

# CURRENTS

*fourth quarter twenty-nineteen . baton rouge area foundation*

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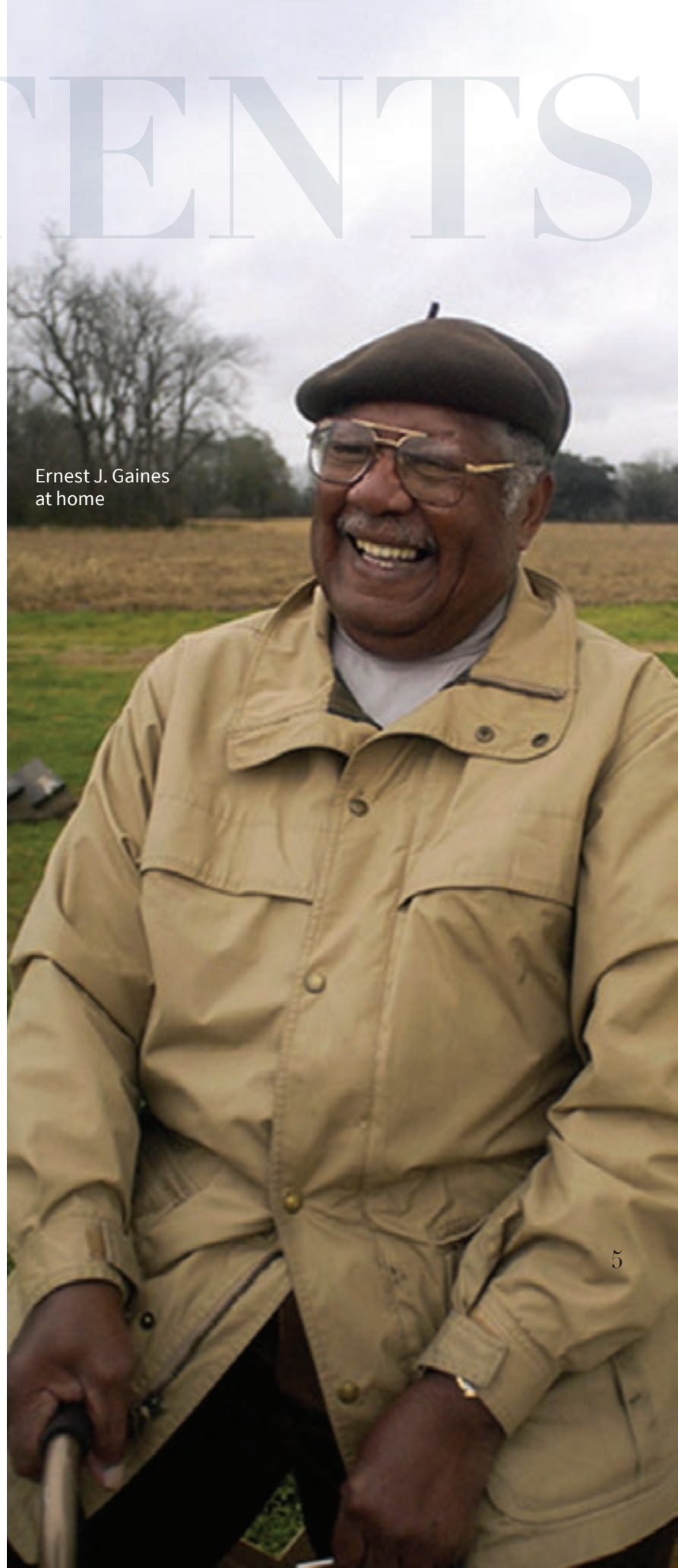
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VOLUME THIRTEEN | NUMBER FOUR

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*Baton Rouge  
Area Foundation*

100 North Street, Suite 900  
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Ernest J. Gaines  
at home

# LETTER



**W**e all appreciate a good story.

The growth of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation is more than just a good story, though. It's a story about goodness.

Back in the early 1960s, John Barton and his wife,

Scott, traveled to Spartanburg, South Carolina, to spend some vacation time with their friends, the Montgomerys. Mr. Walter Scott Montgomery was a third-generation owner of a textile mill. Much had been given to him, and he felt compelled to give back in return.

Montgomery recruited seven key business leaders to help create and seed the Spartanburg Community Foundation in 1943. By the time the Bartons visited him in the early 1960s, the foundation had already brought about much good for Spartanburg.

The Bartons hopped into Montgomery's car for a tour of the city. Spartanburg offers some lovely sightseeing, but the town's landmarks were not what left the most lasting impression on the Bartons. The town had a facility that served 1,500 children with mental and physical disabilities. The city had a new public swimming pool, a first-rate regional museum, and a large tract of land where, soon, discounted houses would be built for veterans. Spartanburg had a summer recreation program for children with disabilities, generous college scholarship programs, and research surveys designed to identify strengths and weaknesses in the region. All of these good things were created for the people of Spartanburg by the community foundation that Montgomery and his seven business leaders had established.

Some of you may have heard what happened next. Mrs. Barton, inspired by the story she'd heard in Spartanburg,

*John Noland, whose father led the Episcopal Church in Louisiana, says many feel a happy obligation to share with others the blessings they have received.*

returned home determined to begin a new narrative in her own hometown. She asked her husband John, a successful businessman, to open a community foundation to bring the kind of good she'd seen in South Carolina.

John Barton enlisted 11 friends to form the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. Their first project was the purchase of a \$600,000 piece of land outside of town; their aim was to lure the Gulf South Research Institute to the area, along with plenty of new high-tech jobs. At the end of each year, Mr. Barton collected money from each of the other 11 businessmen to pay interest on the loan.

A few years later, Helen Barnes left her trust to the Foundation, providing the seed capital needed for the bigger and better things soon to come in the nonprofit's unfolding story. In 1988, Foundation chairman John Noland hired John G. Davies as the first executive director. Over a span of 35 years, the Foundation grew from \$5 million to more than \$550 million in assets. But assets on paper are only a part of the story.

In those years, the Foundation helped to resurrect the city's downtown. It led the way in resolving the decades-old federal desegregation suit, in establishing the Bluebonnet Swamp preserve, and in providing initial operating funds for Pennington Biomedical Research Center. The Foundation started redevelopment groups working to reclaim parts of Baton

## 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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Rouge lost to disinvestment, and began building the burgeoning Water Campus to be a top-tier research park, kick-starting development in a big stretch of the city's riverfront in the process.

The reason for the success: generous people. Walter Montgomery inspired Scott and John Barton. Barton recruited friends to contribute to the cause of a new community foundation. Helen Barnes left us her trust. Wilbur Marvin bequeathed his entire real estate company. Then came the long march of many, many more big-hearted people. Together, they established City Year, invested in public art as well as the city's Arts Block, paid to build the planetarium, and provided services to the mentally ill and addicted as well as children with developmental disabilities. They supported New Schools for Baton Rouge and health care for children. They funded Knock Knock Children's Museum and paid for the funerals of first responders killed while protecting us. Because of them, we have distributed more than \$500 million in grants.

Why are they so generous? John Noland, whose father led the Episcopal Church in Louisiana, says many feel a happy obligation to share with others the blessings they have received. Others are gratified to witness the betterment of their hometown, knowing that they have contributed to improvements that will continue after they are gone.

So much good, brought about by so many good people over the years, through the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

Sincerely,



William E. Balhoff,  
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 55 years, our donors have granted more than \$500 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 and a bike sharing system that launched in the summer.

#### 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



## WATER CAMPUS PROGRESSES

A cybersecurity center is joining Stantec and The Lemoine Company as a tenant in 1200 Brickyard Lane, a 100,000-square foot building on the Water Campus. The Louisiana National Guard leased 11,000 square feet in the building for the Louisiana Cyber Coordination Center, or LC3. Partners in the cyber center are LSU's Stephenson Technologies Corp. and Radiance Technologies.

The LC3 facility will support cyber-related missions at major military installations in Louisiana, such as Fort Polk's Joint Readiness Training Center and Barksdale Air Force Base's Global Strike Command. Once fully operational, the Water Campus site will play a key role in responding to civilian cyberattacks upon schools and government institutions, as well as private workplaces.

Construction has begun on 200 Water Street, a building that will have 20 lofts, and the Campus' Main Square Park. The park and apartments will be ready in the third quarter of 2020.

Ultimately, the Campus will have up to 1.6 million square feet of public, private and commercial space dedicated to collaborative coastal science, applied research and aligned commercial development.

Baton Rouge Area Foundation and Commercial Properties Realty Trust are building the Water Campus on the Mississippi River near the bridge. On the Campus are Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, LSU Center for River Studies and the Water Institute of the Gulf in the Center for Coastal & Deltaic Solutions. More than \$107 million in public and private capital has been invested to build the campus so far.

# GOOD THINGS

## HERE COMES THE SUN

Eagle Solar Group is building a 50-megawatt solar power plant on 560 acres near Port Allen. Entergy has a contract to buy power from the plant for 20 years, saving ratepayers \$29 million during that time. Entergy estimates the solar plant will offset emissions equaling 19,000 cars annually. Starting next year, the plant will supply enough energy to power about 30,000 homes, or three times the housing units in West Baton Rouge Parish.





## NEW PLACE FOR LEARNING

Collegiate Baton Rouge started the school year in its permanent home on Lobdell Avenue, near the intersection of Florida Boulevard. The \$11 million school has 28 classrooms in 45,000 square feet of space. Land for the school was donated by the Wilbur Marvin Foundation, a supporting organization of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. Collegiate has 450 students and expects to grow to 600 next year.



## SCHOOL CHOICE

Enrollment has nearly doubled in the second year at the public career high school at Ardendale. The East Baton Rouge Parish Career and Technical Education Center had about 200 students when classes commenced in August, an increase from 112 last school year. In the half-days they spend at the school, students learn trades that match jobs in demand. They can get good-paying work after graduating or continue to college. At the current growth rate, the school will need more space in less than four years.

The Foundation and EBR school system worked together for more than a decade to open the career high school, which is located in Ardendale, a mixed-use development started as a Foundation project and now being developed by Build Baton Rouge. The Baton Rouge Community College's McKay Automotive Technology Center is located next to the school. Ardendale is on 200 acres between Lobdell Avenue and North Ardenwood. (See cover story).

# CIVIC PROJECTS



## **BATON ROUGE HEALTH DISTRICT**

The street grid is being healed. Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome and leaders of the Baton Rouge Health District celebrated the opening of Constantin Avenue, a road that was recommended in the master plan for the parish. Constantin links Essen Lane to the recently-opened OLOL Children's Hospital. Within 24 months, it will be extended to Bluebonnet and eventually link to the future Midway, which will run to Perkins Road.

Gridded streets provide more options for reaching the same destination, reducing traffic. Bike paths and sidewalks will be fitted into the Health District as well. Funding for roads in the Health District is included in the \$1.2 billion parish roads plan.

The Health District was created by the Foundation and health care providers to improve care for all, foster sustainable economic development and create a unique and healthy environment in the Essen-Bluebonnet corridor.



# *Giving* LESSON

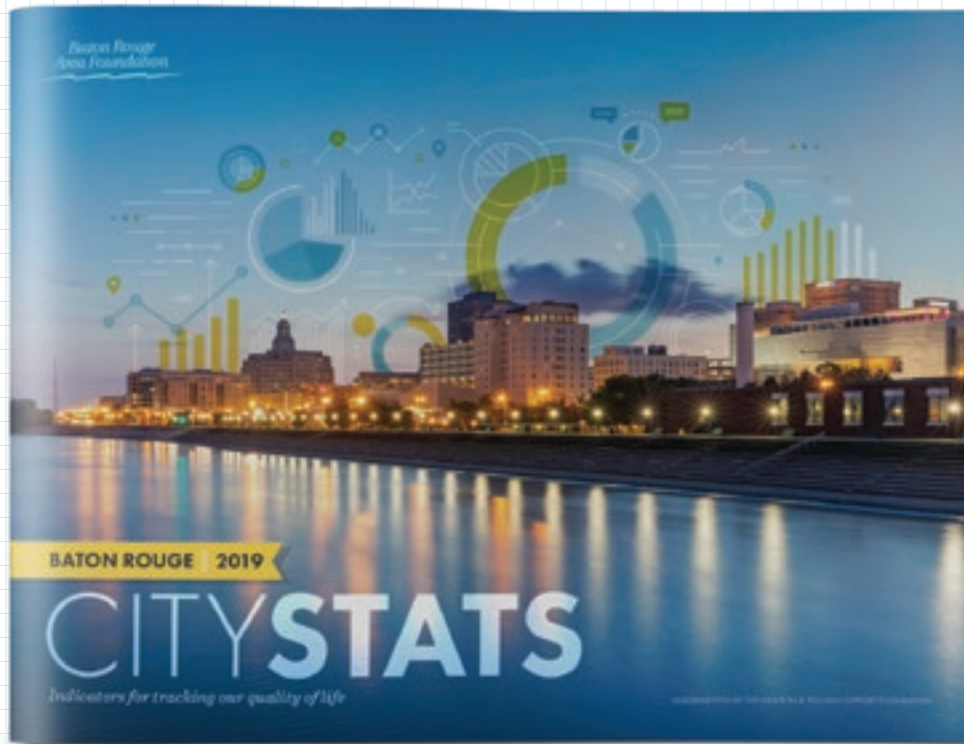
The nation is watching Baton Rouge, where New Schools is recruiting and supporting the best charter schools. Philanthropists nationwide are investing in New Schools. They believe successes here could offer lessons for transforming schools across the nation.

Donors of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation were with New Schools from the beginning. They provided startup funding to give schoolchildren the opportunities they deserve.

If you want to pursue a cause or two you care about, you can do so by opening a donor advised fund at the Foundation. Our Elizabeth Hutchison at (225) 387-6126 and [ehutchison@braf.org](mailto:ehutchison@braf.org) is available to guide you.

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*Baton Rouge  
Area Foundation*



## CITYSTATS REPORT

# EBR progress too slow, support for justice reform

Parents in East Baton Rouge want their children to leave the parish when they grow up, according to a survey for the Foundation's CityStats report. Only 8% want their children to stay, which is opposite of conventional belief in Baton Rouge. More than 90% said that more young people would remain in the parish if there were more job opportunities for them.

Each year, the CityStats report offers new insights into what residents in the parish believe. This year, we learn they are for banning single-use plastic bags and that global warming is an important issue for them, with a strong majority wanting government to do more to curb greenhouse emissions.

The Foundation uses the data to guide our civic projects,

which are approved and overseen by a diverse committee of local residents and board members. CityStats reveals where the parish has been, how far it has come and where it needs to go. It includes indicators that provide insight into the EBR economy, infrastructure, education, arts, environment, public safety and more.

The full report was mailed to fund donors, our members and elected officials. We offer highlights here, but you can download the entire report at [BRAf.org](http://BRAf.org) under the news tab.

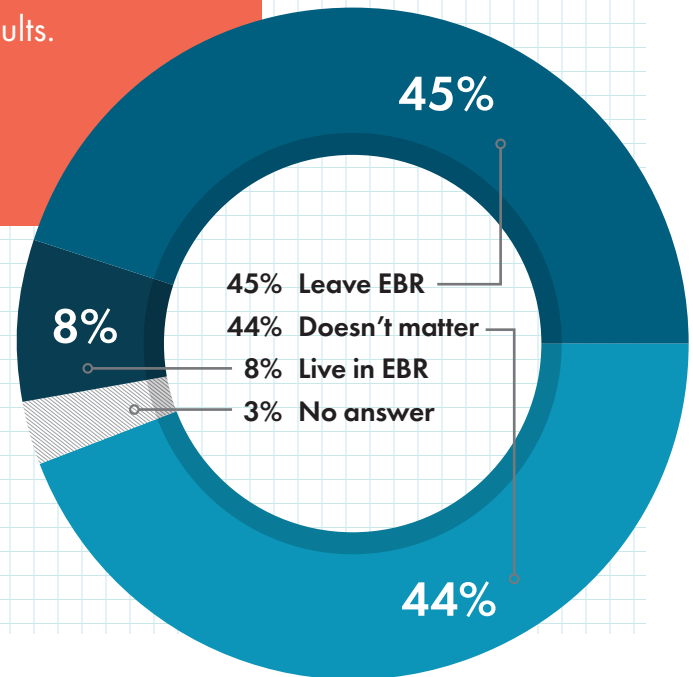
The report is underwritten by the Newton B. Thomas Support Foundation, a supporting nonprofit of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

# LEAVING BATON ROUGE



A plurality of parents **want their children to leave** East Baton Rouge Parish when they are adults. Less than 10% want them to live in EBR.

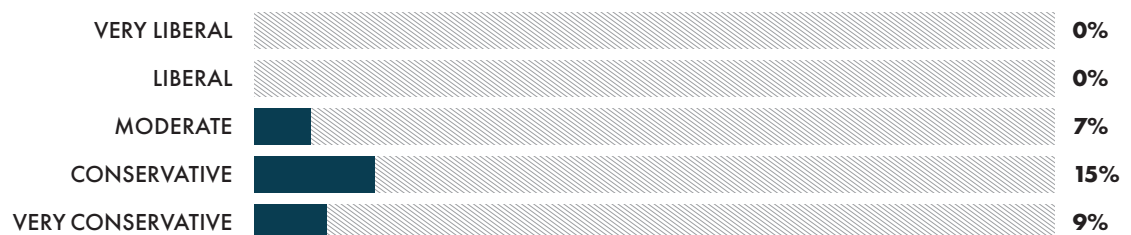
**Q.** Thinking about when the children in your household grow into adults, do you prefer that they continue to live in East Baton Rouge Parish when they are adults, that they move somewhere else to live as adults, or does it not matter much to you either way?  
*Note: this question was only asked of people who had children.*



## Largest demographics saying their kids should leave



## Percentage who want their children to remain in EBR as adults



# CIVIC PROJECTS

## MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

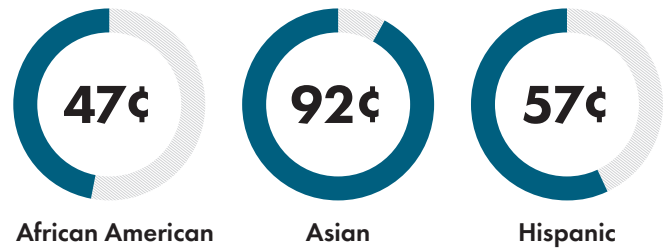
# \$51,436

EBR MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN 2017

		GROWTH OVER 10 YEARS
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$51,436</b>	<b>10.1%</b>
White	\$75,695	30.0%
African American	\$35,828	10.2%
Asian	\$69,875	31%
Hispanic	\$43,477	25%

### Income inequality

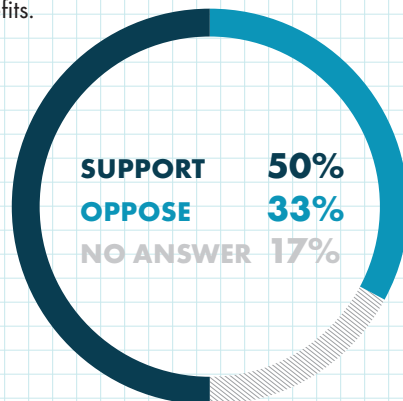
For every dollar earned by a white household in East Baton Rouge Parish:



## ITEP

Louisiana's Industrial Tax Exemption Program, where a state board grants local property tax breaks as a financial incentive, has been a hot issue, with proponents saying jobs are created and opponents saying that some of the breaks don't produce positive economic benefits.

**In our 2019 poll, half support the program, about the same level as in the 2018 poll, when we posed the issue for the first time in CityStats.**



### MOST SUPPORTIVE

North/Northeast of city	61%
Republicans	61%
Ages 50-64	60%
\$25,000-\$49,999 income	59%

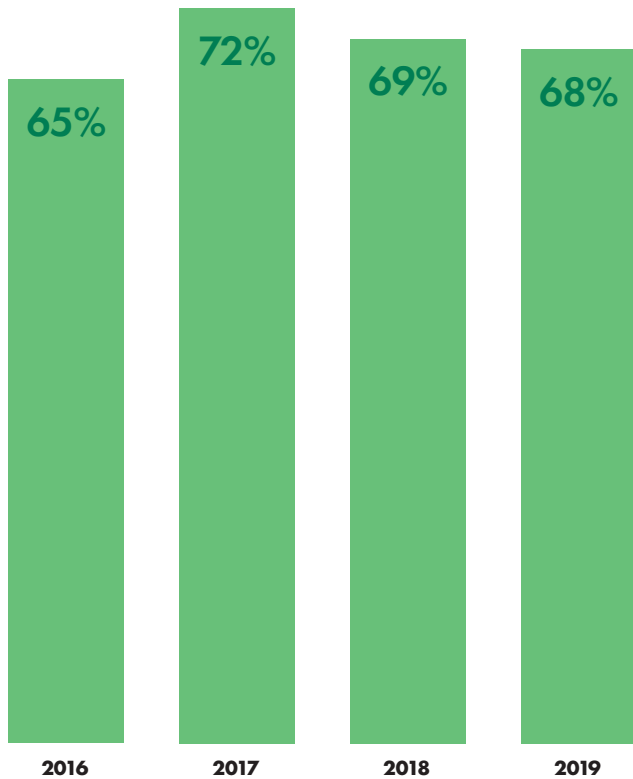
### LEAST SUPPORTIVE

Democrats	40%
College graduates	38%
African-American	36%

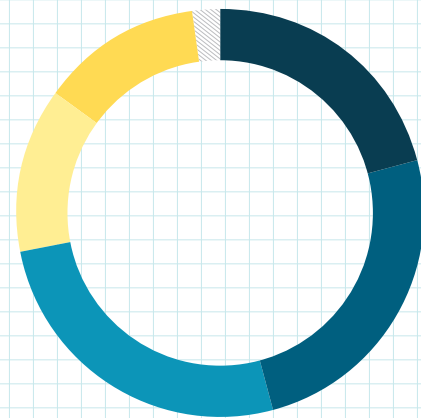
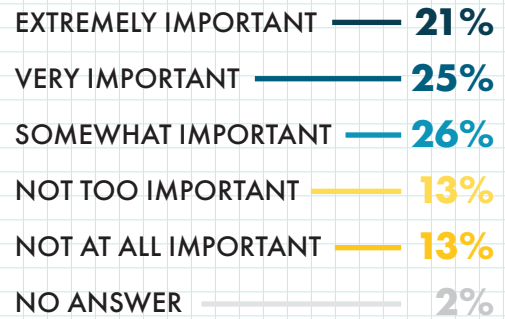


# GLOBAL WARMING

East Baton Rouge Parish residents who believe the world is in a period of global warming



**Q.** How important is global warming as an issue to you?



# EMISSIONS REGULATION

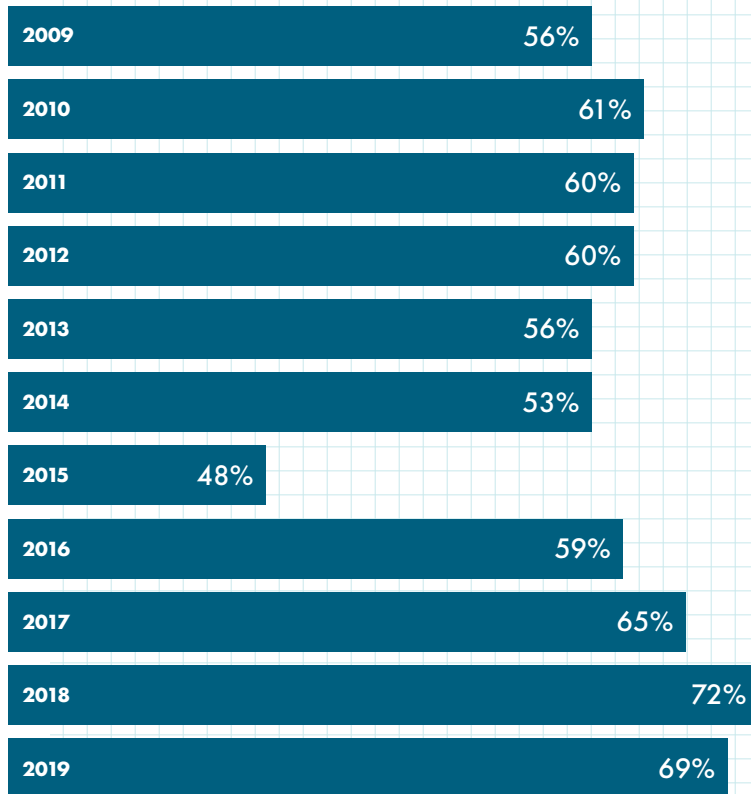
EBR residents want the government to do more to regulate emissions that cause global warming. This holds true, oddly, for people who call themselves "very conservative."



# CIVIC PROJECTS

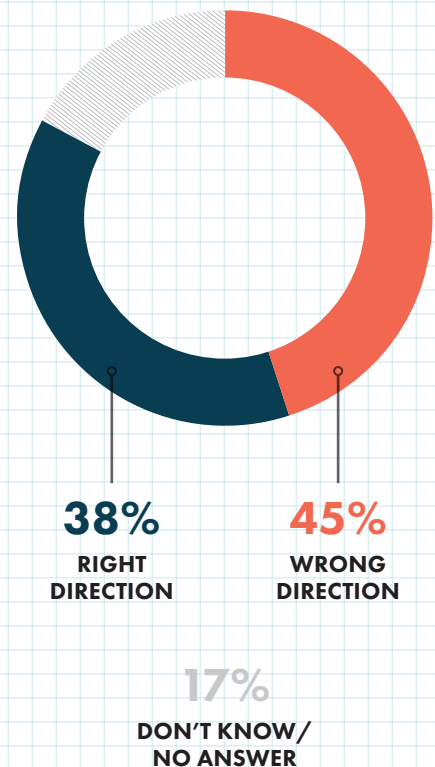
## PACE OF PROGRESS IS "TOO SLOW"

Last year, a record number said that pace of progress in the parish is too slow. In 2019, it was the second-highest percentage since we started the survey.

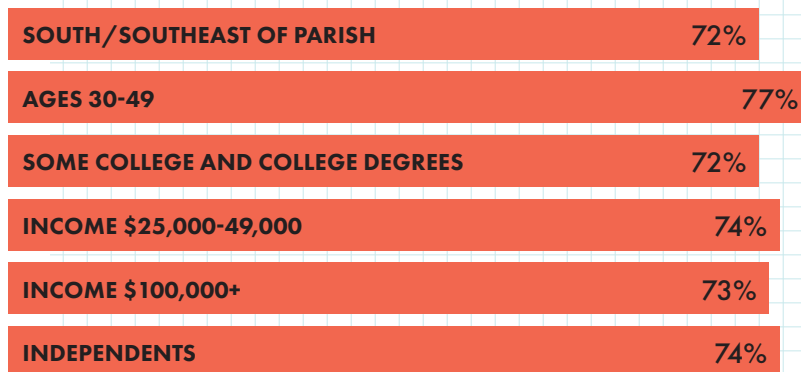


### Parish going in the right or wrong direction?

This is the first time we asked whether the parish was going in the right or wrong direction; a plurality said "wrong direction." By groups, the majority saying the parish is going in the wrong direction are people who live **south/southeast part of the parish (55%), ages 30-49 (51%), ages 50-64 (52%), conservatives (51%), and very conservatives (55%).**

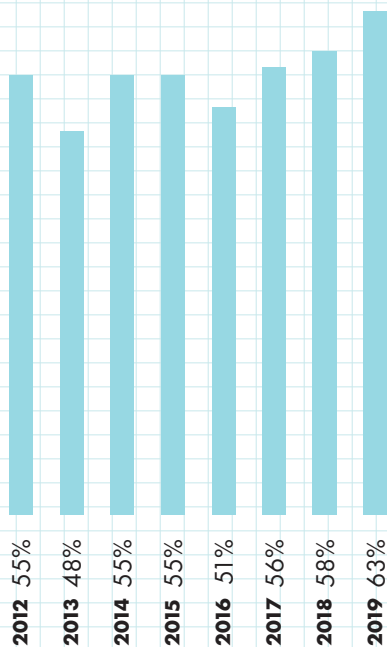


### GREATEST PERCENTAGE WHO BELIEVE PROGRESS IS "TOO SLOW" (2019)

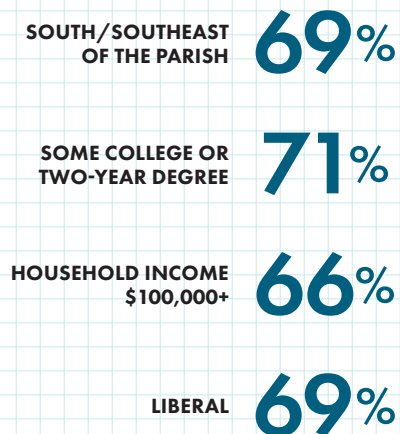


# INFLUENCE OVER ELECTED OFFICIALS

A record percentage told our pollster this year that they have **little to no influence** over elected officials.

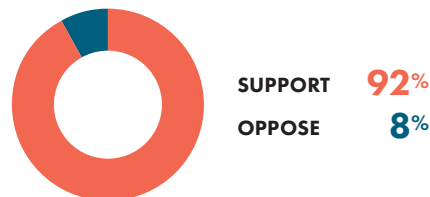


## LEVELS BY DEMOGRAPHICS



# JUSTICE REFORM

There is abundant support among Baton Rouge residents for **alternatives to jail** for people who are convicted of non-violent offenses. In our poll, residents back rehabilitation and treatment programs instead of incarceration.

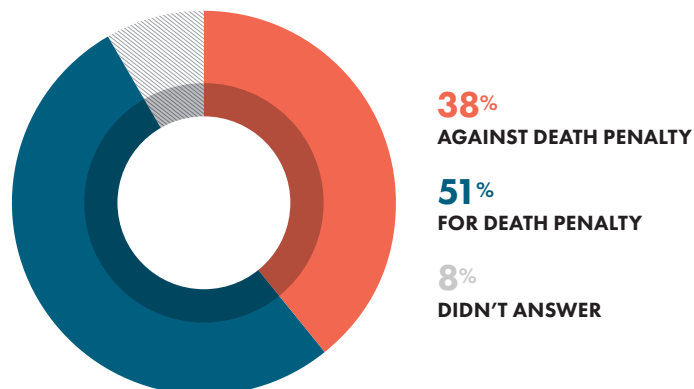


As well, a clear majority are for releasing people charged with nonsexual, nonviolent crimes **without requiring cash bonds**. People who can't afford their bond may stay in jail until their trial.



# DEATH PENALTY

Nationally, support for the death penalty **fell more than 20 points** over two decades to **54% in 2018**, Pew Research says. In our EBR survey, about half are against abolishing the death penalty, level with when this question was asked in 2016. *Note: The last person executed in Louisiana was Gerald Bordelon in 2010; he waived all appeals to allow his execution.*



## A Calming Place

*Arizona provider will open EBR crisis stabilization center in 2020*

By Sara Bongiorno

In less than six months, people in crisis will be cared for by RI International, the firm that was selected by The Bridge Center for Hope to operate Baton Rouge's first crisis stabilization center. The Arizona-based provider expects thousands will receive treatment at its center in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Police officers, family members and others can bypass emergency rooms and take a person in distress directly to the around-the-clock facility where drop-offs will be designed to be fast and safe.

At the center, RI International will stabilize people using the Crisis Now model that is shaping crisis-care initiatives across the U.S. and internationally. RI knows the model, for it led devel-

opment of the protocols that draw on exemplary crisis-care and suicide-prevention strategies in California, Colorado, Georgia and its home base in Maricopa County, Arizona.

"They had everything we wanted," said Kathy Kliebert, chair of The Bridge Center's board of directors, on the selection of RI International. "The model they use is what states and communities are looking at to fill the gap in crisis care, and it is something we knew we wanted here."

The Crisis Now method will also inform the look, feel and operations of the center. Six million dollars in annual taxes passed in December 2018 will fund operations, as will insurance and Medicaid payments. The 30-bed facility is expected to be located in Mid City, with the Baton Rouge General among

### FOUNDATION FACT:

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation, with many partners, produced a plan to improve behavioral health services in the parish. In the first half of 2020, a firm chosen by The Bridge Center for Hope will open a crisis stabilization center to serve thousands annually who aren't getting services now. RI International will operate the crisis center.

*“Our aim is to stabilize people and get them back into the community for treatment as soon as possible.”*

–Jamie Sellar, RI International chief strategy officer

preferred locations when this issue went to press. The center will be more like a living room. With soft colors and recliners, it will avoid the fish-bowl effect of plexiglass windows and locked doors.

RI International will hire local staff to operate the center. Employees will care for an estimated 5,000 clients each year.

Defusing a crisis is the first step. After the client is stable, RI staff will connect the patients to community-based recovery services or other long-term treatment.

The firm’s crisis-to-recovery path prioritizes care in the community and short-term respite care in “sub-acute” units over extended and more costly in-patient hospital admissions.

“Longer lengths of stay don’t necessarily lead to better long-term recovery,” said Jamie Sellar, RI International’s chief strategy officer. “Our aim is to stabilize people and get them back

*(continued on page 23)*



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## **HOW IT CAME ABOUT**

More than five years ago, the Foundation started exploring an alternative to prison and emergency rooms for people who are in a behavioral health crisis. EBR elected officials and behavioral health experts joined the Foundation to advance the project. The group found a successful model in San Antonio and decided to tailor a version of it to fill gaps in mental health services here. The Bridge Center for Hope, a nonprofit, was formed to advocate for a crisis stabilization center.

In December 2018, East Baton Rouge voters approved \$6 million in annual taxes and the Metro Council selected The Bridge Center as recipient of the tax money with the responsibility of operating the center. Through an open selection process, The Bridge Center picked RI International to start and manage the unit. Meanwhile, The Bridge Center selected Charlotte Claiborne as its first executive director to work with RI International.



## **MEET CHARLOTTE CLAIBORNE**

**Executive Director,  
Bridge Center for Hope**

The Bridge Center for Hope has its first executive director—Charlotte Claiborne. Her first main task will be important to people in Baton Rouge. Claiborne will oversee the opening of a crisis stabilization center, with RI International as the operator. RI was chosen by The Bridge Center board to operate the center, with its main purpose to defuse people in crisis—up to 5,000 per year—and connect them with services in the community.

Claiborne will count on her experience to lead the daily operations of The Bridge Center. She worked for 17 years at Entergy Corp. Her duties included managing multi-million-dollar contracts and managing budgets and projects. She was also a department representative of a health program that encouraged physical and mental health among employees. In her last job, Claiborne worked more directly in health care. She was director of Louisiana Behavioral Health Agency, where she was charged with expanding the organization into new areas of Louisiana.



TIM MUELLER

Kathy Kliebert

*(continued from page 21)*

into the community for treatment as soon as possible.”

Peers who have overcome addictions will be responsible for leading clients from crisis to services, a tactic that has been proven by RI International to be very effective in its other locations.

Defining features of RI International’s approach include collaborating with law enforcement officers and other first responders in stabilization. At the center of that partnership is the “No Wrong Door” policy. Officers in East Baton Rouge won’t need to call ahead, get a medical referral or make an appointment before bringing someone to the center, a process that is guaranteed and takes just a few minutes.

That’s critical: East Baton Rouge officers are unlikely to rely on the center for crisis response—instead of the parish jail or local emergency rooms—if they think they might be turned away, Kliebert said.

“The fact that they will accept everyone was important,

because one of the things we promised the Baton Rouge community was that we would get law enforcement back to their jobs on the street,” Kliebert said. “This will do that.”

In metropolitan Phoenix, quick hand-offs kept the equivalent of 37 full-time officers on the streets over a decade, according to a 2018 report by Crisis Tech 360 that examined 10 years of Arizona data. In 2016 alone, Phoenix police officers handed off 21,943 individuals to crisis centers, the report notes. Drop-offs on average took 5 to 7 minutes, according to police-department figures cited in the report.

RI will go outside the boundaries of the facility, too. The provider’s mobile response teams will travel across East Baton Rouge Parish to reach people in distress. Also, law enforcement officers in the field can transfer people to the mobile response unit. The company adopted that innovation from Colorado.

The Baton Rouge center opens in the first half of 2020. •

# GRANTS

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

## CURRENTS



Dan Kahn's kids shoot for the moon

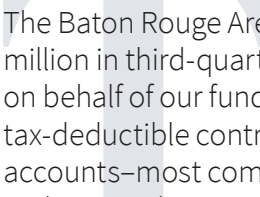
Plan Baton Rouge II | \$60 million for inner city | NOLA to BR, slow train coming

Ten years is a good run, but the Baton Rouge Youth Coalition is just getting started. Daniel Kahn established the nonprofit a decade ago, and the Foundation ran a story about BRYC on the cover of this magazine soon after. Eight years ago, Kahn recruited Lucas Spielfogel to take over and build the coalition. Since then, BRYC has prepared 373 high-achieving high school students for college and helped them win tens of millions in scholarships. One-third of BRYC Fellows who graduate from college do so without debt. BRYC has 18 employees and 130 volunteers. The charity now serves 250 students across nine school districts.

### FOUNDATION FACT:

The Foundation and our fund donors provided advice when BRYC started and our donors and supporting nonprofits have granted \$2 million to the charity.





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Juban Parc Elementary School \$500  
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Louisiana Art and Science Museum Inc. \$20,075  
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 Russell Domingue Ministries Inc. / Blue Flames Ministries \$750  
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# COVER

# Neighborhood, radically REIMAGIN

*A \$29.5 million HUD Choice Neighborhoods grant brings the principles of New Urbanism to a North Baton Rouge community*

By Maggie Heyn Richardson

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**B**uilt in 1970, Ardenwood Village in Baton Rouge is a 90-unit public housing development that offers few quality-of-life amenities. It's almost impossible to take care of daily business without a car here in this commercial industrial area at North Ardenwood and Choctaw Drives. Streetscapes lack trees, as well as architectural cohesion or sidewalks. Neighbors trek miles to reach a supermarkets selling fresh and healthy food. Crime and blight are high; so is unemployment.

*“We’re not going back with the same traditional model of public housing that concentrates poverty in one place. It’s key that we create mixed-income residential developments, and that we broaden the work to the surrounding community.”*

–J. Daniels, EBR Housing Authority

# ED



*"The Choice grant is not about rebuilding dated housing, but in rethinking the way we fight neighborhood poverty in the first place."*

—Chris Tyson, president and CEO, Build Baton Rouge

But Ardenwood Village is poised for transformation. With support from a \$29.5 million Choice Neighborhoods grant awarded to Baton Rouge in May by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, Ardenwood Village will soon be decommissioned and its residents relocated.

They won't have to relocate to a new public housing development. Instead, they will move to one of four new mixed-income residential developments to be built on raw land next to the site. Not until the last residents are relocated will Ardenwood Village be razed.

"This is a really important distinction about the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative," says J. Daniels, CEO of the East Baton Rouge Parish Housing Authority, lead agency for the grant. "We're not going back with same traditional model of public housing that concentrates poverty in one place. It's key that we create mixed-income residential developments, and that we broaden the work to the surrounding community."

Baton Rouge was one of just four cities to receive a Choice Neighborhoods grant in 2019; the others were Newport News, Virginia; Norfolk, Virginia; and Omaha, Nebraska. The Choice Neighborhoods program requires grant recipients to not only demonstrate social need around public housing, but to show a proven track record of engineering successful public and private partnerships nearby.

In other words, the Choice grant is not about rebuilding dated housing, but in rethinking the way we fight neighborhood poverty in the first place, says Chris Tyson, president and CEO of Build Baton Rouge, formerly the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority, a grant partner.

"This was a very competitive grant, but Baton Rouge stood out because we were able to show that we have a tremendous amount of skin in the game," says Tyson. "We were able to show that we had corralled a significant number of partners, had them agree

on a vision for this area, and that we had put our own resources forward."

Tyson says Baton Rouge demonstrated \$335.5 million in existing or planned projects in the surrounding two-square mile area, which is bordered by Florida Boulevard to the south, Choctaw to the north, North Lobdell to the east and North Foster to the west. In addition to Ardenwood Village, this area holds several longstanding high poverty Baton Rouge neighborhoods, including East Fairfields, Smiley Heights and Melrose East.

Also located here is Ardendale, a 200-acre parcel owned by Build Baton Rouge that includes the Career and Technical Education Center (CTEC), an East Baton Rouge Parish high school and the Baton Rouge Community College's Ardendale Campus, which features the McKay Automotive Technology Center for training automobile mechanics.

Receiving a Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant was the culmination of several years of work by a team of partners that included the East Baton Rouge Parish Housing Authority, its nonprofit development arm, Partners Southeast, Build Baton Rouge, the City of Baton Rouge/Parish of East Baton Rouge, the Louisiana Housing Corporation, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, Integral Development Group and others. The process first began in 2014 when HUD awarded Baton Rouge a \$500,000 Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant, which enabled the partners to spend four years conceiving a winning project.

More than 40 community organizations representing youth programs, health and wellness, the arts and education and workforce, came together to support Baton Rouge's Choice Neighborhoods' application.

Nationwide, the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative is the next iteration of HUD's progressive program Hope VI. While Hope VI invited the country to reject notions of crime-ridden, high-



**PLANNED:  
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GREENWELL SPRINGS RD

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LOBDELL BLVD

N. FOSTER DRIVE

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BON CARRE  
TECHNOLOGY CENTER

FLORIDA BLVD





J. Daniels, East Baton Rouge Housing Authority

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rise “projects” in favor of developments that were humanely designed, it nonetheless concentrated public housing in one locale. Instead, the intention of Choice Neighborhoods is to bring together public and private partners to replace distressed HUD housing with mixed income residential developments, while also threading a neighborhood network of quality of life amenities related to employment, health and education. Grantees must also create conditions that help a distressed neighborhood attract public and private reinvestment over the long-term and, in so doing, give residents a chance at leaving generational poverty.

The first phase of the project, estimated to begin in July 2020, is the new residential development, Cypress at Ardentale, a smartly designed 168-unit development that features a mix of housing styles consistent with what Daniels describes as

Southern vernacular. The site plan was designed by Pittsburgh-based Urban Design Associates (UDA) as part of Baton Rouge’s Choice Neighborhoods planning grant. The development features community gathering spaces, landscaping, façade improvements and connectivity to the surrounding neighborhood. It will be flanked by sidewalks and is positioned close to preserved wetlands, which will support drainage and environmental sustainability.

Daniels says Phases 2, 3 and 4 will feature three additional residential developments, including one for seniors. All four developments will be considered mixed-income with a certain percentage of units reserved for individuals who qualify for public housing. The current residents of Ardenwood Village will ultimately relocate to one of these four sites.

Daniels says the Choice Neighborhoods grants team artic-

## CHOICE DEVELOPMENT

The East Baton Rouge Housing Authority, with financial and staff support from collaborators, won a \$29.5 million Choice Neighborhoods grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Baton Rouge Area Foundation was among organizations and government agencies that advocated and provided advice on the grant application.

**Where:** The Housing Authority will develop a parcel of land at North Ardenwood and Greenwell Springs Road. The acreage is part of Ardenale, a project that began at the Foundation after Hurricane Katrina, when a population surge was expected to outpace existing housing supply.

To meet the demand, the Foundation purchased the 200 acres for Ardenale from nonprofits that had received the parcel from a philanthropist. The Foundation turned over the land to the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority for development.

**What took so long:** When post-Katrina federal funding for housing didn't materialize, the RDA, now named Build Baton Rouge, paused and then repurposed Ardenale. With Foundation staff support, Build Baton Rouge did the groundwork that led to two education anchors in Ardenale. Located on Lobdell Avenue, the institutions are an EBR Public Schools Career and Technical Education Center, which teaches trades, and Baton Rouge Community College's McKay Automotive Technology Center.

**What's next:** City-parish government will be a partner in Ardenale. With infrastructure money from MovEBR, the parish will build a boulevard from North Ardenwood, site of the Housing Authority project, and Lobdell, where the education institutions are flourishing. On the 100-plus acres in between, Build Baton Rouge will partner to add a mix of uses.

ulated an overall vision for the area that includes three goals: innovation, resiliency and placemaking. Innovation, he says, means focusing on providing stronger education and workforce development opportunities for neighborhood residents. Resiliency means smart growth design, so that natural disasters can be weathered better. And placemaking refers to creating hubs of activity where arts, cultural diversity and civic engagement take place.

The area will see a \$15 million investment from the City-Parish on a pedestrian-friendly, multi-modal connector linking North Ardenwood Drive and Lobdell Boulevard. This new thoroughfare, part of the MovEBR program, will directly link residents on the west side of North Ardenwood with quality of life amenities to the east.

Ninety-two percent of the current residents of Ardenwood

Village are African American women heads of household, which has prompted grant partner, YWCA of Baton Rouge, to plan an \$11 million Early Childhood and Women's Development Center within the target area, says Dianna Payton, CEO of the YWCA and chair of the East Baton Rouge Housing Authority board of commissioners.

"This gives us a chance to help women directly with anything they need in a centrally-located, family-friendly place," says Payton. "With the close proximity to Cypress at Ardenale and other neighbors, we can overcome transportation barriers."

Once completed, the YWCA Early Childhood and Women's Development Center will provide Early Head Start, full-day child care for kids from birth to three years. Moreover, says Payton, the Center will make available wrap-around services for women, including parental education and support, take-home



The Choice Neighborhoods grant will help pay for a YWCA early childhood and women’s center at Ardenale. The center will offer child-care assistance to low-income women and health services to pregnant women.

family activities, mental health and disability screenings and health care, social service and education referrals.

A major tenet of Baton Rouge’s Choice Neighborhoods grant, says Daniels, is to create a seamless progression of educational opportunities for residents, from child care to secondary and post-secondary institutions.

“Baton Rouge has a poverty problem,” Daniels says, “and education is the great equalizer.”

In addition to the YWCA’s Early Head Start program, the target area includes Melrose Elementary, Capitol Middle, CTEC, Collegiate Academies Charter School, Geo Prep Charter School Mid City, the McKay Automotive Training Center and the Baton Rouge Community College Ardenale Campus. More charter schools will likely come to the area, says Daniels.

Arts and cultural activities are also a main focus of the project, and many will be situated on the providentially named Renoir Avenue, between North Ardenwood and Lobdell. (Other streets nearby are named for seminal painters as well, including Van Gogh, Monet and Titian.)

The Renoir Arts and Culture District will be anchored by

existing arts organizations like the Red Stick Project, a community arts nonprofit, and Chorum Hall, which hosts live jazz. Working with partners like the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, Forward Arts, the Manship Theatre, Of Moving Colors and The Walls Project, organizers want to create robust wayfinding, public art and school-based arts and culture activities that restore pride of place and engage the community.

Ultimately, the area will see more than 550 new mixed-income apartments and single-family homes, significantly improved education, arts and recreational activities, better multi-modal transportation and the opportunity for sustained private investment.

Daniels says the project will prove that Baton Rouge is capable of organizing complex partnerships across a wide variety of sectors to untangle the knot of pervasive poverty.

“We’ve thought a lot lately about what community means in Baton Rouge, and it can’t be lost in the narrative that we can get big things done here.” Daniels says. “If there was ever a shining example of us coming together to make something good happen, this is it.” •

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# LEGACY

*Ernest J. Gaines died Nov. 5 on the land he worked as a child. Mr. Gaines was born into a family that picked cotton near False River. He became one of the greatest writers of his generation, earning a nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature. He returned to his childhood home in Oscar, Louisiana, buying the land that inspired his stories. He built a home there with his wife, Dianne.*

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## *Remembering* Ernest J. Gaines

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*This interview with Mr. Gaines was published in the Fourth Quarter 2007 issue of this magazine. The story is by C.E. Richard and Marcia Gaudet, who is director of the Ernest J. Gaines Center at University of Louisiana Lafayette.*

I think it's the greatest six acres of land on earth. I wouldn't exchange it for anything else in the world," said Ernest J. Gaines, looking out the window from the office in his new home. "From here, I can look back at the church, and beyond the church to the trees back in the cemetery. You know, they've cut some of the sugarcane down, so I can see the trees in the cemetery back there now. I love this."

Six years ago, Gaines and his wife, Dianne, began building a home on the same piece of False River plantation acreage where he grew up, in the heart of the place that has served as the princi-

pal setting for most of his stories—a body of work that includes more than 10 books and earned him a nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004. "I picked cotton exactly where I'm sitting now," Gaines said.

After he retired as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Gaines moved back to Pointe Coupée Parish, outside Baton Rouge, and renewed his relationship with the same plot of oak-shaded earth that he and his family tilled for generations as sharecroppers. Gaines' relationship with the land now is a more equitable one; he doesn't have to wrestle cotton or corn from it the way so many of his forebearers did, pleading their survival from the dirt. He owns this land.

"So, yes, that definitely brings satisfaction," he said. "To be able to have a little piece of this place where my folks worked for more than the last hundred years—and I know they never

could've owned anything themselves." Still, in the course of any conversation with him, it quickly becomes apparent that he is no less bound to this place than those who came before him.

## On the Land

Earlier this year, Marcia Gaudet, from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, drove out to visit Gaines at his home in Pointe Coupée. Along with colleagues Wiley Cash and Reggie Young, she is working on a book titled *This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me: The Legacy of Ernest J. Gaines*. Research for the book has given Gaudet a good excuse to visit the writer, who has been a dear friend since he first came to UL Lafayette in 1981. Mail still arrives at the university for Gaines, so this time Gaudet

arrived at his home with a stack of letters. Among them was one from Wendell Berry.

Berry and Gaines have known each other since their days together in the creative writing workshop at Stanford nearly 50 years ago. Berry, who farms family land in Henry County, Ky., is the author of dozens of books, most of which address the theme of people's relationship to the land and their past. Gaudet asked Gaines about the letter he'd received from his friend. In it, Wendell Berry professes a greater kinship with Ernest Gaines' work than any other living writer's.

"I think it's because we both knew the talk of old people," Berry's letter reads. "Old country people, in summer evenings." Later, Gaines caught himself laughing gently.

**Gaines:** Wendell gave a lecture at the Fellowship of Southern

### FOUNDATION FACT:

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation established the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence to honor Mr. Gaines and to support promising African American writers of fiction. Mr. Gaines hosted each of the winners at his home in Oscar and shared words of encouragement at the awards ceremonies, which began in 2007. The award will continue his legacy.

Mr. Gaines and 2018 Gaines winner Jamel Brinkley





Writers in Chattanooga three or four months ago, and he used a little quote from my work, from *In My Father's House*, in his speech. But sometimes I think Wendell picks what he wants in my work. For example, in his speech he says that I—that the machine destroyed the people, and ran the people away from the land. Well, if you had to pick cotton eight hours a day, in hundred-degree weather, you'd wish for a machine that could do this kind of work so you could do something else.

What happened was, yes, the machine did take their work, and the people did leave. And they went to the towns without any kind of skills that would be useful for working in the city. And so many of them ended up in prison, in poverty, in prostitution and drugs. Much of this happened, yes. However, I think it's the result of not being prepared to go to these places. The machine had come in and destroyed these things, like working in the fields, but it had not prepared the people for something else to do. You see the same thing in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The machines come in, put these people out of their houses and put them on the road, looking for something and not finding it.

So Wendell and I do share a love of the land, of course. He and I are good friends. But, you know, Wendell is still working with horses in his fields on his farm. Big horses. I never had a big horse. When I picked cotton, I had to put that sack on my shoulder and pull. And many, many days I suppose I wished for machines to do this kind of work.

## On the Writer's Education

As a writer, Gaines' relationship with his ancestral home near False River has been complicated and, at times, contradictory. "Fortunately for me, my folks took me away from here when I was 15 and put me in school in California," he remarked. "As I've said many times before, the two greatest moves I've made was on the day I left Louisiana in '48, and on the day I came back to Louisiana in '63."

Not unlike the children in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines' early schooling took place in the plantation church, where an itinerant teacher would come to deliver lessons for a few months at a time, according to the seasons of planting and harvesting.

Education beyond the eighth grade was not available to black students in Pointe Coupée Parish at that time. World War II had brought his stepfather to California, so, when they were able to, Gaines' parents brought him out west to join them. There, he would go on to attend San Francisco State University and Stanford.



What brought him back to Louisiana in January 1963 was the news in fall 1962 that James Meredith had successfully challenged legal segregation in attending the University of Mississippi at Oxford; Meredith had won for himself the right to an equal education in his home state. Gaines took this as a sign that, perhaps, the South was beginning to offer black young people the kind of learning that he had left his home to find elsewhere. Then, too, he understood well that, as a writer, there was another kind of learning that he would only find back on False River.

**Gaines:** The young writer finds his education both in the library and in the people around him. I've talked about this in *Mozart and Leadbelly*: Mozart is a symbol for form, which you pick up in books of all kinds, in the library; and *Leadbelly* is a symbol of the source for my work. That is, I learned both from the books I studied at San Francisco State, at Stanford, as well as from the people here, on this plantation, during my days growing up, the first fifteen years of my life. And then, later, coming back here a couple times a year. I learned as much about writing here, by just being around those people and talking to them, listening to them, listening to the music.

The white writers' novels—because I only studied white writers in college, and then many libraries really only carried the work of white writers at that time—I needed their form, their direction, in creating novels and short stories. But they couldn't give me the source I needed; that had to come from the people. I needed the *Leadbellies*. And I was constantly referring to the music, to the spirituals, to gospel, the blues, to jazz.



*“As I’ve said many times before, the two greatest moves I’ve made was on the day I left Louisiana in ’48, and on the day I came back to Louisiana in ’63.”*

—Ernest J. Gaines

I remember, whenever I’d come back from San Francisco to Baton Rouge, I would always go to nightclubs with my uncles. On Sundays Baton Rouge was dry, so we had to leave town, go across the river to Port Allen to a joint, to drink and talk. Some of those places were pretty rough, and I saw some pretty rough things happen in them, which gave me a source for *Of Love and Dust*, as well as “Three Men” in my *Bloodline* stories. So this is a sort of education that you get as well. I experienced both the book—*Mozart*—and the source: *Leadbelly*. I needed both of them.

## On the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence

Gaines’ formation as a writer also benefited from his receipt of several important literary awards, beginning with a fellowship in Stanford University’s creative writing program in 1958 under Wallace Stegner. There, he joined other young writers whose work would likewise become widely read favorites, including Ken Kesey, Wendell Berry, Tillie Olsen, Larry McMurtry and Bill and Gloria Broder. “It was a wonderful class to be in at that time,” Gaines remembered. “And there were many, many others through the years at Stanford. Stegner had that nose for picking out talent and bringing them there and giving them a year to work.”

With no curricular requirements, that fellowship provided Gaines with several vital resources: a stipend to live on, regular contact with other working writers, and the one luxury most coveted by all writers: time to work. Recognizing how important such literary awards have been in facilitating Gaines’ career,

the Baton Rouge Area Foundation established a \$10,000 (now \$15,000) prize in his honor, to be awarded annually to promising African American fiction writers.

**Gaines:** I know what it means to a young writer to receive these kinds of awards. I received an award by going Stanford, just one year after graduating from San Francisco State. And then, while I was at Stanford I started writing another novel, called *Catherine Carmier*, and I received the Jackson Award there in San Francisco for that. So, yes, I know what it means to receive those kinds of funds when you’re starting out. It encourages you, and it helps you too when, as in my case, you don’t have a lot of money to begin with. Why, when I was there at Stanford, I would work eight hours a day. I’d get up in the morning, go to breakfast, work until noon, come back from lunch, work until dinner at night, and sometimes after dinner. It always helps when someone gives you that chance to write.

But also it encourages the young writer because he finds that someone is interested and feels he’s doing something worthwhile. And that’s what young writers really need. It tells a writer that he’s doing something worthwhile. Of course, if somebody’s going to be a writer, he’s going to be a writer anyway, whether you tell him that or not. But it always helps, and I had that.

## On His Readers

His success with novels like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) has placed Ernest Gaines among America’s most highly regarded living writers, here and abroad. Concentrated in a very particular part of Louisiana, his charac-



ters and settings strike readers as especially distinct, singular. And yet in Gaines' stories, the universal somehow manages to speak through the unique.

**Gaines:** My work has been translated into about twelve different languages—Japanese, Chinese, German, Russian, Slovene, Norwegian. How they understand anything I'm talking about, I don't know. But apparently, they do. Readers from different parts of the world say, okay, yes, we recognize these characters, we believe in these characters.

But I don't know what's going to happen in the future, you know. I've met students who don't want to study dialect. Asian students I've met in San Jose, California, for example, who came out said, "Listen, my folks didn't send me here to study dialect. They sent me to learn to speak proper English grammar. I don't know how long we'll be communicating with those students."

## On the Company He Keeps Nowadays

Inevitably, the topic of any talk with Ernest Gaines will return again and again to his home on False River, just as he himself has throughout his work and his life. But it's not the place that has kept his imagination, and his readers', captivated through the years.

**Gaines:** Returning to it is the result of my love for my ancestors who worked much harder than I did, and who are buried about three-quarters of a mile from where I'm sitting right now. Knowing that their spirit is here, their bones are here, their dust is here—these are the kinds of things that give me great satisfaction. I mean, if it weren't for that fact, I don't think I would care anything for this part of Louisiana any more than any other part of Louisiana, or the South, or the rest of the country.

So, owning this property, it's not necessarily for me. It's for them, and then for the living too; for my younger brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews. They can see this place and have pride in what I've done and in knowing what I've cared about.

I know that the old ones, the ones that are dead—I often sit on my back porch at night and think about how wonderful it would be if they were there sitting with me in rocking chairs and

drinking coffee and talking. It's the sort of thing I think about often, because this is where they were, right here, my grandparents' grandparents. This is what makes me proud of the place.

If Auntie [Augusteen Jefferson] could sit here with me, or my stepfather who took me away from here, or my Uncle George, who used to take me to those old beat-up bars in Baton Rouge—if I could, I'd just buy him a good glass of Gentleman Jack, and we could sit here and talk. Oh, I wish I could do that. •



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GREATER BATON ROUGE

# *For Jennifer*

*Leslies make cancer treatment a little easier for patients*

By Sara Bongiorno | Photo by Tim Mueller

**J**anet and Bob Leslie began talking about helping leukemia patients with the financial burden of treatment a day after losing their daughter Jennifer to the disease 18 years ago.

The Leslies had pursued treatment from Texas to Florida for Jennifer, who was 16 at the time of her diagnosis. They had seen people struggle. “We thought we could start a foundation,” Janet Leslie said. “We had seen the costs and decided we had to do something.”

The couple got to work with an urgency that has not ebbed in the nearly two decades since their middle daughter’s death at age 31.

Bob Leslie had spent 40 years in the floor-covering business. Janet was a stay-at-home mom. They did not know anything about putting together a charitable foundation. They learned on the fly. They did not waste time.

Within months of Jennifer’s death in September 2001, they had established a nonprofit. Next, the Leslies held a golf tournament in Abita Springs and raised nearly \$40,000. They mailed the first assistance check to a leukemia patient in early 2003.

As of Aug. 31, the JL Foundation had provided \$1.75 million in direct assistance to 680 Louisiana leukemia patients for out-of-pocket expenses like gas, food and lodging that insurance companies don’t cover.

“No matter how good your insurance is, it’s not paying for meals and gas,” said Bob Leslie.

In the Baton Rouge region, the foundation has provided \$858,367 to patients, including \$341,647 to families of children receiving leukemia treatment at St. Jude’s affiliate program at Our Lady of the Lake.

The Leslies do not take a salary for what amounts to full-time work. The couple also covers the foundation’s administrative costs. Every penny of every dollar from donors, grants and fundraisers goes directly to patients to reimburse out-of-pocket expenses.

Leukemia is a long disease. The treatment protocol for childhood leukemia lasts two to three years. Adult patients may need to take maintenance medication for the rest of their lives.

The foundation has provided as much as \$14,000 to some patients over time, but it will write reimbursement checks for as little as \$25. “We never cut anybody off while they are in treatment,” Bob Leslie said.

The foundation reimburses patients \$20 a day for meals and 20 cents a mile for gasoline. It sends checks to 150-165 patients in a typical month.

Calculating patient checks is a major task. Hospital social workers submit prior-month treatment records to the Leslies so they can determine precise mileage and meal reimbursement amounts.

The foundation is a deeply personal tribute to Jennifer Leslie, who was a high school sophomore when she was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia, a cancer of the bone marrow



*“We had seen the costs and decided we had to do something.”*

–Janet Leslie

that usually appears in adults in their 70s or 80s.

Every facet of its operations is hands-on. If you call the foundation, Bob or Janet picks up. They are 77 and 76 years old, respectively, but they take few vacations. Rare getaways are scheduled for late in the month so patients can get reimbursement checks as soon as possible.

**Foundation Fact: The Foundation, its fund donors and supporting nonprofits have granted \$521,000 to the JL Foundation since 2009.**

They work out of an office in the center of their open-concept home along the diversion canal in Ascension Parish. The shelves are lined with family photographs, including a framed picture of Jennifer on a ski trip. She wears a blue snowsuit and beams at the camera.

Bob is the foundation’s CEO and chief fundraiser, doggedly working the phone and calling on friends and corporate donors at a pace that would dizzy a man half his age. Janet is executive director. She keeps the books with to-the-penny accuracy and processes checks for patients.

Both offer advice and encouragement to patients. Some become friends through frequent phone calls, even if the Leslies never meet them in person.

Jennifer Leslie’s life was cut short, but it was extraordinary. At the time of her diagnosis in 1986, doctors gave her one or two years to live without a bone-marrow transplant. She lived another 15 years with the help of oral chemotherapy that kept the leukemia mostly in check.

Outgoing and a good student, the Covington teen was a member of the tennis team and cheerleading squad at school, never missed a ski trip, never complained, enjoyed many friends, almost never got sick, kept her diagnosis mostly to herself.

Her parents affectionately call her their hippie child in view of her laid-back demeanor.

“Nothing bothered her,” said Bob Leslie. “She didn’t miss a thing.”

After graduation from St. Scholastica Academy in Covington,

Jennifer headed to the University of Alabama with her best friend from childhood, who gave her daily injections of medication stored in a cooler in the girls’ dorm room.

Jennifer later transferred to Louisiana State University, then went to work at a Northshore law firm after completing her degree. Her employers were so impressed after hiring her for a short-term assignment, they offered to cover the cost of sending her to paralegal school. Jennifer took them up on the offer.

She was managing the Covington law office in 2000 when an acute phase of illness called a blast crisis prompted the family to seek experimental treatment in Tampa, Florida. A then-experimental drug helped for some months, but by spring 2001, Jennifer was again in blast crisis.

Over the years, the Leslies had searched locally and nationally for a genetic match that would make a bone-marrow transplant possible. By 2001, they had found one, a U.S. serviceman stationed in South Korea. The man agreed to return to the U.S. to donate marrow and even quit smoking in preparation for the procedure.

The transplant at Baptist Hospital in New Orleans in August 2001 went well at the outset, but in early September, Jennifer’s body abruptly reacted to months of massive chemotherapy in the run-up to the procedure.

Her oxygen levels began to decline. Tests showed blood clots throughout her body. Jennifer was a few weeks shy of her 32nd birthday when she died on September 4, 2001.

The Leslies’ work to support other leukemia patients keeps them connected to Jennifer in a meaningful way. Sometimes it is difficult to fathom that so many years have gone by since her death. They find solace in honoring Jennifer by easing the stress of treatment among families their daughter never met.


“She would have loved the idea,” said Janet Leslie.

The Leslies’ work continues. Bob Leslie worries there may be leukemia patients living or receiving treatment in Baton Rouge who could use help with out-of-pocket costs but haven’t heard about their charity. He hopes to get the word out.

He encourages them to contact the foundation through its website, [www.jlffoundation.org](http://www.jlffoundation.org).

“If they’ve slipped through the cracks, they can contact us,” he said. •





“My heart swells when we talk about the mental health project. Baton Rouge is recognizing that it's up to all of us to make sure that we're treating the people who need that help—effectively.”

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*mental* HEALTH

*Baton Rouge  
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## On a good NOTE

*Symphony's Executive Director  
Brings Energy and Ideas to New Post*

By Maggie Heyn Richardson | Photo by Tim Mueller

**A**ustin, Texas, is known for lots of things. It's chock-full of young people who crave edgy food and entertainment. It's got electric scooters, bike sharing and bus lanes. It has a robust music scene girded by the live PBS show, *Austin City Limits*. It's the playground of tech start-ups and venture capitalists.

It's also the kind of place, figured Eric Marshall, that would embrace side-by-side performances of a chamber music quartet and dance club mash-ups engineered by four of Austin's most popular DJs. The DJs, in fact, would be asked to mix tunes that featured the very pieces of music the musicians played live. Held at *The Parish*, a 300-seat music venue in downtown Austin, and organized under Marshall's direction, *Bach n' Beats* was the Austin Symphony Orchestra's answer to roping in distracted young people to the timeless world of classical music.

"It was a big success," says Marshall, 35, "What look like

challenges with younger audiences can really be seen as opportunities."

Now Marshall is bringing his passion for classical music—and his millennial sensibilities—to his new role as executive director of the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra. Marshall comes to the Capital Region from an eight-year stint in Austin, where he worked in various management capacities for ASO, most recently as director of information systems. Marshall was charged with beefing up the organization's social media platforms and creating programs, like *Bach N' Beats* and others, that would appeal to younger audiences. His efforts were successful. ASO's top selling age bracket for purchasing single concert tickets is 25-to-35-year-olds.

Expanding the appeal of BRSO's programs to a broader audience is a big part of what Marshall plans to do in Baton Rouge, just as the symphony enters a period of reinvention. BRSO's artistic heft has never been in question. Its musicians are widely



## FOUNDATION FACT:

The Foundation and our fund donors have granted \$470,368 to the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra since 2015, and provided research and staff support for the improvements to the the River Center Performing Arts Theater.

respected, as is its conductor and music director, Timothy Muffitt. But in recent years, BRSO had become financially over-extended. Its board of directors, led by Meredith Hathorn, worked diligently to reorganize the arts nonprofit and bring it into the black. They held the BRSO executive director post open for a two-year period until the organization was on solid footing.

“I can’t say enough about the BRSO board of directors,” says Marshall. “They have done so much to prime everything for the future. We’ve been profitable the last two years, scaled back to re-engage the community and now plan to grow our footprint to reach new audiences.”

That includes a plan to accomplish four pillars of work over the next three to five years, says Marshall. The symphony wants to cultivate an audience that is a more accurate reflection of Baton Rouge; sell out every performance; achieve sustained profitability; and expand community outreach and education.

Marshall says each of the four pillars go hand-in-hand.

“When we expand our audience through community outreach, we increase interest in the symphony and we sell more tickets,” he says. “That, of course, increases our chances of selling out performances and sustaining profitability.”

Marshall takes the helm just as the organization is navigating two major changes. First, the symphony’s home stage, the River Center Performing Arts Theater, is under renovation and won’t reopen until 2021. The new and improved facility will include improved seating, lighting and sound, but until then, the symphony is performing in alternative locations around the community, including First Baptist Church, Istrouma Baptist Church, Houmas House, the Capitol Park Museum, St. Joseph Cathedral and First Presbyterian Church. Marshall says these community-based performances have been effective at increasing the symphony’s exposure.

“These present new opportunities to get out into the community and attract new patrons,” says Marshall.

The second big change includes the anticipated departure of BRSO’s beloved music director, Muffitt, who has announced the 2019-2020 season will be his last as conductor. Muffitt will serve as music director laureate through two more seasons, during which the symphony will host guest conductors and search for Muffitt’s replacement. In April, BRSO will hold “A Tribute to Tim” following the symphony’s performance of Beethoven’s Ninth, Muffitt’s final show.

Marshall earned a degree in voice performance with a concentration in opera from Mercyhurst University in Erie, Pennsylvania, his hometown. After college, he was performing in a traveling Barry Manilow tribute show and sang with the Erie Philharmonic when he was offered a job on staff. “I was 24 and there were only five of us, so I got to learn all aspects of the business,” Marshall says. “I loved it, and I decided that arts administration was what I wanted to do.”

Marshall isn’t sure yet if a chamber music-DJ mashup is right for Baton Rouge, but he’s sure there are yet-to-be explored programs that will do more to reach a cross-section of the community, especially young professionals. After all, he says, we’re living in a time when Metallica and the San Francisco Symphony just played to a packed house in early September at the Chase Center, home of the Golden State Warriors. It was the second time the two had played together, the first being in 1999, and is one of numerous band-orchestra collaborations that have happened throughout the country.

As for attracting the youngest of listeners, Marshall says BRSO will connect with school-age children through 14 school-based music education programs, for which the organization was recently awarded a grant from the Louisiana Decentralized Arts Funding program. The school workshops will bring music awareness to children through lessons that integrate math, science, English and other subjects. Marshall also likes the idea of holding an instrument “petting zoo” in the community, during which children can hold and play musical instruments.

Competing for the attention of new listeners isn’t easy today, but Marshall says he believes there’s never been a better time to showcase a community asset like BRSO.

“I’m excited about classical music and where it’s going, and the level of musicianship we have here in Baton Rouge is incredible,” Marshall says. “There’s no replacement for experiencing something like that, live.” •



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# CDA RIK



The Walls Project Director, Casey Phillips (second from left) and his team are putting up murals and training hundreds of high school students for jobs of the future.



TIM MUELLER

# Beneath the surface

*Walls Project reimagines  
community development with  
programming, partnerships,  
and lots (and lots) of paint*

By Jeffrey Roedel

**S**craping sweat back up under the brow of his ball cap, artist Jonathan Brown—known by all as “Skinny”—rolls fresh paint high up on the side of the old Disk Productions Inc. building that sits quietly in the punishing summer sun at the crux of two divergent neighborhoods: Old South Baton Rouge and the Garden District.

Brown’s newly vivid scene depicts a colorful civic landscape—revitalized with shades brighter and more hopeful than what just days before laid dormant under his fresh coats of passing cars, sunbeams and billowing clouds. “I just hope people enjoy it, honestly,” he tells a local news crew.

*“What started as murals became a community and coalition building program. And we made that decision to diversify in the first year of Walls, we just didn’t put that out there because we were busy introducing ourselves to the community.”*

—Casey Phillips, Walls Project

This is the Old South mural, one of more than 100 public art pieces planned and sponsored by Walls Project, a Baton Rouge-based nonprofit that is expanding further in its eighth year.

Not unlike the makeover this once-forgotten building has received thanks to Brown’s prolific creativity and his hard-earned sweat, the New Orleans-born fine artist’s career trajectory has been forever reshaped by support from Walls Project. Since connecting with Walls, he’s worked on buildings in the now-booming Government Street corridor of Mid City and even large event venues like the Raising Cane’s River Center.

“Walls was exactly what I needed to achieve my goal of painting murals publicly,” Brown says.

And he’s not a lone paint-slinger. Since 2012, Walls has gotten more than 80 artists of all walks of creativity paid, promoted and partnered with local movers-and-shakers while they develop public pieces, even as for several years now, the group’s greater goals for community change have come into sharper focus.

• • •

With only the moonrise glow of a computer screen casting light on his enthralled face, a middle school student, all of 13 or so, stares down at a line of code, learning his way around the latest tools of web design. As business owners across industries wrestle with automation and technology disruptors from all angles, this young student might as well be looking into a crystal ball. He’s taking his first steps into a knowledge base that will help those companies with technology-fed growing pains thrive on change, and he’s doing it through Walls Project’s fastest growing initiative.

This is a typical scene for the Futures Fund, the second prong in Wall’s *Create—Cultivate—Reactivate* mantra that has educated more than 1,000 students the last few years in coding

for web design and digital photography. Taught by paid instructors who are working industry professionals, the Futures Fund is a nine-week technical training program held on Saturdays every spring and fall that gets young people prepared for a tech-driven, gig-based creative economy.

“We focus on the fundamentals of photography as an art, from reading the light and composition, to editing,” says photo instructor Nick Martino, a Baton Rouge-based portrait and adventure photographer. “There’s an underlying core value as well, which is teaching life lessons with these classes, helping each student walk out of Futures Fund a better person.”

Before they graduate and impact the broader community, Martino sees his students creating a community of their own, based on shared creative interests as they gain important basics of their craft.

“We are leaping forward with technology, teaching these students what they aren’t getting in school,” says Casey Phillips, founder and director of Walls Project. “We give young people the computer skills to advance and, importantly, to really help companies grow and evolve as technology evolves.”

Cheryl Cummings is a Florida native and AmeriCorps veteran who administers the Futures Fund program for Walls. “It’s important that we also instruct in the soft skills of online research, giving presentations, being professional,” she says. “We work hard to equip our students to be able to get a job, keep a job and excel at a job.”

Just wait five years, Phillips believes, for what he affectionately calls Futures Fund’s “moment of singularity.”

“That’s when we will start seeing these young people start opening businesses, running for office, becoming teachers and mentors and choosing to stay in our community.”

Those who donate time, money or resources to Walls Project are benefiting Futures Fund and in turn, giving the next gener-





## MLK FEST BY THE NUMBERS

volunteers in 2019 ▶ **5,000**

**90** properties painted since 2013

**150** tons of blight cleaned since 2013

**5.5** city miles reactivated

Number of students in the Futures Fund program since 2016—94% of whom are from low-to-middle income families

**1,000**

**120** ◀ Number of murals and public art installations created in East Baton Rouge Parish since 2012

**\$2 MILLION**

Amount of creative economic resurgence **benefitting more than 80 local artists, installation specialists, photographers and ancillary creatives** associated with Walls Project public works since 2012

ation marketable, economy-building skills. It's a method of investing in social impact, with a big return on investment when the Baton Rouge community is uplifted.

"I want kids to gain the confidence to be better humans than we are now," says Rose Lawless, Cummings' assistant at Futures Fund, and a 22-year-old who identifies completely with her students, having worked with mentorship programs and in education since graduating from high school four years ago. "Seeing them gain confidence and skills, seeing that change from week one to week nine is my 'go'—that transition motivates me."

Graduates of the Futures Fund can enlist in the Work Study program, where they contribute to, and get paid for, real-world multimedia and web projects.

"These students' voices, opinions and perspectives are ones we respect like any adult's," says Helena Williams, director of operations and marketing for Walls Project. "That lets their creativity and confidence blossom in a way that might take a lot longer otherwise. These young people need to see their worth before adulthood."

• • •

South Louisiana's blood appears to be thicker than water. Look no further than the flood of 2016, or any major hurricane clean-up. As a people, we mobilize fast when disaster strikes our neighbors.

"Can we get organized and proactive when we have blue skies?" Williams asks. "Yes we can."

MLK Fest, now in its sixth year, is a three-day event every January that includes community art and city beautification and clean-up projects. Last year, 5,000 volunteers—a majority under the age of 24—turned up to honor Dr. Martin Luther King's message by serving. "They may not have a lot of money but they have sweat, and they show up to help out," Williams says. "With people power, we can make real change, reactivate a region and bring awareness to these areas of blight or crime."

Williams and Phillips testify that Walls has grown much more adept at identifying their organizational holes and blind spots, and at seeking out partners to fill those needs. Williams says they can always use in-kind donations of materials or expertise from the likes of landscaping and construction companies, among other specialists who know how best to beautify sites.

More than 200 public and private partners help make MLK

Fest possible, but you have to scan pretty far down the list of sponsor logos to see the event’s umbrella organization, Walls Project. And Williams likes it that way.

“Organizationally, we have no internal ego,” she says. “We want to push the work out in front, not ourselves, then through that work we are known.”

Mitchell Provensal, the former community gardens coordinator for the mayor’s office, joined as a direct result of Walls Project’s skilled and open-door approach to collaboration and sponsorship. A Southern University graduate in forestry, Provensal serves Futures Fund as the program coordinator for the newly formed Baton Roots Community Farm on 4 acres in north Baton Rouge.

“What used to be the lowest performing golf course in the parish is now a real community asset thanks to Walls, BREC, the city and incredible partnerships with a lot of other stakeholders,” Provensal says.

Hosting demonstrations, workshops and more, Baton Roots’ Hustle & Grow students grow opportunities for themselves, quite literally.

With its first class in 2019, their excitement for mastering new skills was as palpable as the July heat. They walked away with vegetables in hand to improve fresh food access in their neighborhoods, and empowered with the knowledge to make changes to dietary habits and to discuss healthy eating with friends and family.

Like MLK Fest’s community clean-ups that have impacted more than 5.5 miles of the city, Baton Roots is a Walls method of reactivating a lost asset into something useful and communal.

And there are few things as communal as a visibly stunning public mural.

“No one walks around saying, ‘Man, I hate art,’” Phillips says.

• • •

Whether driving by a colorful city block or overhearing someone telling a friend they have to check out this mural or that one, Walls Project Mural Coordinator Kimberly Braud’s excitement and pride for these public art pieces is easy to read. She beams when discussing her team’s work.

Braud grew up always experimenting with art projects, but with Walls, the young artist has found her niche in the workforce.

“I really wanted my passion for art to be meaningful,” Braud says. “And Walls absolutely fulfills that every day by supporting

young creators and benefiting the community.”

In this way, Braud’s goals for an arts career with impact closely mirror the mission of Walls Project, which from almost day one aimed to leap beyond downtown murals and dig beneath the surface of the city to enact lasting social and economic change.

That change can extend even to crime prevention. “Murals can literally save lives,” Braud says. A new study—though still under review at LSU—led by Dr. Tracey Rizzuto, associate director of the university’s School of Leadership and Human Resource Development, reports that incidents of crime are reduced by 38% within a 5-block radius of a mural after one year.

“What started as murals became a community and coalition building program,” Phillips explains. “And we made that decision to diversify in the first year of Walls, we just didn’t put that out there because we were busy introducing ourselves to the community.”

Eight years later, the question becomes not one of beautification of buildings—they’ve done so many times over—but beautiful transformation of a community. Can this movement remake the quality, the perception, the very value of an entire city, the same way it can change the side of a building once unfairly ignored? How big of a paint brush can Walls Project wield?

“Whenever people don’t act like gatekeepers and instead operate more open, then amazing things start to happen—one dream, one team,” Phillips says, as if not just referring to newer colleagues like Provensal, but perhaps a much broader spectrum of potential partners, supporters and the populace at large—anyone who picks up a brush to help with a community mural, or picks up trash at the MLK Day event, or those who slow down to crane their necks at the eye-popping visuals that bloom across their morning commute, unaware their views were improved by artists attracted and empowered by the Walls Project.

Phillips acknowledges that much of Walls Project’s cultivating initiatives are working at a long game, but he and his team are committed to that challenge because the social and economic viability of a city long-term hinges so crucially on the next generation of civic leadership. And those middle- and high school students now are part of the generation Phillips is most passionate about reaching.

He, like Walls Project, is devoted to potential. “Giving youth the opportunity to learn and to collaborate with other youth in the community, the conversation becomes about abundance, not scarcity. The fact is we can create so much together.” •

## TALK IT OUT

In New York City, you can sit at a Friendship Bench and talk to someone about your problem. They aren't therapists; they are people who have been there. "These are nontraditional safe spaces in plain view—no strings attached," said Takeesha White, who works for NYC's health department. "You can work with someone who has a heart and understands and has been through the system." A nonprofit in New York manages the program, which sets up benches outside city health centers and other gathering places, such as fairs. The city adopted the idea from Zimbabwe.



## BALANCING POWER

Shifting demand for electricity could reduce power consumption by 15% at peak hours by 2030, according to a report by the Battle Group. Now that appliances and industrial processes are on a digital grid, utilities can more easily manage when they are turned on and off, with permission from customers. Electric hot water heaters are an example. Utilities can set them to heat water at night when lower demand reduces the need for expensive peak power.



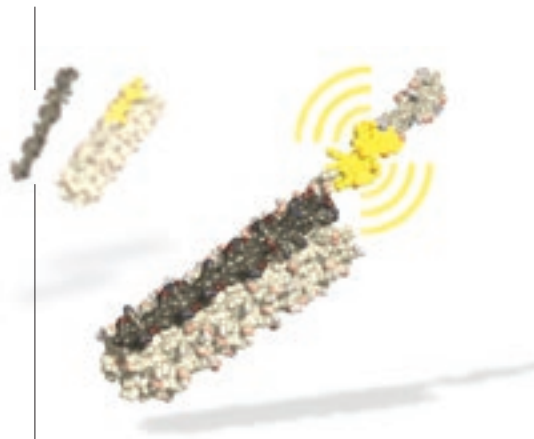
## WASTE NOT

U.S. consumers toss out \$218 billion worth of food every year. Globally, the carbon emitted by wasted food alone ranks just behind the U.S. and China, the two largest emitters. There's an elemental solution: change the way expiration dates are depicted on food. Clear labeling, such as when food is at its peak and when it's no longer safe to eat, would reduce food waste by 30%. The Food Marketing Institute and National Grocer Manufacturers have already offered a solution.



## FOREVER YOUNG... SOMEWHAT

A scientist may have found the fountain of youth, but there's a problem. Juan Carlos Izpisua Belmonte, who works at the Gene Expression Laboratory at San Diego's Salk Institute for Biological Studies, has reset chemical switches in mice, curing them of disease and making them young again. But the rejuvenated mice die in a few days, or develop tumors that kill them later. Still, Izpisua Belmonte believes the technique will be perfected and extend human life by up to 50 years. "I think the kid that will be living to 130 is already with us," he tells *MIT Technology Review*. "He has already been born. I'm convinced."



## BIOLOGY'S FLIP-FLOP

Scientists at the University of Washington have created a synthetic protein that could initiate a revolution in biology. They compare their invention to the transistor, which sparked the computer age. Numbering about 20,000, human proteins trigger biological functions, such as turning starch into sugar and letting us smell mustard. But proteins are challenging to manipulate because they do more than one function. Named LOCKR, the synthetic protein's sole purpose is to turn cells on and off; it's a biological switch. Companies are already testing the protein to attack cancer cells.



## HOUSING LIFTS

Housing vouchers weren't working well enough. If they were coupled with helpful information and support services, would more families relocate to neighborhoods that provide better odds of upward mobility? In an experiment in Seattle, economist Raj Chetty found the answer to his question: by adding support to housing vouchers, he raised the share of families moving to higher-opportunity neighborhoods from 14% to 54%. "This is the largest effect I've ever seen in a social science intervention."

# CODA

Lee Ann Lockridge (left)  
and Karen Stagg



## SECOND CHANCES, WITH A LITTLE HELP

When women are released from prison, Karen Stagg is there for them. With her small crew at Connections for Life, Karen teaches former prisoners how to transition from life in jail, where all decisions were made for them, to living on their own again, making choices for themselves. They come out needing not only job skills but life skills as well. The women work at Connections thrift store on Highland Road to earn money and, just as importantly, to learn how to conduct themselves with confidence in a workplace. The one-year program has served more than 500 women looking for a fresh start. With backing from our fund donors, the Foundation is assisting Karen and Connections' board, led by LSU law school professor Lee Ann Lockridge. Together, we're raising money so that more women can fulfill the promises they have made to themselves.

“Reclaiming downtown has given a lot of hope to our younger generation. The energy is spreading across our parish. You can see it in Mid City and the exciting redevelopment that’s taking place there.”

More than \$2 billion has been invested in downtown since the Foundation underwrote a master plan. The city center is alive again; our members have made it so.

**Cordell Haymon**  
Member since 1989



## Membership

is more than financial support.

It’s a declaration by our members that they

*believe in  
our region*

and its future.

In 2019, we’ll use member support to expand justice reforms with local officials, pursue funding to implement the lakes master plan, add more space for scientists on the Water Campus, press efforts to reclaim the city, and expand education opportunities for schoolchildren.

Please renew your membership or join us as a new member at [BRAf.org/membership](http://BRAf.org/membership).

DOWNTOWN *redevelopment*

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# TOMORROW IS BUILT BY WHAT WE DO TODAY

Lemoine is proud to partner with the Baton Rouge Area Foundation in a shared vision to improve the community where we live and work. Together, we are all constructors of our community, builders of our future.



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