overhang at the former Entergy buildings on Government Street. The project—Electric Depot—is among several warehouses being converted in a revival of Mid City around Government Street. Story on page 44.



# WATERWORKING

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*Baton Rouge  
Area Foundation*

100 North Street, Suite 900 | Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70802 | [braf.org](http://braf.org)

# LETTER



**W**e are an impatient people. We twitch for news on Twitter. We drive-thru for lunch. We expect fast delivery and quick fixes.

Impatience can be a virtue, with the impulse of urgency prodding us to get things done. But some undertakings require time and a lot of commitment. Good ideas demand faith to evolve and materialize.

The founders of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation set the example. They formed the Foundation in 1964 to buy 1,000 acres from Russel Kleinpeter. Two hundred acres were put aside to lure the Gulf South Research Institute to Baton Rouge. It took three years before GSRI finally opened its doors on the land purchased for them by the Foundation. In time, new businesses were drawn into GSRI's orbit, just as the civic leaders who formed the Foundation had envisioned.

Eventually, the institute was shuttered, but it had served its purpose. The land where it sat has since become the site of the growing LSU South Campus, where the nonprofit Emerge Center recently opened its headquarters to assist children with developmental disabilities. IDEA Charter is building a new school there too.

The idea behind the Foundation was to build opportunities

for people to prosper. It's a grand notion. The founders understood that, like starting construction on a medieval cathedral, the builders' vision is fully realized only by their descendants. We know that some projects, especially the ones that transform our region, take time and sustained faith.

Downtown's rebirth is the best example. Twenty years ago, in spring 1997, Stefanos Polyzoides was the inaugural speaker for the Foundation's Marcia Kaplan Kantrow Lecture Series. He talked about an idea that was not well known to people in our region in those days: New Urbanism, the rearranging of cities to make them more livable. A year later, town planner and architect Andres Duany worked with residents to create a revival strategy for our failing downtown, based on New Urbanism. People put faith in it— even though they knew that it would take time,

and some would not live to see its completion. Almost two decades later, their dedication to the idea has been validated. Thousands more people now work in the heart of the city. Restaurants and entertainment venues lead people to linger long after quitting time. And, at last, people are moving back downtown and making their homes there again.

Ardendale follows the same wide arc. Started by the Foundation after Hurricane Katrina, the project began with the purchase of 200 acres of open land north of Florida Boulevard. Now, years later, the neighborhood is finally beginning to come into its own, anchored by the McKay

*Good ideas demand faith to evolve and materialize.*

## Baton Rouge Area Foundation

### 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 South Louisiana. We do so by providing three 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 education reform. Two, BRAF invests in and manages pivotal projects to improve the region. Three, we provide consulting services to nonprofits.

For more information, contact Mukul Verma at [mverma@braf.org](mailto:mverma@braf.org).

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Automotive Training Center of the Baton Rouge Community College. Opening there this fall will be a new East Baton Rouge Parish public high school. Soon, there will be houses and shops in Ardendale.

Likewise, The Water Institute of the Gulf was an idea that emerged from the floodwaters of Katrina. It took some years of patience, but now the nonprofit hosts top researchers working on solutions to the problem of living with rising seas and sinking coastlands. It's the centerpiece of an even grander idea: The Water Campus, occupying 35 acres of property on the riverfront.

We continue to work on projects that require faith and commitment over the long term. Saving the lakes is one of them. Starting a commuter rail connecting Baton Rouge and New Orleans is another.

The staff here is impatient, but they know that our projects—the ones that really transform the community—demand diligence and, sometimes, take generations to complete, the same way that grand cathedrals are patiently chipped out of piles of rock.

Sincerely,



S. Dennis Blunt,  
Chair

# ABOUT US

## THE BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION ACCOMPLISHES ITS MISSION IN THREE WAYS :

**1** We connect fund donors—philanthropists—to worthwhile projects and nonprofits. Over 52 years, our donors have granted more than \$400 million across South Louisiana and the world.

The Foundation offers several types of charitable funds, including donor-advised funds, which can be opened for a minimum of \$10,000. Contributions to the fund are tax deductible. Donors use these funds to make grants to nonprofits. The Foundation manages the money in the charitable accounts, offers local knowledge about issues and nonprofits, and manages all the necessary paperwork.

**2** We conduct civic leadership initiatives that change the direction of the Baton Rouge region and South Louisiana. Members support these projects, which solve fundamental problems. Tax-deductible memberships range from \$100 to \$10,000.

**3** We offer strategic consulting services to nonprofits.

### KEY CIVIC LEADERSHIP PROJECTS

#### THE NEW MOBILITY :

The Foundation is trying to make it easier for people to get around the parish. We are participating with local and state government on several projects that give residents transportation choices. Engineers say that more choices reduce the burden on roads. The projects include a train connecting Baton Rouge to New Orleans, a bike sharing system that is expected to start in late 2018 and support for car sharing.

#### BATON ROUGE HEALTH DISTRICT

**(BRHEALTHDISTRICT.ORG) :** The parish asked the Foundation to pay for a master plan for the Bluebonnet, Perkins and Essen Lane corridor, where most of the health care assets are located. The plan has been adopted by the parish, and an independent nonprofit—the Baton Rouge Health District, has been formed to implement the plan.

## *Baton Rouge Area Foundation*

### MISSION :

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation unites human and financial resources to enhance the quality of life in South Louisiana.

To achieve our mission, we:

- serve our donors to build the assets that drive initiatives and solutions;
- engage community leaders to develop appropriate responses to emerging opportunities and challenges;
- partner with entities from our service area, as well as with other community foundations, in order to leverage our collective resources and create the capacity to be a stimulus of positive regional change; and,
- evaluate our work and share the results with our stakeholders.



# LEAD IN

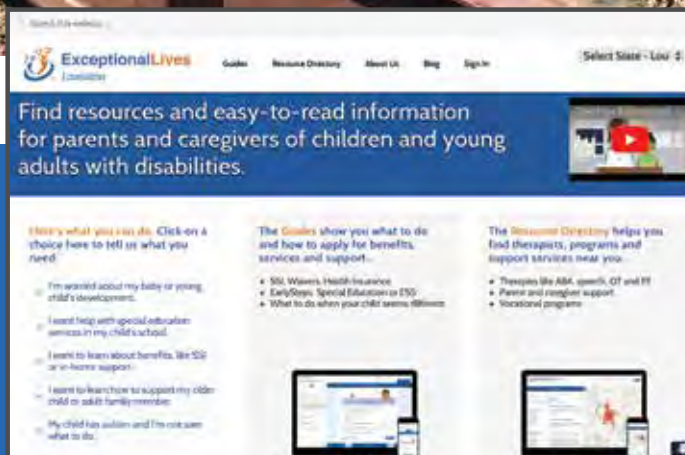
## HOWLING SUCCESS

Companion Animal Alliance’s shelter for lost dogs, cats and other critters is coming into shape. Cinder block walls were completed in January and crews were working to build out the interiors. The shelter should open by late summer, allowing CAA to move operations from a dog-eared shelter near the Baton Rouge Metro Airport. Features of the shelter include a patio, a tall curved perch where cats can be displayed for adoption; an outdoor dog park; and easy-to-clean kennels. The 30,000-square-foot shelter will be among the best in the country, thanks to fund donors of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation and other philanthropists. CAA continues to accept gifts for the final touches to the \$12 million shelter. More at CAABR.org. CAA was created by the Foundation with animal enthusiasts. The nonprofit finds permanent homes for more than 70% of lost pets, up from 20% when it took over for the city-parish.



**AN EXCEPTIONAL START** The Baton Rouge Area Foundation started a website last year to assist parents and guardians who have children with development disabilities. At La.ExceptionalLives.org, caretakers can find services for their children, depending on age, disability and other factors. More than 15,000 have already used the website—La.ExceptionalLives.org. The free site provides two things: step-by-step “how-to” guides to maneuver through complicated processes that affect their child’s life, and a directory of more than 1,000 resources statewide. We were able to build and launch the site because of funding from Matt and Sherri McKay, who are both members and donors to the Foundation.

The Foundation is securing grants to expand and sustain the site.



# GOOD THINGS



**RIVERFRONT PARK** The Downtown Development District wants to turn 20 acres of riverfront batture land into a park with trails and fishing ponds. The land runs from North Street to Hollywood Casino. The park would cost several hundred thousand dollars, and the DDD is applying for a \$100,000 state grant to start building the park.



## LOOK GOOD, FEEL GOOD

**Sharon Weston Broome wants to sweep Baton Rouge clean.** In her annual review of the parish, the mayor promised to make EBR more presentable to residents and to the world. A good thing, as an uncluttered and beautiful place attracts businesses while also making people proud of the place they call home. The Broome Administration's first two targets are College Drive and Plank Road, among the grungiest and most-traveled corridors in the parish. Crews have picked up thousands of pounds of trash, fixed broken signs and removed hundreds of illegal ads.

**MORE PARKS** BREC's park renovations and a new botanic garden will debut in 2018. Above, Howell Community Park's grand opening is slated for April 5, when spring flowers are in bloom. Howell's barely used golf course was closed. In its place will be lawns, basketball courts, sports fields, a recreation center, playground, pavilion, walking paths, a swimming pool and tennis courts. Meanwhile, North Sherwood Forest Community Park's second expansion will have a splash pad, water features and new playground. And the ribbon cutting for a botanic garden at Independence Park is May 12.

# CIVIC PROJECTS



## ARDENDALE ADVANCES

Baton Rouge Community College opened the McKay Automotive Training Center at Ardendale last year. **In August of 2018, EBR Public Schools will welcome students to the career high school next door.** They will learn in-demand skills so they can get jobs after graduating. Located on 200 acres off Lobdell Avenue and North Ardenwood, Ardendale is mixing educational institutions with housing and retail. The EBR Redevelopment Authority is developing Ardendale with assistance from the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.



## UNTANGLING TITLES

A program to clear titles has aided more than 300 homeowners, with many of them getting FEMA flood assistance to repair and return to their homes. After the Great Flood of 2016, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation together granted \$550,000 to Flood Proof, a program run by Louisiana Appleseed, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, Southern University Law Center and LSU Paul M. Hebert Law Center. Their work has produced more than \$5 million in benefits to local homeowners. Thousands of people live in homes that they don't own outright because properties were passed to family members without successions. The program found heirs and asked them to sign over their ownership—typically small amounts—to the person living in the home.

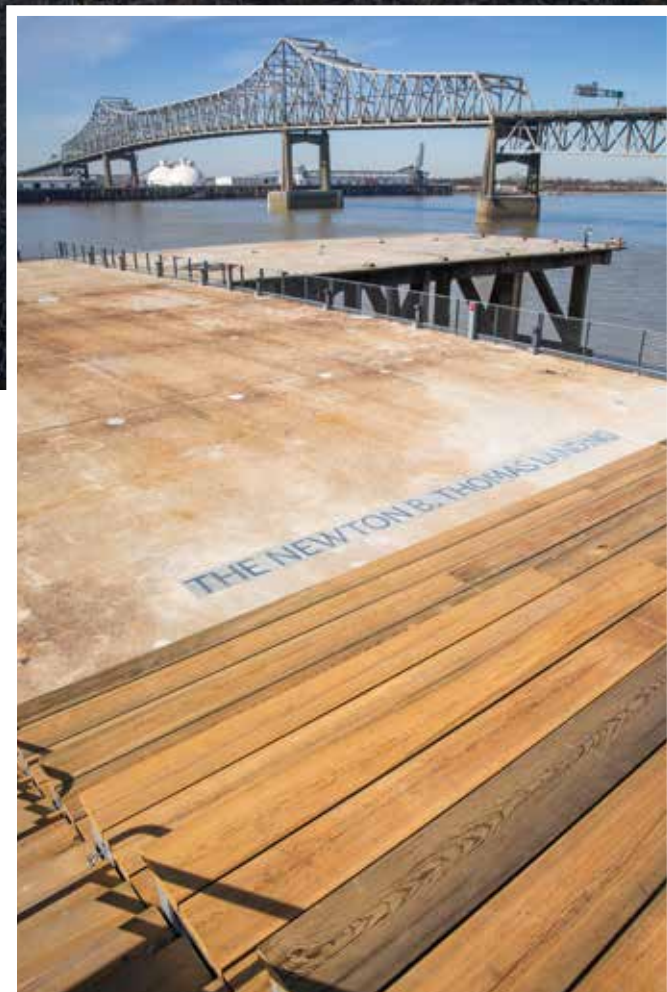


## BACK TO THE RIVER

In December, the Foundation and Commercial Properties Realty Trust, which manages the Foundation's real estate, gathered with partners to open the Center for Coastal and Deltaic Solutions, the centerpiece of the Water Campus. The Water Institute of the Gulf has located to the second floor; WaterWorking, a co-working space is on the first floor; and The Estuary, a conference and event space, is on the third floor. Photographer Tim Mueller provides a look inside and around the Center, which is on River Road near the Mississippi River bridge. For more, visit [TheWaterCampus.org](http://TheWaterCampus.org), and [Waterworking.com](http://Waterworking.com). Both are projects led by the Foundation and Commercial Properties Realty Trust.

Photos by Tim Mueller


# CIVIC PROJECTS







# CIVIC PROJECTS

A man with short dark hair, wearing a blue blazer over a light blue striped shirt and grey trousers, stands in the center of the frame. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is an urban setting with a weathered brick wall on the left featuring large red and blue graffiti. To the right, a rusty metal staircase with a silver railing leads upwards. The overall scene suggests a focus on urban development and revitalization.

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation and city government started the Redevelopment Authority as an independent agency to revive areas that have lost investment. John Noland, RDA chair, represents the Foundation on the RDA board.

Tim Mueller





*New director of the  
EBR Redevelopment  
Authority*

# Christopher Tyson

**L**SU law professor Christopher Tyson has worked as a real-estate attorney, taught current events as a volunteer in a Boston prison and helped to launch an Internet start-up. His newest role is director of the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority, the 10-year-old agency charged with blight elimination and revitalization of the parish.

The son of a judge and a teacher, the Howard University grad takes the job as the RDA assumes additional responsibility for HUD-funded housing programs previously run by the Office of Community Development. He sat down with our writer Sara Bongiorno to reflect on the challenges ahead.

**YOU HAVE A BACKGROUND AS A LAND-USE LAWYER. YOU ALSO GREW UP IN BATON ROUGE. HOW WILL THOSE THINGS SHAPE YOUR WORK AS RDA DIRECTOR?**

I see intrinsic value in all the neighborhoods in our community. I've lived in various parts of the city, from Glen Oaks to south Baton Rouge off Highland Road. That has given me connections to people across the city who help me see every part of it as worthy of investments.

**WHAT DO YOU WANT PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RDA?**

Land use affects us all. That makes the RDA indispensable to us all. It's a vehicle to sound planning and economic development, but it also plays a social justice role. Issues such as tran-

sit and social services delivery often relate to spatial design. We don't want to look at just putting up buildings but at how we can form partnerships to address some of the serious problems we have. A coordinated, collaborative approach is going to be key to enabling the RDA to have maximum positive impact on the community.

#### **WHAT WILL BE YOUR MAIN PRIORITY ON DAY ONE?**

The first priority has to be making sure that the city-parish meets its commitments in the use of CDGB and HOME funds and that use of those (HUD) funds is in compliance with federal law.

But the core of our mission is redevelopment and addressing blight. We look forward to working with the city on the best way to deal with code enforcement and blight to see how the RDA can assist in those efforts. We will be looking for collaborative opportunities as we look to the future with new projects.

Christopher Tyson was the Newman Trowbridge Distinguished Professor of Law at LSU's Paul M. Hebert Law Center before joining the RDA. He earned a bachelor's in architecture from Howard University, a masters of public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School, and a law degree from Georgetown University Law Center. He was an attorney with Jones Walker.

#### **DO YOU HAVE DREAM PROJECTS FOR BATON ROUGE?**

I'd love to see our corridors of commerce revitalized—Florida Boulevard, Plank Road, Airline Highway.

#### **IN TERMS OF NEW PROJECTS, DO YOU HAVE A SPECIFIC PART OF THE CITY-PARISH IN MIND AS A PLACE TO START? WHAT ARE ONGOING PROJECTS THAT WILL BE IMPORTANT MOVING FORWARD?**

There were a number of community plans done a few years ago. I'd like to revisit those and see to what extent they still reflect the priorities of those neighborhoods—Scotlandville, Melrose East and others.

We will continue to move forward with Ardentale and the former Entergy site on Government Street. I expect those important projects to serve as additional examples of the RDA's successful work in the community.

#### **CLEARLY THE ISSUE OF STEADY FUNDING FOR THE RDA IS NOT YET RESOLVED. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS THERE?**

Funding is obviously a big deal. We will be making a thoughtful and strategic identification of funding sources that can produce revenue for the agency because that is what we will need to be effective.

For the near term, we'll rely heavily on city-parish support. That's appropriate because the activities of the RDA are essential to a healthy, functioning city.

For a city to invest in its own redevelopment is not groundbreaking. It's a basic function. We need to understand that we're going to be more successful in pursuing competitive funding if we can show that we have skin in the game. It shows that we are serious about redevelopment.

#### **HOW OPTIMISTIC ARE YOU ABOUT THE RDA'S POTENTIAL TO TRANSFORM PARTS OF TOWN THAT ARE STRUGGLING?**

I am optimistic. I don't think we've dreamed too big for what the RDA can do. I believe it can have a significant impact in improving the lives of people across the city-parish. The string of RDA projects demonstrates that.

#### **ARE LOCAL CHALLENGES TO REDEVELOPMENT SIMILAR TO THOSE IN OTHER U.S. CITIES WITH A LARGE NUMBER OF BLIGHTED AND ABANDONED PROPERTIES?**

To a certain degree, yes. But the extent of disinvestment in north Baton Rouge over so long a period intensifies what our commitment there needs to be to turn it around. The concentration of poverty in north Baton Rouge and wealth in south Baton Rouge creates a great divide, really a tale of two cities, that exists to the detriment of us all. Understanding our history and how equitable development can help us cross that divide will benefit all of us.

#### **IS THERE A CITY WHOSE SUCCESS IN REDEVELOPMENT SERVES AS AN INSPIRATION FOR THE WORK YOU'LL BE DOING IN EAST BATON ROUGE?**

You see amazing possibilities when you look at places like Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Portland. But moving forward here won't mean taking a blueprint of what's worked elsewhere. We will find the best solutions to our challenges in developing projects that reflect the history and culture of this city. •

## **When the rains came, companies were there for their employees.**

Nearly 80 of them opened charitable funds at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation to write emergency checks to their workers. Our Employees 1st program handled all the work. We made sure employees were qualified and they received assistance as quickly as possible.

## **Employees 1st is not only for disasters.**

More than 40 companies are taking care of their employees who have suffered unexpected hardships, such as a fires and illnesses.



Learn more by contacting **Elizabeth Hutchison**  
(225) 387-6126 or [EHutchison@braf.org](mailto:EHutchison@braf.org).

# GRANTS

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation's fund donors make thousands of grants from their charitable accounts. Grants for the fourth quarter of 2017 are listed below. They total \$12.96 million. If you wish to learn more about opening a charitable fund at the Foundation, please call Elizabeth Hutchison at (225) 387-6126. You can open a charitable fund for a minimum of \$10,000. The Foundation will manage the fund and make grants on your behalf. Contributions to charitable funds are tax deductible. This list does not include hardship grants made to individuals.

100 Black Men of Metro New Orleans Inc. \$75,000  
100 Black Men of Metropolitan Baton Rouge \$50,000  
AATS Graham Foundation \$500  
Academic Distinction Fund \$46,852  
Academy of the Sacred Heart New Orleans Foundation Inc. \$3,000  
Acts of Love Inc. \$4,275  
Acus Foundation \$25,000  
Adaptive Sports Center of Crested Butte Inc. \$25,000  
AFS Intercultural Programs Inc. \$250  
Agenda for Children Inc. - New Orleans \$202,500  
All Hands Volunteers Inc. \$30,000  
Alliance for Choice in Education - Louisiana \$200,000  
Alzheimer's Association of Louisiana \$100  
Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association Inc. \$100  
Alzheimer's Services of the Capital Area \$4,500  
America Achieves Inc. \$143,750  
American Cancer Society Inc. - Mid-South Division \$375  
American Diabetes Association Inc. - Metairie \$100  
American Heart Association - Greater Southeast Affiliate \$31,761  
American Lung Association of Louisiana \$100  
American National Red Cross - Louisiana Capital Area \$315  
American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \$100  
AmeriCares Foundation Inc. \$200  
Angels' Place Inc. \$1,500  
Arthritis Foundation Inc. \$100  
Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge Inc. \$21,109  
Atchafalaya Basinkeeper Inc. \$1,000  
Audubon Nature Institute Inc. \$1,650  
Baton Rouge Area Foundation \$125,000  
Baton Rouge Audubon Society \$1,000  
Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre Inc. \$500  
Baton Rouge Child Advocacy Center \$500  
Baton Rouge Christian Education Foundation /  
The Dunham School \$353,367  
Baton Rouge Community College Foundation \$10,500

Baton Rouge Crisis Intervention Center \$3,606  
Baton Rouge Green Association Inc. \$4,826  
Baton Rouge Health District \$5,500  
Baton Rouge High School Foundation \$1,500  
Baton Rouge Opera Guild \$663  
Baton Rouge Sponsoring Committee \$1,000  
Baton Rouge Youth Coalition Inc. \$109,000  
Bay Area Deputy Sheriff's Foundation Inc. \$500  
Bayou Blue Volunteer Fire Company \$985  
Bayou District Foundation \$2,500  
Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Heart of Georgia \$1,000  
Big Buddy Program \$3,000  
Blue Ridge Mountains Health Project Inc. \$750  
Book Harvest \$5,000  
Boy Scouts of America - Istrouma Area Council \$1,000  
Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Baton Rouge Inc. \$51,100  
Boys & Girls Clubs of Southeast Louisiana \$985  
BREADA (Big River Economic & Agricultural  
Development Alliance) \$15,600  
BREC Foundation \$1,000  
Bridge Center for Hope \$25,000  
Broadway Cares-Equity Fights AIDS Inc. \$2,500  
Brothers of the Sacred Heart Foundation of the  
New Orleans Province \$1,000  
Cal Farley's Boys Ranch \$2,000  
Campus Crusade for Christ Inc. \$250  
Campus Crusade for Christ International \$500  
Cancer Services of Greater Baton Rouge Inc. \$46,961  
Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless \$4,000  
Capital Area Animal Welfare Society \$315  
Capital Area United Way \$149,150  
Capitol City Family Health Center Inc. \$16,200  
CASA of St. Landry Inc. \$1,000  
Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans \$105,000  
Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge Inc. \$863  
Catholic Daughters of the Americas - St. Raphael \$1,000  
Catholic Foundation of South Louisiana \$25,000  
Catholic Foundation of the Archdiocese of Mobile Inc. —  
St. Thomas by the Sea \$500  
Catholic High School Foundation \$11,723  
Cenikor Foundation - Baton Rouge \$5,000  
Center for Planning Excellence Inc. \$33,250  
Center for the Arts - Crested Butte \$25,000  
Center for the New Economy Inc. \$61,750  
Central Georgia Technical College Foundation \$1,000  
Cerebral Palsy Association of Greater Baton Rouge Inc./  
McMains Children's Development Cneter \$72,100  
Chanson, Inc. \$3,000  
Children's Cup \$2,800  
Children's Hospital of Los Angeles \$1,500  
Chinese Christian Church of Baton Rouge \$294  
Christ the King Evangelical Lutheran Church \$2,000

Christ the King Parish and Catholic Center at LSU \$12,785  
Church of the Good Shepherd \$5,000  
City of Port Allen \$450  
City Year Inc. - Baton Rouge \$15,650  
Closer Walk Ministries \$1,000  
College Entrance Examination Board \$8,500  
College for Social Innovation Inc. \$5,000  
Community Foundation of Greater Jackson Inc. \$500  
Companion Animal Alliance \$48,100  
Congregation B'nai Israel of Baton Rouge \$7,890  
Congregation B'nai Israel of Baton Rouge Foundation \$223  
Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph Inc. \$700  
Connections for Life \$1,000  
Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere Inc. \$200  
Cotuit Center For the Arts \$1,000  
Court 13 Arts \$25,000  
Covenant House New Orleans \$4,500  
Crescent City Schools \$6,250  
Crested Butte Land Trust \$100  
Crested Butte Mountain Educational Radio Inc. \$1,000  
Crimestoppers Inc. \$1,500  
Crippled Children Foundation \$500  
Cristo Rey Baton Rouge \$25,000  
Cultural Landscape Foundation \$500  
Cystic Fibrosis Foundation - Baton Rouge \$5,250  
Doctors Without Borders USA Inc. \$300  
Domus Pacis Family Respite Inc. \$100  
Donaldsonville Area Arc \$1,000  
Double Angel Inc. \$100  
Douglas Manship Sr. Theatre Complex Holding Inc. \$17,211  
Dream Day Foundation \$500  
Ducks Unlimited Inc. \$500  
Duke University \$50,100  
Dutchtown Middle School \$2,195  
Dyslexia Association of Greater Baton Rouge Inc. \$620  
East Baton Rouge Parish Library \$2,401  
EBRPSS - Capitol Elementary School \$500  
EBRPSS - Mayfair Laboratory School \$1,000  
EBRPSS - Wildwood Elementary School \$800  
Ednavigator Inc. \$175,000  
Education Resource Strategies Inc. \$50,000  
Episcopal Church of the Resurrection \$2,500  
Episcopal High School of Baton Rouge \$1,568,512  
Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre \$1,200  
Eternal Word Television Network \$1,000  
Excelth Inc. \$12,400  
Family Service of Greater Baton Rouge \$5,000  
Film Forum Inc. \$50,000  
First Baptist Church \$100  
First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge \$1,286  
First United Methodist Church \$104,950  
Fondren Renaissance Foundation \$1,000  
Fosters Home Foundation \$2,000  
Foundation for a Better Louisiana \$3,000  
Foundation for Excellence in Louisiana Public Broadcasting \$2,000  
Foundation for Historical Louisiana Inc./ Preserve Louisiana \$4,570  
Foundation for Woman's Hospital \$38,161  
French Camp Academy \$1,000  
Friends of Hilltop Arboretum Inc. \$2,250  
Friends of Louisiana Public Broadcasting Inc. \$14,643  
Friends of Magnolia Mound \$7,300  
Friends of Oakley Community Foundation \$100  
Friends of Rosedown Inc. \$500  
Friends of the Alexandria Museum of Art \$500  
Friends of the Louisiana State Archives \$100  
Front Yard Bikes \$7,500  
GaitWay Therapeutic Horsemanship \$15,000  
Galloway United Methodist Church \$11,000  
Gardere Community Christian School \$10,500  
General Assembly of the Christian Church Disciples of Christ \$1,000  
General Health Foundation \$11,000  
Girl Scouts Louisiana East Inc. \$1,500  
Girl Scouts of Greater Mississippi Inc. \$1,000  
Giving Quilt Inc. \$2,235  
Gonzales Area Foundation \$10,000  
Good Neighbor Foundation \$5,000  
Good Work Network \$32,500  
Good360 \$2,500  
Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank Inc. \$47,133  
Greater Baton Rouge Hope Academy \$8,000  
Greater Houston Community Foundation \$500  
Groton School \$135,500  
Habitat for Humanity of Greater Baton Rouge \$4,000  
Hargrove Foundation \$5,000  
Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society \$100  
Hathaway Brown School \$3,000  
Healing Place Church \$3,000  
Healing Place Serve \$15,000  
Healthnetwork Foundation \$500  
Heart of Georgia Hospice Inc. \$1,000  
Heritage Ranch \$54,200  
Highlands Emergency Council Inc. \$100  
Highlands-Cashiers Hospital Foundation Inc. \$20,000  
HIV/AIDS Alliance for Region Two (HAART) \$16,200  
Holy Family Catholic Church \$12,023  
HOPE Ministries of Baton Rouge \$500  
Hospice Foundation of Greater Baton Rouge \$38,348  
Houston Chamber Choir \$3,000  
Humane Society of the United States \$100  
Iberville Foundation for Academic Excellence \$5,873  
Inner-City Arts \$2,000  
International Center for Journalists Inc. \$12,000  
International Hospitality Foundation LSU \$682  
International Rescue Committee Inc. \$10,000  
International Rett Syndrome Foundation \$150  
International Society for Krishna Consciousness  
of New Orleans \$54,753  
Jane Goodall Institute for Wildlife Research

Education and Conservation \$100  
 Jefferson Parish Public School System -  
   L.H. Marrero Middle School \$1,000  
 Jewish Children's Regional Service \$100  
 John Burroughs School \$5,000  
 Jubilee Pioneers \$5,000  
 Junior Achievement of Greater Baton Rouge and Acadiana \$2,002  
 Kappa Alpha Order Educational Foundation \$100  
 Kemper and Leila Williams Foundation —  
   Historic New Orleans Collection \$100  
 King of Kings Ministries Inc. \$1,000  
 Knock Knock Children's Museum Inc. \$108,250  
 Kudvumisa Foundation USA Inc. \$2,000  
 Life of a Single Mom \$7,925  
 Lighthouse Christian Fellowship Church \$2,000  
 Live 2 Serve \$500  
 Living Word Church of Muskegon \$800  
 Louise S. McGehee School \$500  
 Louisiana Art and Science Museum Inc. \$22,832  
 Louisiana Environmental Action Network Inc. \$2,500  
 Louisiana Industries for the Disabled Inc. \$5,000  
 Louisiana International Film Festival \$18,000  
 Louisiana Methodist Children and Family Services Inc. \$200  
 Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra \$10,000  
 Louisiana Preservation Alliance Inc. \$250  
 Louisiana Resource Center for Educators \$5,500  
 Louisiana State University and Agricultural and  
   Mechanical College \$12,000  
 Louisiana Superintendents Academy \$25,000  
 Louisiana Symphony Association/Baton Rouge Symphony  
   Orchestra \$34,935  
 Louisiana Tech University Foundation \$1,500  
 Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Foundation \$2,500  
 LSU Alumni Association \$1,000  
 LSU Foundation \$36,301  
 LSU Foundation - College of Art & Design \$1,000  
 LSU Foundation - College of Engineering \$1,050  
 LSU Foundation - E. J. Ourso College of Business \$2,500  
 LSU Foundation - Friends of French Studies \$1,000  
 LSU Foundation - LSU Ag Center Botanic Gardens at Burden \$6,000  
 LSU Foundation - LSU Museum of Art \$9,600  
 LSU Foundation - Manship School of Mass Communication \$7,000  
 LSU Foundation - Paul M. Hebert Law Center \$7,500  
 LSU Foundation - Shreveport \$1,000  
 LSU Foundation - University Lab School Foundation \$24,100  
 LSU Health Sciences Center - New Orleans \$4,962  
 LSU School of Medicine - New Orleans Medical Alumni Association \$100  
 Luke's House - A Clinic for Healing and Hope \$1,500  
 Maison des Ami of Louisiana Inc. \$1,250  
 Make-A-Wish Foundation of America \$100  
 Make-A-Wish Foundation of the Texas Gulf Coast and  
   Louisiana Inc. \$500  
 Mantle of Mary Inc. \$800  
 Map 10 40 \$3,040

March of Dimes Foundation - South Louisiana Chapter \$100  
 Marine Toys for Tots Foundation \$100  
 Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center \$170,046  
 Memory Project Productions Inc. \$25,000  
 Mercy Ships \$2,991  
 Metanoia Inc. \$10,000  
 MetroMorphosis \$32,500  
 Metropolitan Opera Guild Inc. \$1,000  
 Miami Suns Youth Development Inc. \$27,439  
 Mid City Redevelopment Alliance Inc. \$5,500  
 Miles Perret Cancer Center Services \$1,500  
 Mission Heart Inc. \$5,000  
 Mission of Our Lady of Mercy \$300  
 Mississippi Children's Home Society—  
   Canopy Children's Solutions \$8,000  
 Mountain Chapel United Methodist Church \$500  
 Muscular Dystrophy Association \$100  
 National Foundation for Cancer Research \$100  
 National Multiple Sclerosis Society - Houston \$800  
 National Multiple Sclerosis Society - Metairie \$100  
 National World War II Museum Inc. \$5,500  
 Natural Resources Defense Council Inc. \$2,000  
 New Horizons Ranch and Center Inc. \$2,000  
 New Orleans Airlift \$25,000  
 New Orleans Ballet Association \$10,000  
 New Orleans Center for Creative Arts Institute \$2,500  
 New Orleans Film and Video Festival Inc. \$2,500  
 New Orleans Museum of Art \$20,000  
 New Orleans Opera Association \$2,500  
 New Schools for Baton Rouge \$353,330  
 New Schools for New Orleans Inc. \$62,500  
 Newton B. Thomas AMIkids Fund \$324,494  
 NexusCity \$4,000  
 NOLArts Learning Center \$1,500  
 Northern Star Council - Boy Scouts of America \$2,000  
 Oasis a Safe Haven \$1,000  
 O'Brien House Inc. \$8,750  
 Ochsner Health System \$2,500  
 Of Moving Colors Productions \$5,350  
 Ollie Steele Burden Manor Inc. \$360  
 Omicron Delta Kappa Foundation Inc. \$100  
 Onbikes Pensacola Inc. \$5,000  
 Opera Louisiane Inc. \$56,167  
 Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church \$14,100  
 Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church \$32,311  
 Our Lady of Peace Church \$72,406  
 Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church \$1,000  
 Our Lady of the Lake Children's Hospital \$1,300  
 Our Lady of the Lake Foundation \$16,933  
 Our Voice Nuestra Voz \$25,000  
 Ozanam Inn \$1,000  
 Pahara Institute \$62,500  
 Parkview Baptist School Inc. \$500  
 Particular Council of St. Vincent de Paul of

Baton Rouge Louisiana \$13,185  
 Patient Access Network Foundation \$5,000  
 Peggy Crosby Community Service Center \$1,100  
 Pennington Biomedical Research Foundation \$50,350  
 Phillips Exeter Academy \$2,000  
 Pointe Coupee Early Childhood Coalition Inc. \$1,000  
 Pointe Coupee Historical Society Inc. \$200  
 Pointe Coupee Parish Police Jury \$250  
 PolitiCraft Inc. \$10,000  
 Port Allen Educational Broadcasting Foundation \$100  
 President and Fellows of Harvard College \$5,000  
 President and Fellows of Harvard College -  
 David Rockefeller Center for Latin Am \$25,000  
 Primary Care Providers for Healthy Feliciana \$16,200  
 Project HOPE the People to People Health Foundation Inc. \$100  
 ProPublica Inc. \$2,000  
 Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana Inc. \$5,000  
 Raven's Outreach Center Inc. \$500  
 Rebuilding Together Baton Rouge \$87,719  
 Red Shoes Inc. \$1,000  
 Red Stick Project \$10,000  
 Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation \$500  
 Roman Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge \$126,324  
 Roman Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge -  
 Bishop Ott Works of Mercy Trust \$193  
 Roman Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge/  
 Bishop's Annual Appeal \$6,700  
 Ronald McDonald House Charities of Pensacola \$5,000  
 Roots of Music Inc. \$20,000  
 Rotary Club of Baton Rouge Inc. Foundation \$100  
 Russell Domingue Ministries Inc. \$1,000  
 S S C Progression Corp - St. Stanislaus College \$500  
 Saint Jean Vianney Catholic Church \$2,590  
 Saint Joseph's Abbey and Seminary College \$15,000  
 Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee \$500  
 Sexual Trauma Awareness and Response Center \$8,500  
 Shriners Hospital for Children \$5,000  
 Single Stop USA Inc. \$62,500  
 Sisters of St. Joseph - St. Paul Adult Learning Center \$3,000  
 Society of Saint John the Evangelist \$500  
 South Africa Development Fund Inc. \$10,000  
 Southeastern Louisiana University \$1,250  
 Southern Poverty Law Center Inc. \$1,000  
 Southern Women Action Network (SWAN) \$5,000  
 SouthWings Inc. \$500  
 Special Olympics Louisiana Inc. \$100  
 St. Agnes Catholic Church \$2,000  
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 St. Anna's Episcopal Church \$1,500  
 St. Anne Catholic Church \$1,922  
 St. Anthony of Padua \$25,000  
 St. Augustine Church \$927  
 St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church \$3,000  
 St. Francis Xavier Catholic School \$600

St. Francisville Area Foundation Inc. \$600  
 St. George Catholic Church \$10,000  
 St. George's Episcopal School \$250  
 St. Gerard Majella Church \$10,500  
 St. James Episcopal Church \$14,200  
 St. James Episcopal Day School \$5,000  
 St. James Place of Baton Rouge Foundation Inc. \$250  
 St. Joseph Cathedral \$101,808  
 St. Joseph Seminary College \$1,000  
 St. Joseph Spirituality Center \$1,500  
 St. Joseph the Worker Church \$5,993  
 St. Joseph's Academy \$34,500  
 St. Joseph's Academy Foundation \$5,500  
 St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Inc. \$2,200  
 St. Luke's Episcopal Church \$22,850  
 St. Luke's Episcopal Day School \$4,500  
 St. Mary's Episcopal Church \$250  
 St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church \$1,000  
 St. Paul United Methodist Church \$800  
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church \$100  
 St. Paul's Holy Trinity Episcopal Church \$15,167  
 St. Thomas Aquinas Regional Catholic High School \$14,290  
 Strength for Today \$4,800  
 Stuart Hall School for Boys \$3,000  
 Stuart Hall School Foundation \$100  
 Summit Public Schools \$31,250  
 Swine Palace Productions Inc. \$3,000  
 Teach for America - South Louisiana \$311,500  
 Teacher Prep Inspection - US Inc. \$99,000  
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 The Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund \$19,121  
 The Arc of East Ascension \$3,000  
 The Ascension Fund Inc. \$13,279  
 The Awty International School \$3,000  
 The Baddour Center Inc. \$6,000  
 The Breakthrough Collaborative Inc. \$1,000  
 The Cahoon Museum of American Art Inc. \$1,000  
 The Christian Outreach Center of Baton Rouge, Inc. \$1,286  
 The Cleveland Clinic Foundation \$1,000  
 The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina Inc. \$1,500  
 The Emerge Center Inc. \$2,683  
 The Friends of the Rural Life Museum Inc. \$1,125  
 The Mental Health Association for Greater Baton Rouge \$10,000  
 The Nature Conservancy - Louisiana \$10,000  
 The Norwegian Seamen's Church of New Orleans Inc. \$15,000  
 The Ogden Museum of Southern Art Inc. \$500  
 The Original Richland Library Restoration Society Inc. \$823  
 The Regents of the University of California Los Angeles \$9,926  
 The Rhode Island Community Foundation \$79,406  
 The Salvation Army - Baton Rouge \$2,050  
 The University of West Alabama \$500  
 The Water Institute of the Gulf's Delta \$218,000  
 THRIVE Baton Rouge \$105,000  
 Trinity Episcopal Church \$15,115

Trinity Episcopal School Endowment Trust II \$1,000  
 Trinity Lutheran Church \$5,000  
 Tulane Alumni Association \$1,116  
 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops -  
   Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church \$7,000  
 United States Fund for UNICEF \$200  
 United States Olympic Committee \$100  
 United Way of Beaumont and North Jefferson County \$10,000  
 United Way of Greater Houston \$15,000  
 United Way of Lamar County \$15,000  
 United Way of Morgan County \$7,500  
 United Way of Southeast Louisiana \$22,500  
 University of Louisiana at Lafayette Foundation \$500  
 University of New Mexico Foundation Inc. \$200  
 University of New Orleans Foundation \$250  
 University of Richmond \$250  
 University of Southern Mississippi \$500  
 University of Texas Foundation \$1,000  
 University of the Cumberlands Inc. \$500  
 University of the South \$17,500  
 University Presbyterian Church \$22,750  
 University School \$3,000  
 Urban League of Greater New Orleans Inc. \$75,000  
 Vanderbilt Catholic High School \$3,000  
 Vision 21 Foundation \$500  
 Volunteers In Public Schools Inc. \$6,150  
 Volunteers of America Inc. \$1,600  
 Wellesley College \$5,000  
 West Baton Rouge Foundation for Academic Excellence \$6,408  
 West Baton Rouge Historical Association \$100  
 West Feliciana Education Foundation \$100  
 West Feliciana Historical Society \$125  
 Westminster Place \$500  
 William Carey University \$1,000  
 Willwoods Community \$1,000  
 Wounded Warrior Project Inc. \$425  
 WRKF Public Radio Inc. \$4,043  
 Yale University \$1,000  
 YMCA of the Capital Area - Paula G. Manship YMCA \$1,000  
 Young Aspirations/Young Artists Inc. \$5,000  
 Young Life Baton Rouge \$5,000  
 Young Life New Orleans \$25,000  
 Youth Oasis \$4,250

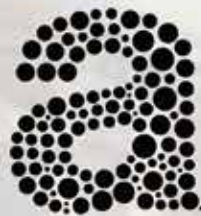


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*Javed Rashel and Tajreen Akter, artists from Bangladesh who are seeking residency in Baton Rouge because of the welcoming arts community*



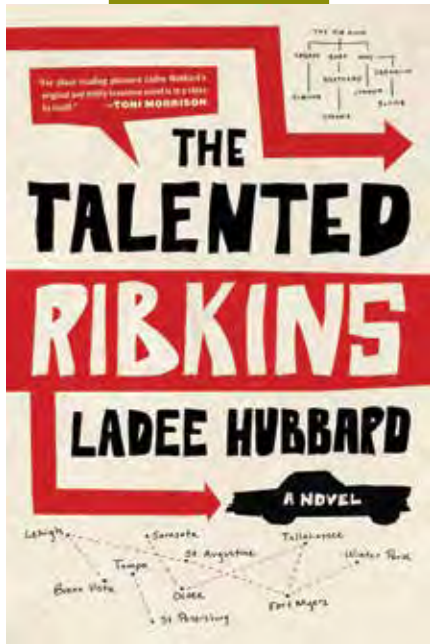
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Ernest J.

**GAINES**  
award for literary excellence



# Our 2017 winner ... *LaDede Hubbard*

Interview by Kennedy Sam | Photo by Vilma Samulionyte

L

adee Hubbard won the 2017 Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence for her debut novel, *The Talented Ribkins*. The Baton Rouge Area Foundation and donors underwrite the award, which recognizes the best work of fiction by an African-American writer. The award also honors Louisiana native Ernest Gaines' extraordinary contribution to the literary world. An independent panel of judges picks the winning book. Hubbard's

win was celebrated Jan. 18 at the Manship Theatre at the Shaw Center for the Arts.

*The Talented Ribkins* follows Johnny Ribkins and his family. They race across Florida—with the aid of their superpowers—to dig up hidden treasure while eluding Johnny's mobster boss.

Hubbard earned a PhD in creative writing from Princeton University. She is a professor of Africana studies at Tulane University.

She sat down with *Currents* writer Kennedy Sam to discuss her life, work and the book.

**HOW DID YOUR EXPERIENCE GROWING UP BETWEEN MASSACHUSETTS, FLORIDA AND VIRGIN ISLANDS SHAPE YOUR CHILDHOOD?**

We moved around throughout the states often so it was a great opportunity to experience other places instead of living a stagnant life in one area. We lived in Oakland before my mom moved us to St. Thomas and St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands to continue her job as a public defender. The different environments make you aware of how many ways there are to be yourself. You become aware of how others perceive you. The way in which you are perceived isn't necessarily fixed everywhere you go. You can go somewhere else where they have different ways of interacting with each other that are completely different than what you are used to.

**AT PRINCETON, THE NOVELIST TONI MORRISON MENTORED YOU, BUT DID YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE A WRITER OR DID A SITUATION FLICK THE SWITCH?**

I've always enjoyed writing. In college I wrote mostly poetry, then I began working on more short stories and now I finished my first novel. There's no method, I write whatever seems to move me. In terms of thinking of myself as a writer, that's more complicated since it's something I've enjoyed personally throughout the years, but I'm also much more than only a writer.

**WHAT DROVE YOUR INTEREST TO TEACH AFRICANA STUDIES?**

I've always been interested in Africana Studies. I have a PhD in folklore and mythology from UCLA, where I studied performance, traditions, belief and migration. The interest budded as an outgrowth of my PhD studies since teaching the subject was my first job in academia upon completion of my degree, and I have retained that affiliation over the years.

**WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO NEW ORLEANS?**

I came to New Orleans in 2003 to teach Africana Studies at Tulane and continued to teach there on and off since. Although we left New Orleans from 2012 to 2015, my affiliations have always been with Tulane and teaching in the Africana Studies department.

This semester I'm teaching a course in Afro Futurism, where we talk about culture, literature, music and film. I wanted to teach a class covering the topic and the students had an interest as well so we've had a great semester.

**SINCE MOVING TO NEW ORLEANS IN 2003, HAS THE CITY'S CULTURE INFLUENCED YOUR WRITING OR SPARKED YOUR CREATIVITY?**

I believe the city's had a huge influence on my writing. New Orleans is such an imaginative, complicated place and the longer I'm here the more I appreciate those characteristics. It's so unique and singular where you see so much creativity around you that I consider it a generative place to foster ideas. Certainly, ideas for thinking about identity and how people interact with each other. There's an abundance of creative people here, so I'm sure it has impacted my thoughts by being able to experience it all. The

The Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence is a project of the Foundation and underwritten by the Foundation and the McMains Foundation in 2017.

longer I live here the more I can see and understand the layers in term of what goes on in the city. It's a hard place to live and the way people have dealt with their environment is inspiring.

**THE TALENTED RIBKINS STARTED AS SHORT STORY YEARS BEFORE YOU DECIDED TO DEVELOP IT INTO A NOVEL. WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE IN THE LONGER FORM?**

We were living in Brazil at the time I wrote the short story and the only characters consisted of Meredith, Eloise and Johnny. Specifically, I wanted to continue Johnny's story. I began writing the novel in 2012 when I went to University of Wisconsin-Madison to continue my studies on creative writing.

This is the first time I've sat down and completed the writing process for a novel. It took me two years to finish writing then another two years editing and revising. It was an amazing experience. Since this is my first novel, I learned so much about myself and about writing a novel that I didn't previously understand, until I allowed myself to sit down and do it.

**IN PAST INTERVIEWS YOU SAID JOHNNY RIBKINS RESEMBLES YOUR GRANDFATHER. WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY OF HIM?**

My grandfather and I were extremely close so I have a lot of fond memories with him. It's hard to pick just one. My parents divorced when I was young so I spent all my summers in Florida



with my grandparents. We used to take a lot of road trips throughout Florida and surrounding states, so I have these vivid memories of being a young girl in the backseat of a big old car with my grandfather sitting in the front.

**IN THE BOOK, ELOISE SPENDS A GREAT DEAL OF TIME IN THAT SAME SETTING AS SHE ACCOMPANIES JOHNNY IN HIS QUEST ACROSS FLORIDA. SINCE THAT ENVIRONMENT COINCIDES WITH YOUR CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF ROAD TRIPS WITH YOUR GRANDFATHER, ARE YOU ALSO PURPOSELY REFLECTED IN THE NOVEL?**

I don't know. A lot of the characters in the book remind me of people I've known who tried to teach me various things in life, but none of the characters directly reflect people from my life.

My grandfather was a chemistry professor and a generous and compassionate man who followed his own path. Even though Johnny's root characteristics align with those of my grandfather, Johnny is still a very different person. It's funny because when my mother read the book she would ask me if this character was Uncle XYZ and so on, but I couldn't give her a definitive answer because they're not completely real people!

**IN THE NOVEL, THE RIBKINS FAMILY ASSEMBLED AS PART OF THE JUSTICE COMMITTEE WHO PROTECTED CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS AS THEY TRAVELED THE COUNTRY. WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GIVE THEM TANGIBLE GIFTS COMPARED TO PERSONAL SKILLS, SUCH AS LEADERSHIP?**

Referring to W.E.B. Du Bois essay (*The Talented Tenth*), the book isn't necessarily trying to embody Du Bois' concept of solving inequality but it's more of a reflection of people's reaction to the essay over the years. It's also about the relationship of how the black middle class is often perceived and how it perceives itself. I thought about the essay, on occasion taught it as well, and heard how students respond to it. I wanted to make the idea of talent tangible even though not every power is a physical manifestation. I wanted to give it some type of form so it wasn't simply abstractions.

**WERE YOU INFLUENCED BY ANY SUPERHERO GROUP OR COMIC BOOK WHEN CREATING THE CHARACTERS' 'POWERS'?**

That was never on the forefront of my mind when I was writing the book. People use different lenses to analyze and talk about the novel. To me the powers were intimately connected to how I perceived the characters moved through the world, how they perceived themselves, and negotiated the real world. Their powers are simply a physical manifestation of their personalities. When people hear the word "powers" they expected it to be a superhero book even though the characters never formally refer to themselves as such. The only case is when one of the characters sarcastically says they have superpowers. After a while the

*New Orleans is such an imaginative, complicated place and the longer I'm here the more I appreciate those characteristics.*

title of the Talented Tenth reminded me of the Fantastic Four. So when I made the group Johnny belonged to in the '70s called The Justice Committee, I was playing off the name The Justice League; nevertheless, it wasn't my intention to write a superhero-themed book.

**THE 19TH CENTURY WAS FILLED WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERS DURING THE RECONSTRUCTION ERA. WHAT WAS IT ABOUT DUBOIS'S 'TALENTED TENTH' ESSAY THAT STOOD OUT TO YOU MORE THAN THE MOVEMENTS LIKE BOOKER T. WASHINGTON'S VIEWS ON SELF-RELIANCE AND EDUCATION, OR MARCUS GARVEY'S RETURN AND REBUILD OF THE MOTHERLAND?**

It was more what the essay represented in terms of ideas about the black middle class. I hear that term used a lot, mostly sarcastically. It wasn't about comparing different intellectuals' ideas at the time but more about the meanings the term has accrued over time. People often forget Du Bois' essay refers to education and stressing the importance of having liberal arts educational opportunities accessible to African Americans in the South

instead of only focusing on trade skills.

I probably have a personal relationship to the essay too because my grandfather did not come from wealth or the black middle class of that time. To get his education, he worked in the kitchen of the school for three years before he could afford to take any classes. For him it meant everything that the school was there and he had access to the opportunity regardless of the financial hardships that came with it. In my family, if they fetishize anything, it's not money but education because of all the years we were denied that right. I wasn't advocating any theory, but I simply wanted to focus on Du Bois' beliefs.

**NOW THAT YOU HAVE THIS PLATFORM AS A WRITER AND IN ACADEMIA, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A PART OF THE TALENTED TENTH?**

I would consider myself a product of Du Bois' essay. My family reflects the traditional black Southern middle class since we had the opportunity to move freely throughout different states and the Virgin Islands. Now I'm paying it forward as a member of the academia teaching liberal arts.

**YOU HAVE RECEIVED NUMEROUS ACCOLADES FOR YOUR NOVEL AND BEEN INTERVIEWED BY SETH MYERS. DID YOU EXPECT SUCH AN OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE RESPONSE SO SOON?**

The response was unexpected, so everything has been a wonderful experience. I knew about the Gaines award and said one day I'm going to write a book to enter in the competition. I am so honored to be chosen to receive the award. When writing the book, I didn't know how people would react to it. I believe it's a unique book and it was important for me to write it. Mentally I didn't write the book with any expectations because you never know how people are going to respond to your work and you don't write with the intention to appease others. I wasn't sure if people would understand what I was trying to convey. Overall this has been such a gratifying experience knowing that people appreciate what I tried to portray with my novel.

**HOW HAVE YOUR CHILDREN RESPONDED TO YOUR NOVEL?**

My daughter, who is 17, appreciates it the most because she was old enough to understand how difficult the four-year

process was. My 12-year-old son was most impressed with the Seth Myers interview. When I started writing it my youngest son, who is 5 now, was still a baby so now he's just happy.

**WHAT IS YOUR MESSAGE TO MINORITY YOUTH – HOW DO YOU INSPIRE HOPE IN A STATE WHERE THERE'S A PREVALENCE OF POVERTY?**

It's something I thought about and tried to reflect within the book. There's a re-occurring theme of people trying to retain a sense of their beauty and worth even when other people couldn't see it. There is value to who they are and the things that make them unique and so often their talents aren't recognized by others in their community.

*In my family, if they fetishize anything, it's not money but education because of all the years we were denied that right.*

There's a bit in the book about the difference between talent and vision, knowing how to use your talents and respecting other people's talents who aren't recognized or acknowledged yet. Younger generations are the source of new ideas and their youth makes it hard for people to see them as well; nevertheless, they're just as important. Johnny and his brother deal with the same kind of experience in the book because Johnny has a hard time understanding what his brother is trying to accomplish. In the end, they're trying to achieve the same thing but use different approaches.

Don't be afraid to express your ideas, be who you are, assert your own voice, and find your own power even if it's not externally reinforced by your surroundings.

**WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?**

I don't want to give too much away, but I'm working on a historical novel, love story based on a chef. •

# Think Outside the **Ballroom**

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A hand is shown in silhouette, holding a glowing lightbulb. The lightbulb is the central focus, emitting a bright, warm glow that illuminates the surrounding area. The background is dark, creating a strong contrast with the light from the bulb. The overall mood is one of hope and enlightenment.

# Into the light

*An experiment is helping the mentally ill,  
and saving money*

By Sara Bongiorno



Six young mothers were headed to prison. All but one of them were homeless when they were arrested for drug possession last fall. All had lost custody of their children.

Addicted to heroin, they were probably going to follow a frequently repeated script—spend time behind bars, be released, break the law, return to jail. But the six women—and some others—are in a new diversion program that offers a commonsense alternative: treatment and services instead of incarceration, not only for people on drugs but also people with mental illness, who too often now suffer the horrors of prison even though they have little or no control over the wrong they do.

Naysayers would stop reading here. But similar programs have been successful in other cities. People are getting second chances, freeing up police and the justice system to spend their resources pursuing and incarcerating violent criminals.

In Baton Rouge’s pre-trial release program, the six mothers and two men, ages 25 to 34, had been redirected into long-term residential treatment facilities by early January. The multi-agency pilot got underway in October, according to officials.

Of the two men in the group, one was homeless and struggling with mental illness at the time of his arrest; the other was arrested on drug charges.

In essence, the pilot gives nonviolent offenders a chance to fix the problems that often got them arrested in the first place—addiction or mental illness, or both.

A little history to show how we got here. The Baton Rouge Area Foundation convened local justice department leaders, police, mental health professionals and others to create a plan for a crisis intervention center. Police could drop off people with drug addictions and mental health issues, or both, to the center for treatment.

The model for the center was created from exploring the best in the nation. A nonprofit named The Bridge Center for Hope was created to operate the center, but they needed funding to do the work. Unfortunately, a modest tax for operating the Bridge Center failed by a small margin about two years ago. The Bridge Center continues as a nonprofit, overseen by a board comprised of East Baton Rouge public justice officials.

After the floods of 2016, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation won a MacArthur Foundation grant that targets innovative programs to safely reduce jail use and racial disparities in local prisons. The grant was used to start the pilot. In late 2017, Mayor Sharon Weston Broome and the Metro Council expanded and sustained the program by including \$260,000 for it in the 2018 parish budget.

There is a lot riding on the program’s success.

Demonstrating that community-based treatment is a safe, effective, and less costly alternative to jail for inmates with mental illness and drug addiction could build public support for the mental health crisis center.

“The hope is that this can be the cornerstone of a larger effort going forward,” said District Attorney Hillar C. Moore III, whose office is working with the 19th

Judicial District Court, EBR Public Defender's Office, other local agencies, and the nonprofit Bridge Center. Moore is a Bridge Center board member.

In Baton Rouge, as elsewhere, questions about improving services for the mentally ill intersect with calls for prison and criminal justice reform. As many as 15% of U.S. inmates have a serious mental health illness, according to the MacArthur Foundation.

In East Baton Rouge, the population of the 1,600-bed parish prison has ballooned since the 2013 closure of Earl K. Long Hospital and its mental-health unit. Arresting officers bring offenders with mental illness and substance abuse to the prison or to local emergency rooms because there aren't other options.

A study released by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation in 2016 concluded a mental health facility could relieve prison overcrowding and reduce the expense of housing low-level inmates in jails across Louisiana while they await trial.

Indeed, the Broome Administration anticipates savings of \$800,000 this year if the pilot meets its goal of moving one inmate per week out of prison and into less costly treatment.

For now, the pre-trial release program underscores the labor-intensive nature of even a small-scale alternative to prison for mentally ill offenders. That first step in the process takes place at the prison, where the program's licensed clinical social worker attends daily "call outs" of 25 to 45 arrests.

As she listens, social worker Angel Rushing, of the Bridge Center, takes down details of nonviolent charges such as drug possession, vagrancy and disturbing the peace.

Weapons charges and parole violations immediately disqualify many male inmates whose arrests for nonviolent offenses might otherwise make them potential fits for the program, she explained.

Out of 100 or so offenders, maybe three look like potential fits for the program, Rushing said. Two out of those three are then typically eliminated during a subsequent, intensive screening process that includes scrutiny of their criminal histories and other factors.

"This program puts a real emphasis on public safety," Rushing said. "The instructions I've been given are go slow and do things right."

Rushing next approaches the inmates to ask if they are interested in being released into treatment. If they are, she formulates a plan for treatment and identifies other elements of necessary support, everything from housing to job training.

The district attorney and public defender then meet to attach additional conditions to an offender's release, such as travel

restrictions or how frequently he or she needs to check in with a judge. Participants also must check in with the Bridge Center's case manager at least once a week. Final approval for release rests with the assigned judge. The Bridge Center's case manager closely monitors offenders during the course of the program and will continue to do so after they finish treatment, Rushing said.

Offenders who stray from the stringent requirements of release don't get additional leeway.

The backgrounds of the first group of participants points to the importance of connecting offenders with education and job-training opportunities as part of long-term recovery. Just one of the eight had completed high school and was gainfully employed when she began using drugs. The other seven had dropped out of school in their teens, often after becoming parents at 15 or 16.

Job training, education and other resources are notable elements of the most successful prison-diversion programs, including the "Restoration Center" in Bexar County, Texas, that is an oft-cited model for Baton Rouge and cities around the U.S.

Local officials don't have to look as far as Texas for a successful example of a program that combines treatment, education and job training. Lafayette Parish has saved upward of \$20 million by directing nonviolent inmates into treatment or community-based support programs in job training, anger management, or GED classes as they near the end of their sentences.

The timing of the inmate-release pilot is in step with statewide initiatives to rethink jails, even if it is not formally connected to those efforts. Louisiana spends \$700 million annually on corrections. It has the highest rate of incarceration in the nation, in large part because it locks up nonviolent offenders at a far higher rate than other states.

A series of justice-reform bills signed into law by Gov. John Bel Edwards last summer aims to direct less-serious offenders away from prison, including by developing better alternatives to incarceration.

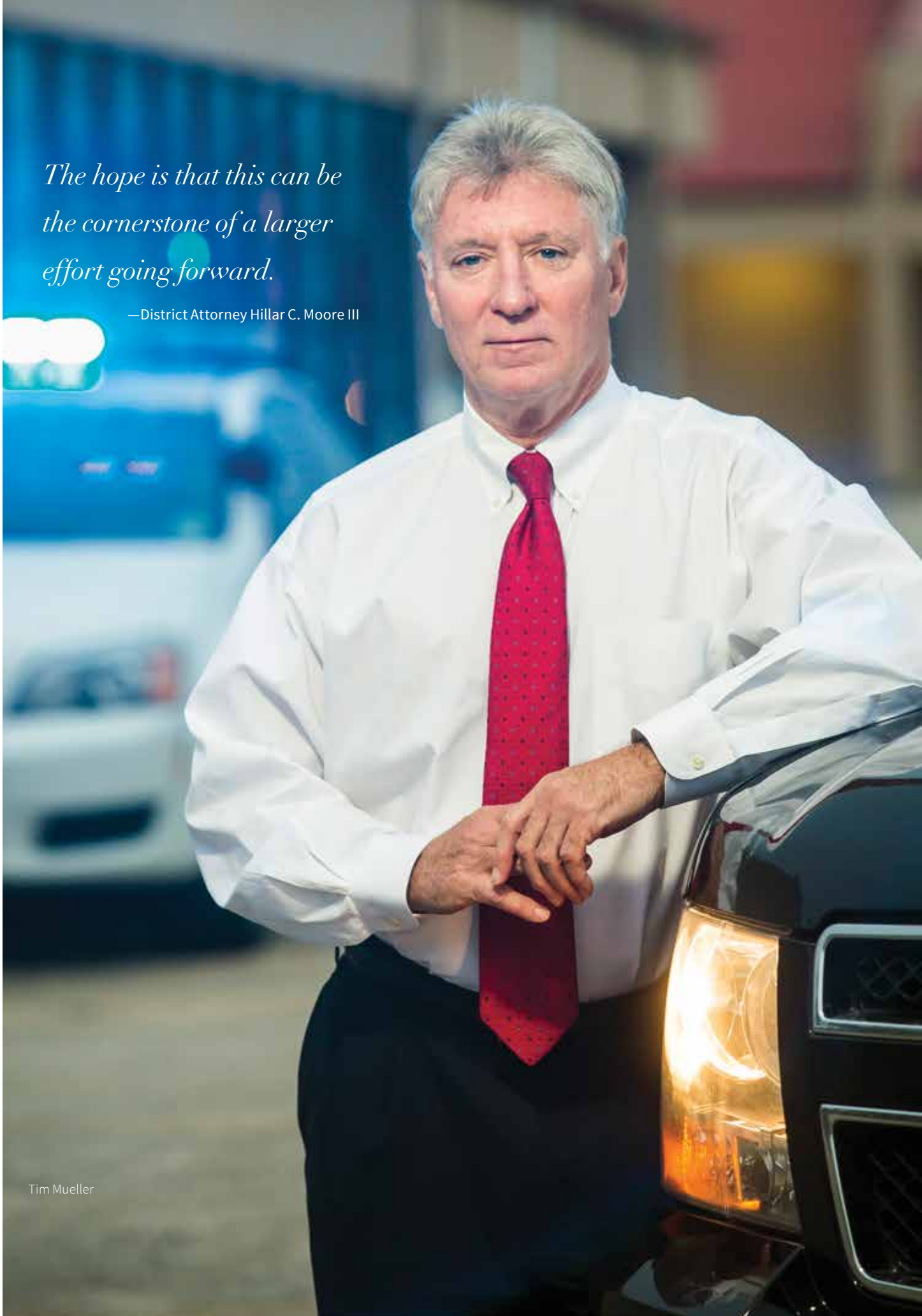
Judge Don Johnson of the 19th Judicial District points to the new program in East Baton Rouge as an example of a smarter approach to criminal justice.

"As a state, we're way behind in recognizing that a substantial portion of the criminal population exists because of mental health and substance abuse problems," Johnson said. "Until now, we've only had one way of dealing with crime, which is to incarcerate people. This gives us an alternative." •

*The hope is that this can be  
the cornerstone of a larger  
effort going forward.*

—District Attorney Hillar C. Moore III

Tim Mueller



# COVER

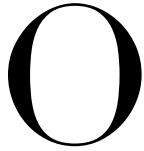


*Boy Scouts' big dream could  
draw thousands to Louisiana*

# Learning to *love the swamp*

By C.E. Richard





n a bright autumn morning, we eased our canoes into still waters near Henderson, Louisiana, and paddled a few clumsy strokes before old muscle memories took over. Soon, we were gliding easily across the glassy black surface of the swamp.

Navigating our way through a graveyard of gray cypress stumps, I felt a familiar excitement rising. No matter how much time I spend in the swamp, it always feels like a new discovery.

I tagged along with Art Hawkins, the Executive Scout overseeing the Evangeline Area Council, and Ben Pierce, the director of the Boy Scouts' newest High Adventure camp, Louisiana Swamp Base. Both men spend lots of time in the Basin, but it was clear that neither of them ever tired of it. Ben and Art were giving a brief paddling tour for a few scientists from The Water Institute of the Gulf in Baton Rouge. They wanted them to get a feel for the wild areas not far from the place where Swamp Base is being built.

Dr. Melissa M. Baustian, a coastal ecologist with the Water Institute, had moved to Louisiana from the Midwest. She seemed especially excited to be out in the Atchafalaya Swamp that morning.

"It's just an amazing wetland ecosystem," she told me. "And it provides important services to us humans. Many of them, we don't fully appreciate."

That's why Melissa and her colleagues, geologist Ryan Clark and the Institute communication director Amy Wold, accepted the Scouts' invitation to join them in crafting a robust program of education and scientific research for young people coming to Swamp Base.

Together, they are working to devise valuable "STEAM" learning experiences (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) for young people while they explore some of the 1.4 million acres that comprise the basin. They want Swamp Base to provide what Baustian calls "meaningful activities that get their hands wet and their feet muddy to really learn about the natural environment and cultural heritage that's right in their own backyard."

Active learning is a critical component of Swamp Base, which is constructing an extensive education and research center, deep in the woods, as part of its complex. When complete, the facility will be able to accommodate field trip groups of 70 students,

from K-12.

At the start of the morning, there was much talk of future scouts and students learning scientific methodologies while collecting water and soil samples or gathering big data sets for calculating seasonal water levels. But, as we paddled further out, that conversation gave way quickly to simpler expressions of wonder. "Wow! Look! Isn't that amazing?"

The Basin showed us many things remote from most people's day-to-day experiences. Bald eagle nests. Puzzling animal tracks in the mud. Odd mollusks and strange, ancient fish. Derelict houseboats and artifacts of an older way of life in the swamp, left behind by the people who once dwelt there. I grew curious about the sight of green saplings, growing incongruously from the hollow spots in decaying cypress. Seeds of a different species sprouted new life from the detritus collecting in the bowls of the long dead stumps.

*[The Atchafalaya] provides important services to us humans. Many of them, we don't fully appreciate.*

—Dr. Melissa M. Baustian

"They're button bushes," one of the scientists said. "They're native."

Less easy to identify were the big globules of gelatinous slime that clung to roots and branches just below the surface. We hypothesized about the kind of frog, or perhaps fish, that had deposited what we could only conclude were egg sacs. We collected a sample so that Melissa, a biologist, could get a closer look on shore and identify the species that laid them.

With a knife, she cut open one of the sparkling, translucent globules. Inquisitively, we all hunched around the specimen. Rather than squishy and wet, it had a surprisingly firm consistency all the way through. "Kind of like a big, clear gummy bear," one of the men remarked. Inside, however, there was no sign of eggs. Or anything else recognizable. Scientists and experienced outdoorsmen alike, we were all stumped.

"I have no idea what this stuff is," Melissa seemed delighted to concede finally, as she took photos to bring back to her lab for



The Evangeline Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America is raising \$42 million to build an education and research center at Swamp Base. Big plans on 450 acres near the town of Catahoula call for a welcome center, classrooms, dining hall, lodging and research houseboats. Open to all, Swamp Base is expected to draw more than 10,000 visitors to Louisiana each year.









The bigger Swamp Base will have cabins, piers, education facilities and research houseboats. The state of Louisiana has granted a 99-year lease on the Atchafalaya Basin for the Boy Scouts project.

more study.

“So,” I asked drily, “Do you really think kids will find anything of scientific interest out here in the swamp?”

### FROM A NOTION

Swamp Base began as an idea in 2009 as the Evangeline Area Council sought ways to celebrate the centennial of the Boys Scouts of America the following year. They’d heard about the grand plans of councils in big, metropolitan areas, and scouts here wanted to do something to distinguish themselves from the other 279 councils in America.

“We started asking ourselves, ‘What do we have here that’s special to our region?’” Ben Pierce told me. The most obvious answer was also the most overlooked: The Atchafalaya Basin Swamp.

The council organized a big one-day festival near Butte La Rose, complete with authentic local foods, Grammy-winning Cajun musicians, and an army of boy scouts with their sleeves rolled up, ready to work. In the course of a single day, they planted over 5,000 native cypress and oaks.

But one day just wasn’t enough.

“To really grow that love for a place, that understanding of it, to get people really invested in it, we needed something more than just one day out of the year,” Pierce said.

From the success of that day unspooled the far-reaching vision for a new High Adventure camping experience in Louisiana, adding Swamp Base to only four others in the U.S., including the famous Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico and Sea Base in the Florida Keys.

But no other place can deliver what Louisiana has to offer.

Swamp Base provides two treks through the Basin. In Trek One, Scouts spend five summer days paddling 61.6 miles through diverse ecosystems, including bayous twisting through the hardwood uplands in the north; dim, flooded forests of cypress; and finally the wide-open, freshwater lakes near the southern end. Along the way, they camp on remote wilderness islands, aboard houseboats, and in cabins at the 24-acre Island Outpost at Lake Fausse Pointe. Traveling in crews of eight or nine, with two adult leaders, the scouts are encouraged to catch their own food using traditional methods, including cast nets.

If Trek One is meant to test a scout's mettle, Trek Two will push him to his limits. Considered the toughest camping adventure available to scouts, it's 75 miles of paddling and four nights of primitive camping. Stopping at islands en route, the scouts sleep in jungle hammocks with only mosquito netting and a rainfly. They eat only what they bring with them and what they can catch along the way.

And, throughout it all, scouts learn about the unique cultures that inhabit the region, including Acadian, Creole, and Chitimacha Indian populations. They learn about wetlands ecology, about various species of indigenous plants and animals, water and soil science, and, perhaps most importantly, about conserving wild places.

When Swamp Base began operations in 2013, 140 scouts signed up. Within four years, that number had risen to over 1,200. Scouts have come here from across the country and as far away as Scotland and the South Pacific.

But with 4.75 million Scouts in the U.S. alone, Swamp Base is just getting started.

Thanks to a one-to-one match of state funds and private donations, the Evangeline Area Council purchased a 99-year lease on 450 acres along an ancient river delta near the town of Catahoula in St. Martin Parish. Managed like a state park, the property provides an ideal location for constructing what Swamp Base will become. Among other features, it will offer a welcome center with wildlife and cultural exhibits, a theater, and an outfitter's shop. There will be a K-12 educational center, a university research center, dormitories, and a conference center open for use by public and private groups.

Recognizing that the High Adventure camp will only be in use by Scouts during the summer months, the designers have made sure that Swamp Base will serve the needs of schoolkids, university researchers and the general public throughout the other nine months of the year. Fully operating, Swamp Base is projected to attract 18,000 youth participants annually and create 70 full- and part-time jobs.

"It started off as a scouting project," Pierce said. "But now? This is bigger than Scouts."

## GOING BIG

A bit bashfully, Ben Pierce admits to some pretty sweeping ambitions for Swamp Base. He told me that he hopes many of the youth who come to Swamp Base will go home changed.

"Some of them will grow up to be business leaders maybe, or scientists, or teachers, or lawyers and legislators," he forecast. "They'll become influencers, and if they learn to love our swamp now, maybe they'll be the ones to preserve and protect this place in the future."

Under threat, the Atchafalaya Basin certainly needs friends. But can an arduous week in the wilderness really change lives?

Ben said it begins with changing minds. He points to a word-association game that starts every trek. Before they arrive at the Basin, he asks each scout for one word to describe their impression of swamps. *Dangerous. Dirty. Disease-infested. Nasty.*

*It started off as a scouting project. But now?  
This is bigger than Scouts.*

—Ben Pierce, director of High Adventure Camp

"What they know of swamps comes from movies and television," Ben explained. "To most of them, nothing good comes out of a swamp."

After they've completed their trek, Ben asks the same question again, and their answers are very different. Scouts' responses are jubilant.

"If we've done our jobs, the words they use now are *beautiful, vast, majestic, and underestimated*," Ben smiled. His favorite response so far came from a woman in California who completed a trek and described this part of the world as "blessed."

What began as a day of tree planting has become something of a crusade for these Scouts. They're still planting trees— 53,000 so far—but they're trying to grow something even greater.

"We're the only council in the country that's still celebrating the centennial," Ben said. "What better way to celebrate the last hundred years of Scouting than by making a dedication to the next hundred?" •

Executive Director of the Evangeline Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America, Art Hawkins, left, and Louisiana Swamp Base Executive Director, Ben Pierce.



Tim Mueller





# The new warehouse district

*Old buildings are being  
transformed in Mid City*

By Maggie Heyn Richardson | Photos by Tim Mueller

**E**very so often, business owner David Applegate steps out onto the balcony of his building at 14th and Government streets to look at the world below. Thousands of cars speed by daily, trekking into downtown from parts east, and back again at the end of the work day. Trains rumble down the Kansas City Southern railroad line that runs

alongside the property.

Neighborhood residents, many of whom Applegate knows by name, pass through the area on foot. And these days, construction trucks plied with fresh materials head for dormant structures nearby whose transformation is underway.

This corridor, which once pulsed as Baton Rouge's warehouse district, has been buzzing with action lately, as investors who see its untapped potential and advantageous location are starting to pull the trigger on new projects. Sandwiched between downtown and Mid City, 14th Street and its environs are fast becoming an urban lab where the promise of new businesses and housing could build community and opportunity among the area's diverse residents.

Anthony Kimble is an investor in Weinstein Nelson Development's transformation of the former Entergy buildings in a partnership with the EBR Redevelopment Authority, which was created in a collaboration between local government and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

Applegate, a longtime neighborhood property owner, operates a marine and industrial materials business at 1440 Government, an expansive space that once served as a railroad hotel. He says he'll soon sell the building as he downsizes and moves his business to another location down the street.

"I probably won't recognize the area in a few years," he says.

The biggest project underway is the \$20 million transformation of the former Entergy substation across the street led by architect Dyke Nelson and developer David Weinstein. Named the Electric Depot, the mixed-use development's first phase includes 16 one-bedroom apartments, an entertainment venue called Red Stick Social, which features a bowling alley, live music stage and bar, a yoga studio and a healthy foods restaurant.

A portion of the apartments will be set aside as work-force housing, affordable options for working people with restricted incomes.

"The first phase will be completed by the end of 2018," says Nelson. "You'll be able to celebrate New Year's Eve there."

Entergy donated the 6-acre complex to the East Baton Rouge Parish Redevelopment Authority in 2013 after it sat dormant for years. Little was noticeable about the vast site, save broken windows and barbed wire. The project is widely seen as an innovative approach to urban blight. It's also viewed as a catalyst for the area, says Anthony Kimble, an investor on the project and neighborhood property owner.

"We realized that if anything was going to start moving this neighborhood forward it was this," says Kimble. "It's one of the biggest parcels of land around, and it definitely needed to happen first to show the neighborhood's potential and attract interest. Nothing like this has really been done in Baton Rouge."

The second phase of the project includes 120 more apartments, outdoor plaza space and plenty of parking, Nelson says.

Nelson says the objective of the project has been to maintain the architectural integrity of the building and the character of the neighborhood. The opportunity to rent in the area will appeal to existing area residents as well as those eager to live in downtown and Mid City, which both lack large residential developments.

Nelson has long appreciated the neighborhood's potential. In 2012, he moved his architectural firm, DNA Workshop, to a 1919 building once used for wine bottling. It's part of a strip of buildings and warehouses that run along 14th Street between

Government Street and North Boulevard.

"I just really liked the texture of the area," says Nelson. "And with so much already going on in downtown and Mid City, it was a place full of opportunity that really hadn't been discovered."

Nelson, along with partners Weinstein and DNA Workshop architect Abe Kinney, are also transforming a 30,000-square foot warehouse across the street into a new commercial-retail space. Tenants include a commissary kitchen for a local restaurant group, a keg storage facility, a graphic design firm and event space with exposed beams and an edgy, warehouse feel.

"It's not typical of what you see in Baton Rouge for events," says Nelson. "With a building with this kind of character, the only thing you really have to do to is not screw it up."

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, other changes are afoot. In 2017, French Truck Coffee was one of several new businesses to open on Government Street in Mid City in the former Southern Camera building. Developer Matthew Shirley, a Baton Rouge native, also intends to purchase the building next door once occupied by Avos Food Mart.

"Given the trajectory of the area, it made sense to buy here," says Shirley, a commercial real estate broker with Saurage Rotenberg. "I'm a local guy, and it's been great to see the changes along Government Street."

In September 2017, the historic Lincoln Hotel at Government Street and Eddie Robinson sold to Solomon Carter, who has hinted at plans to transform it into a boutique hotel—the first of its kind in the area.

"The stars are finally starting to align for the area," says Kimble, who owns a warehouse across the street from the hotel.

Changes to make Government Street more pedestrian friendly are also underway this year. The new road diet converts the four-lane thoroughfare to three lanes with a dedicated turn lane in the center and new space captured on the peripheries for pedestrian and bike lanes.

Nelson says the road diet is badly needed to make Government Street safer for all who use it.

"I hear people say, 'Why do we want to do this? No one walks in Baton Rouge,' says Nelson. "I see people walking all the time in the neighborhood." •

## *The stars are finally starting to align for the area.*

— Anthony Kimble, business owner and investor

Construction on the first phase of Electric Depot, a mixed-use conversion of former Entergy buildings on Government Street, will be completed in December. New apartments will be blended with restaurants, bowling, music venue and shops.



NORTHSHO



TENETS



A. Kadonji

10



RE

The Northshore Community Foundation is an affiliate of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. NCF operates independently with its own board.

# Ten good years

*Community foundation shapes parishes on the Northshore of Lake Ponchartrain*

By Sara Bongiorno

A straightforward mission shapes the work of the Northshore Community Foundation: Make life better in four parishes north of Lake Ponchartrain. To that end, the foundation supports food banks and middle-school robotics teams. It funds classroom science projects, helps homeless families, breathes life into neglected parks and neighborhoods, supports and celebrates veterans and fights Parkinson's disease.

It invests in young people across the parishes it serves—St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, St. Helena and Washington—through scholarships, workforce training and a program to train teen entrepreneurs.

The foundation works close to the ground by planting school gardens and in the intangible future by crafting community plans to guide what the region will look like in years ahead.

It has granted \$15 million to local charities since its founding in 2007.

“The work is diverse, but the focus is not,” said Susan Bonnett Bourgeois, president and CEO.

The foundation's 10-year anniversary in 2017 marked an anniversary of sorts for the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, too.

The idea of a foundation to serve the Northshore emerged from the Baton Rouge Area Foundation's post-Hurricane

Katrina search for recovery partners across the region. North of Lake Pontchartrain, it found a region growing in population and influence but with little in the way of local philanthropic organizations and regional expertise.

“From the standpoint of philanthropy, there was a hole there,” recalls John Davies, CEO and president of Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

The decision to move forward was informed by what Davies describes as “a thundering yes” from regional officials canvassed about the idea. The Foundation was launched with financial and staff support from Baton Rouge, but was intentionally independent; the board was comprised of leaders from the four parishes it was meant to serve.

The Northshore Community Foundation works in three areas: helping donors maximize the impact of their giving, supporting nonprofits and driving civic leadership, especially community-planning initiatives.

Creative, flexible solutions are a specialty. The Foundation runs college scholarship programs funded through the sale of a community swimming pool, a complex transaction that it helped to arrange. It partnered with Blue Runner Foods to deliver one million meals of red beans and rice to Texas food banks to feed victims of last year's Hurricane Harvey.

It knows how to move fast. The Foundation had a relief fund up and running two days after historic floods swept across the

Northshore in 2016.

It serves a region in flux. Years of surging population growth and aggressive development are challenges in St. Tammany and Tangipahoa, while rural Washington and St. Helena are losing residents. The region includes the richest parish in Louisiana—St. Tammany—and among the poorest.

A lack of awareness of problems like poverty and homelessness adds to the complexity of the Foundation's work. The lack of adequate shelter and other Northshore services for its homeless population, for instance, reflects poor understanding about the local need for such resources, Bonnett Bourgeois notes.

*That's one of the most valuable things that we as a community foundation can do—listen to what's needed, understand what resources are there and then connect the dots.*

—Susan Bonnett Bourgeois

The Foundation helps to bridge the gap in services and awareness. It partnered with local governments and churches to develop a Northshore affiliate of Family Home Promise, a national model to provide shelter to homeless families.

"The sheer reality of Louisiana demographics holds true here too, but both inside and outside the region many people don't understand that," Bonnett Bourgeois said.

Another challenge: getting donors who make large charitable gifts to speak publicly about their giving. Such reticence is a missed opportunity for donors to share their motivations in giving—discussions that Bonnett Bourgeois says would encourage still more giving.

"Significant gifts go uncelebrated," she says. "The region doesn't realize the giving capacity it has because there's little talk about that giving."

Two initiatives signal the Foundation's reach on the Northshore. Both are poised for expansion.

The Foundation's commitment to building the capacity of local nonprofits is captured in its newly opened Northshare "co-working" campus in downtown Covington. The 7,000-square-foot building provides a functional and low-cost place for local groups to connect, collaborate and share ideas. It is a working

space designed for efficiency, with top-notch Wi-Fi, back-office equipment and a 35-person conference room for meetings, training and workshops. There is an inviting outdoor space in the form of what the foundation describes as "the mother of all porches," a wrap-around structure with views and shady places to gather.

The space is sleek and airy—and buzzes with activity. About 400 people visit the North Columbia Street building each month. If they have questions for the foundation, they don't need to look far: Its headquarters are there, too.

There's meaning in Northshare's location, too. The building, flanked by the parish courthouse and the Northshore Food Bank, stretches along a block that connects Covington's tony downtown to the disadvantaged West 30s neighborhood that the Foundation is working to revive.

"It is a bridge, literally and figuratively, between the affluent and lower-income parts of Covington," Bonnett Bourgeois says.

That bridge soon will grow more prominent as the foundation plans to double the building's size over the next couple of years

for greater community impact.

What Bonnett Bourgeois calls the organization's "visioning" process is another core focus. The effort involves collaborating with civic leaders and residents across the region to craft a cohesive and maximally effective approach to growth and economic development.

The work is having tangible results. St. Tammany Parish begins 2018 with a single economic-development organization, down from three. A "North of Your Expectations" regional branding effort will grow in focus this year as the region more clearly positions itself as a distinct element of a Baton Rouge-New Orleans-Northshore "super triangle" of economic activity in the state.

In the meantime, Bonnett Bourgeois and her team will continue doing what they do each day: identifying challenges in the community and working with donors, nonprofits and others to find impactful solutions.

Says Bonnett Bourgeois: "That's one of the most valuable things that we as a community foundation can do—listen to what's needed, understand what resources are there and then connect the dots." •



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*Puerto Rico  
Se Levanta*

A photo essay by Lori Waselchuk




Armancio "Sijo" Acosta Rivera's only family photo was damaged during Hurricane Maria, which struck Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017.



**¡CAÑO!**

Esta Tierra se Respe

¡Aquí estamos de



Community organizer Joe Caraballo Diaz on his street in the Marina Barrio Obrero neighborhood in San Juan. Two months after Hurricane Maria, only a few people in the eight communities he serves had power.

I could see it from the sky above, Puerto Rico. The island was no longer a rolling blanket of lowland and highland forests. A rare Category 5 hurricane, Maria, had ripped nearly every leaf from every kapok, tree fern, palm and courbaril. But when I got on the ground, underneath the brown tangles of trunks and branches, I spotted bright new shoots of green.

I crisscrossed the island over five days, photographing hurricane relief carried out by people, communities and nongovernmental organizations.

In the small town of Punta Santiago, every home and business sustained damage. Houses that did stand up to 155 mile-per-hour winds were soaked in up to five feet of brackish water. But the hurricane didn't end just because the rain and wind had moved on. Floodwaters had contaminated most of the food and stored water.

Cut off from rescue and help, the 5,000 residents of Punta Santiago knew what they had to do. They gathered salvageable food, collected water and medicines, and shared what they had collected with their neighbors in greatest need. For 10 days, they cooked communal meals with help from a nonprofit named Programa de Educación Comunal de Entrega y Servicio (PECES), which for two decades has provided programs in three core areas: education, prevention services for at-risk populations, and entrepreneurship and development training. The nonprofit reopened its campus as soon as it cleared debris from its front gate, offering shelter and whatever supplies had been spared by the storm.

Twelve days after the storm, help came to them from the skies. The Center for a New Economy, with partner Espacios Abiertos, had sent helicopters to drop food and supplies. A think tank with deep connections to stateside nonprofits and Puerto Ricans everywhere, CNE had quickly established the Puerto Rico Recovery Fund. Because of its reputation, CNE raised more than a million dollars in the week after the storm. They not only provided food and relief items, but also developed a multitiered distribution network of community-focused organizations. When the communities were unreachable by truck, CNE found helicopters to fly relief to them.

Schools, community centers and nongovernmental organizations quickly activated volunteers and staff to save lives in the days after the storm. The immediate emergency has passed, but many Puerto Ricans now realize how vulnerable they are. As Juan Jose Gonzalez Colón in Salinas considered the previous two months of living with his family in one small leaky room without electricity and water, he said: "We never knew how poor we were until Maria." •

—Lori Waselchuk



Above, Rebecca Rodrigues shows Don Angelino a solar lamp during a visit to the centenarian's home. Rodrigues is a volunteer at Casa Pueblo, a community self-reliance project that has promoted solar energy and has distributed more than 6,000 solar lamps.

Dr. Lourdes Marrero, left, with Mission de Haiti Se Pone de Pie, listens to Natalia Santos Rivera's lungs in her home in La Verde.





Elvis Jael Figueroa plays inside his grandmother's home in Punta Santiago. Stagnant water keeps him confined to the house and its front porch.



Above, Erik Ramos Pomales teaches Introductory algebra on the outdoor basketball court at a school in Punta Santiago.

Two months after the storm, Juan Jose Gonzalez Colón, right, had left his house in disarray, which would help him make a case for FEMA support. Soon after, an impatient Colon started to repair his roof.









## EDITOR'S NOTE:

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation dispatched Lori Waselchuk to photograph the slow recovery of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. The Foundation has a special fondness for Lori Waselchuck and Puerto Rico.

We printed Lori's provocative photos of Hurricane Katrina and underwrote her return to shoot the recovery of New Orleans a few years later. The Foundation also supported her photography of Angola inmates caring for their dying friends at the Louisiana State Prison. Some of those photos are now on display at the new African American Museum in Washington, D.C. Lori was a photographer for *The Advocate* in Baton Rouge. She lives with her family in Philadelphia, where she coordinates special projects at the Philadelphia Photo Arts Center.

Puerto Rico, meanwhile, was a vacation place for Wilbur Marvin, who left his real estate business to the Wilbur Marvin Foundation, a supporting nonprofit of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. Since then, a share of profits from the Marvin Foundation have been granted to nonprofits in Puerto Rico that are attempting to, among other things, reform education, government and the economy. After Hurricane Maria, we assisted a major Puerto Rico partner, the Center for a New Economy, in raising funds for relief and recovery. In November, Lori went to the island and traveled with CNE to tell a story of what was happening. The work here first appeared in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* in November.

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# Light fantastic

*LSU algae researcher pursues  
photosynthesis advance to  
boost food production*

By Sara Bongiorno | Photos by Tim Mueller





# SPARK



**T**he Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supports research by impatient optimists—innovators working on solutions to the world’s biggest challenges, including poverty, climate change and infectious killers like Ebola.

Louisiana State University biology professor and algae expert Jim Moroney is part of a group of innovators taking aim at another Gates Foundation target: world hunger.

Moroney’s work in a laboratory inside the university’s Life Sciences Building is funded through a \$45 million Gates Foundation initiative to improve photosynthesis in food crops. The goal of Realizing Increased Photosynthetic Efficiency, or RIPE, is increasing yields of rice, soybeans and other crops in the world’s poorest regions by making them better at converting sunlight to food energy.

could make food crops more resilient to hotter temperatures and drought tied to climate change.

Moroney’s work with the project dates to 2011, when he was one of 13 scientists invited to a Gates Foundation meeting in Seattle to discuss how photosynthesis could contribute to agricultural production.

His long-time focus on algae might not seem like a logical fit for a research collaboration centered on food crops. It turns out a protein in algae makes the watery plants highly effective at pulling carbon out of the atmosphere—and Moroney helped identify the protein.

Some \$700,000 in RIPE funds will support Moroney’s work to tweak the genetic sequence of rice and other crops to make them more efficient in delivering CO<sub>2</sub> to chloroplasts, the specialized compartments in plants where photosynthesis takes place.

In the lab, Moroney can already inject the photosynthesis

*For the past 50 years, food production has stayed ahead of population demand. Now that gap is narrowing.*

—Jim Moroney

RIPE’s work is urgent. Twentieth-century gains in food production have stalled. Worldwide stockpiles of wheat hit a 30-year low in 2008.

The U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization says global production of staple crops must rise by at least 70% to keep pace with a global population that will reach 9.6 billion by 2050. “For the past 50 years, food production has stayed ahead of population (demand),” Moroney explains. “Now that gap is narrowing.”

Led by the University of Illinois, RIPE researchers at universities in the U.S., China, England, Australia and elsewhere hope to boost yields by 50% or more over the next three decades. RIPE teams also will look at how changes in photosynthesis

gene from algae into the genetic sequence of the crop plant, but getting the plant to then reproduce the protein for itself is a work in progress, he says. “We’re not there yet, but that’s the goal,” Moroney adds.

Applying his work to a tangible challenge is gratifying to Moroney, whose focus in the past has been basic research. “This is about finding a way to make crops better at photosynthesis so people have enough to eat,” he says.

RIPE’s early efforts have largely focused on tobacco, which is easier to genetically modify than other crops. The plan is to transfer what is learned with tobacco to crop plants.

The strategy is productive: a team of RIPE scientists in 2016



LSU biology professor Jim Moroney studies algae photosynthesis in his laboratory. His goal is to increase yields of rice, soybeans and other crops by making them better at converting sunlight to food energy.

published an article in the journal *Science* that showed they had increased the yield of tobacco plants 20% by speeding up the plants' responses to changes in sunlight. The gain in productivity compares to standard gains in yield of 1% or less.

RIPE researchers also have created a simulation of the 170-step process of photosynthesis, a process that is similar across many plant species. They have identified seven potential pathways to improve photosynthesis. Computer models will help RIPE determine which approach is most likely to succeed in increasing crop yields.

Their progress prompted a recent second investment by the Gates Foundation, which funneled \$25 million into RIPE in 2012. In late 2017, it provided an additional \$45 million to RIPE and expanded its commitment through a partnership with the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research and the U.K. Department for International Development, the British equivalent of USAID.

The Microsoft founder appears to take a personal interest in the role of photosynthesis in solutions to the globe's biggest problems. In a May 2017 blog posting, Bill Gates recounted his visit to a Caltech professor looking to use photosynthesis in

place of fossil fuels.

Altering the genetic make-up of food crops isn't free of controversy—a point brought up by Moroney and other scientists during their initial meeting with the Gates Foundation six years ago. Critics of GMOs say the health impacts of putting a gene from one organism into another present unknown danger. It's worth noting that a 400-page report published by the National Academy of Sciences in 2016 concluded genetically modified organisms are safe for people and the environment.

Moroney recalls: "We asked them, 'Do you really want to do this?' Their answer was yes, because they want to have options when it comes to feeding the world."

Moroney offers a nuanced view of GMOs. Key U.S. food crops, such as corn, are mostly genetically modified at this point. Crop species that have been made more pest resistant reduce the need for chemical pesticides. Moreover, the changes he is pursuing in his lab are "tweaks" to the plants' genetic make-up, not wholesale changes.

There is also the argument of what's at stake.

"If you can help people get enough to eat, that's a pretty good argument in favor," Moroney says. •

# SPARK BRIEFS



## NETHERLANDS MODEL

A house near Baton Rouge has flooded 40 times. Owners have claimed \$428,379 from the federal flood insurance program even though the home is worth \$56,000. That's one of many examples—and reasons—the national flood safety net is broken. Conversations have begun on how to overhaul a system that subsidizes, and therefore encourages, building homes along coasts that are vulnerable to flooding from rising seas and more intense storms. Most countries have flood insurance but one does not. In the Netherlands, homeowners accept the full risk of living in flood-prone areas, and the government builds robust protection infrastructure. And developers there are experimenting with floating homes, above.



## LASER VISION

Tech companies and auto manufacturers are in an unseen sprint. They are trying to improve LIDAR, the main sensor that spins on top of cars, using lasers to paint a digital image of the surroundings for autonomous vehicles. Velodyne took the lead in November when it announced a LIDAR that packs more lasers into a space that is one-fifth the size. It can scan up to 300 meters, far enough to allow safe motoring at highway speeds. Several other companies are racing to build cheaper and better LIDARS.

## MATH FOR KIDS

Pittsburgh leaders have written a math formula that flags kids in danger of child abuse. Cases of potential abuse are reviewed by caseworkers, but a computer also searches across databases to draw its own conclusion. Often, the computer is better at spotting child abuse because it can sift and make sense of larger amounts of data. The algorithm was created with input from Pittsburgh residents and experts to dispel fear and produce the best outcome.

## BIKER'S DREAM

BMW has dreamed up an enclosed biking superhighway. It would connect destinations, such as traffic hubs or two employment centers. The enclosed road for bikes would be elevated, thereby reducing traffic congestion. Bikers would travel in controlled environments, safe from aggressive drivers and bad weather.



## TIGERS IN TOP 10

An LSU software development team is among 10 competing for the IBM Watson AI XPrize. The competition started with nearly 150 teams. They were winnowed to 59 earlier this year and 10 finalists in December. Named Deep Drug, the Baton Rouge team is comprised of LSU faculty Supratik Mukhopadhyay, Michael Brylinski, Robert DiBiano and Patrick McGrew. They are writing software that learns from the successes and failures of clinical trials to shorten the time it takes to create new drugs. In 2020, the chosen winner receives \$3 million while others share \$2 million.

**GOOGLEVILLE, EST. 2019** Google's sister company is building a smart city. Sidewalk Labs, which has parent Alphabet in common with Google, won a contest to redevelop industrial property in Toronto. Called Quayside, the 12-acre undertaking could scale to 800 acres. Google will relocate its Toronto offices to Quayside to kickstart the project. Step 1 is community engagement. Sidewalk—which marries urban planning and technology—already has ideas of its own: self-driving cars, point-to-point transit systems, the most current materials to reduce energy use, an underground trash collection system, community hubs with diverse services, and digital infrastructure to continually improve the undertaking.



# CODA



## **BIGGER RECTANGLE**

Town Square will become a larger rectangle. At a cost of \$2 million, the second phase of Town Square will begin construction in spring and be completed before the end of the year. Included in the upgrades are a plaza at Fourth Street and North Boulevard, a promenade under the oak trees between Fourth and Fifth streets, pedestrian improvements on St. Phillip Street and new pavements and plantings down to the riverfront. The Town Square has become the gathering place for festivals, celebrations, road races.



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