

# CURRENTS

*second quarter 2025*

BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION

*braf.org*



## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

*Changing the game, and the outcomes, of education in  
East Baton Rouge Parish*





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**A**s I step into the role of Chair at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, I am both honored and energized to be a part of this incredible journey alongside our committed staff, partners, donors, and community members. Together, we have an extraordinary opportunity to build on a strong legacy of community investment and innovation, shaping a Baton Rouge that will thrive for generations to come.

I also want to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude to Jeff Koonce, our immediate past chair, for his humble leadership throughout his tenure and commitment to creating positive change throughout our region. I step into this role with deep respect for the work that has come before and great optimism for what lies ahead.

Already, this year has brought remarkable milestones that underscore the Foundation's commitment to strengthening our region.

In May, we celebrated two years of the Center for Nonprofit Excellence, which continues to play a transformative role in our community. Since 2023, the Center has supported Baton Rouge's nonprofit sector through leadership development, professional fellowships, networking

opportunities, and strategic consulting. Over the past year alone, it has engaged 150 nonprofit groups, elevated the visibility of 125 organizations through our Nonprofit Directory, served 80 professionals through leadership and development programming, and welcomed over 40 new nonprofit members into the Foundation's network.

The Center's staff continue to provide innovative ways to strengthen the nonprofit ecosystem. After detailed and thoughtful planning, they launched the first cohort of our Nonprofit Board Chair Fellows, who graduated in March. Over six in-depth sessions, nonprofit leaders honed their governance skills and strengthened their leadership capacity. This tuition-free program represents a powerful investment in building a resilient, effective nonprofit sector.

We also celebrated the graduation of the second cohort of Nonprofit Board Fellows, emerging leaders who completed seven dynamic sessions designed to equip them with the tools and insights essential to strong governance. As we look to the future, we are excited to welcome new cohorts and continue this vital investment in nonprofit leadership.

Our Philanthropic Advancement team continues to work closely with donors and fund holders to support their unique giving goals. In this issue, we are proud to highlight one of the many stories that reflect the spirit of generosity that fuels our work.

Beyond our nonprofit and philanthropic partnerships, the Foundation remains deeply committed to expanding opportunity through civic initiatives and data-driven research.

Earlier this year we joined civic partners to announce the selection of Sasaki, an internationally acclaimed planning firm, to lead Plan Baton Rouge III. This ambitious, 12-month effort builds on the momentum of previous downtown master

plans and will involve deep community engagement to envision a more vibrant, inclusive, and connected city center.

The Foundation's Opportunity Data Project continues to inform key efforts across the region. The latest briefing, released this spring, focuses on early intervention strategies to reduce violent crime. By analyzing patterns in data from our education and justice systems, the report identifies early warning signs and underscores the value of preventive, community-informed solutions.

This summer, the Foundation will begin a new chapter as we move to the Rivermark Centre. This new space offers room to grow, greater flexibility to support nonprofit organizations, and a location that aligns with our commitment to downtown revitalization. It will allow us to better serve as a hub for collaboration, connection, and community engagement.

As we look ahead, I am inspired by the momentum we have created together and the opportunities still to come. Our shared vision, grounded in partnership and purpose, will continue to guide our efforts to expand opportunity and improve lives throughout greater Baton Rouge.

Thank you for your continued trust and support. Together, we will build on our successes and create an even brighter future for our community.

With sincere thanks,

Thomas J. Adamek  
Chair, Baton Rouge Area Foundation



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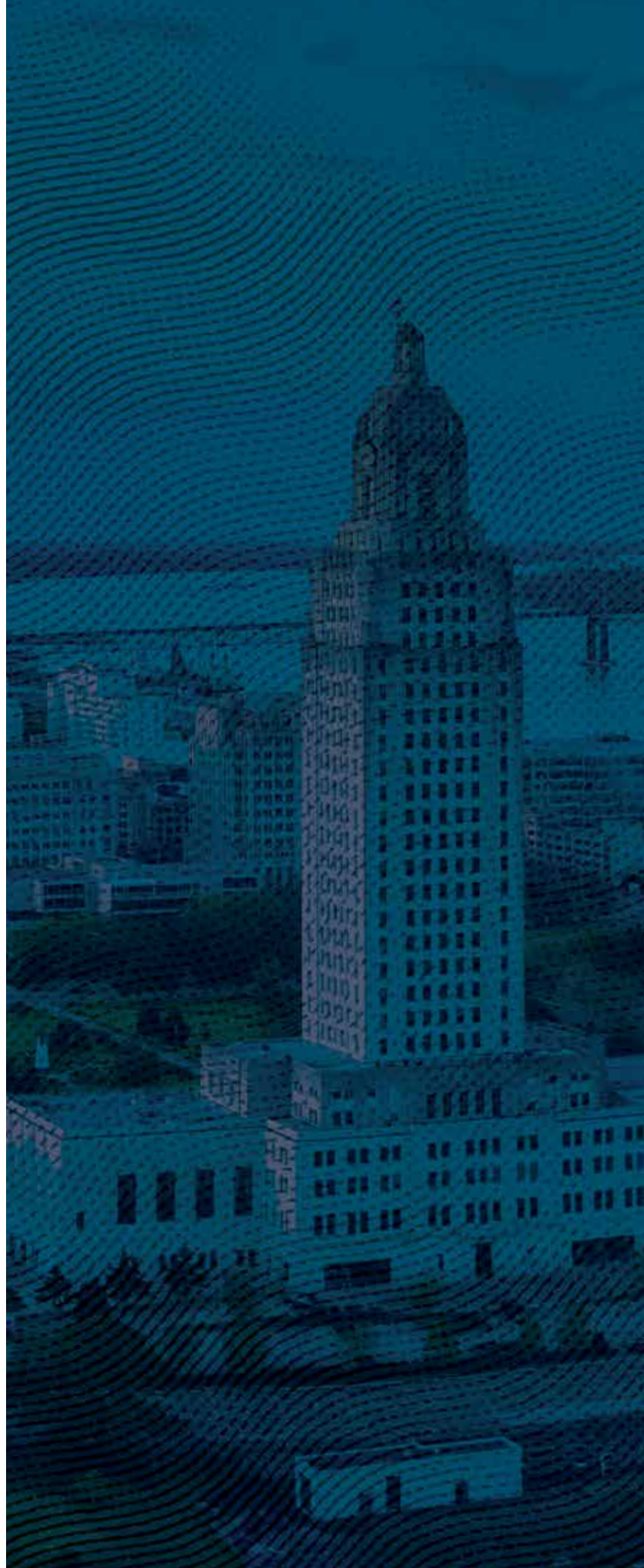
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## About

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation has been dedicated to making a difference in South Louisiana since 1964. With a mission to enhance the quality of life in our region, we unite human and financial resources to drive positive change and foster community growth. Among the largest community foundations in the country, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life in greater Baton Rouge and across South Louisiana.

The Foundation pursues its mission by serving donors to build the assets that drive initiatives and solutions, supporting local nonprofits with strategic consulting to ensure overall impact and sustainability, engaging community leaders to develop appropriate responses to emerging opportunities and challenges, and by partnering with others to leverage collective resources and create the capacity to be a stimulus of positive regional change.

## Our North Star

Our North Star is clear: We strive to build a thriving and resilient future for all in Baton Rouge and beyond. Through strategic initiatives, collaborative partnerships, and thoughtful philanthropy, we work tirelessly to address emerging challenges and opportunities in our community.

## How We Fulfill Our Mission

We pursue our mission through three key avenues:

### 1 Catalyzing change and positive opportunity in our community.

The Foundation leads civic projects with annual support from our members. This work seeks to address the most pressing barriers to opportunity and is guided by data and community need.

### 2 Fostering a strong philanthropic environment.

We believe philanthropy is for everyone. The Foundation supports philanthropists at every stage of their journey of giving — providing education, counsel, and tools to help them support nonprofits and

the community at large with their time, knowledge, and resources.

### 3 Empowering changemakers and nonprofits.

Our Center for Nonprofit Excellence provides strategic and technical support to nonprofit organizations. We build relationships with and between nonprofits in our area, connect organizations to funding opportunities, offer consulting services for fundraising and planning, and lead educational fellowships.





## On the Move

THE BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION will embark on an exciting new chapter with a move to the Rivermark Centre in the coming months. After several years of growth in the IBM Building, the Foundation is preparing to transition to a location that better supports its expanding team and evolving community mission.

The move to the Rivermark Centre presents a significant opportunity for the Foundation, where the new space offers approximately 50 percent more square footage, allowing for greater flexibility for staff and guests. At the same time, the Foundation will realize monthly savings, cutting rent costs. This combination of increased capacity and cost-efficiency will enable the Foundation to expand its ability to host community gatherings, meetings, and collaborative events, creating more space to foster meaningful connections with donors, members, and partners.

Importantly, this relocation aligns with the broader goals of Plan Baton Rouge III, reflecting the Foundation's ongoing commitment to invest in downtown Baton Rouge and its surrounding neighborhoods.

With this move, the Foundation is

poised to strengthen its role as a community hub and continue its work to build a vibrant and inclusive future for the region. BRAF looks forward to inviting community partners to the new space once construction is completed in early fall.



Rendering of the atrium in the new office space at Rivermark Centre.



## Plan Baton Rouge III

IN FEBRUARY, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation joined with civic partners to announce the selection of internationally acclaimed planning firm Sasaki to lead Plan Baton Rouge III, a visionary initiative focused on the continued growth and revitalization of downtown Baton Rouge.

The selection was announced at a press conference held by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, the City-Parish of East Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge Area Chamber, Downtown Development District, Visit Baton Rouge, and other community champions.

A public kickoff event followed in April, bringing together more than 200 community members at the Louisiana Art and Science Museum. Attendees had the opportunity to meet project leaders, ask questions, and share their ideas to help shape the future of downtown.

Building on the successes of previous planning initiatives, Plan Baton Rouge III continues the transformation launched in 1998 with Plan Baton Rouge I and expanded in 2009 with Plan Baton Rouge II. Together, the first two plans laid the groundwork for coordinated public and private investments totaling more than \$3 billion over the last 20 years.



Sasaki was chosen from a competitive pool of 23 firms. The firm brings a wealth of experience, having led award-winning projects around the world and locally, including master plans for the Baton Rouge Lakes, Greenwood Park, and the Baton Rouge Zoo.





Over the next year, the firm will collaborate closely with the Baton Rouge community to create a bold, actionable vision for downtown. The planning area extends from the Mississippi River to Capitol Lake, Downtown East, and Interstate 10, with a special focus on key corridors such as Main Street, Florida Boulevard, North Boulevard, Government Street, 3rd Street, and Nicholson Drive.

Several local firms have joined the planning effort as collaborators. Franklin Associates is leading engagement and

outreach. CSRS manages planning and engineering. Vectura is overseeing traffic analysis. Trahan Architects will provide architectural guidance. James Lima Planning + Development is advising on economic strategy.

With community collaboration at its core, the planning process is designed to complement existing initiatives and build upon current assets. The result will be a unified vision that sets the course for downtown Baton Rouge's next chapter.



**TO LEARN MORE  
AND FOLLOW THE  
PLANNING PROCESS,  
VISIT [WWW.PLAN  
BATONROUGE.COM](http://WWW.PLANBATONROUGE.COM)**



## Fellows Graduation

IN MARCH, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation proudly celebrated the graduation of the first cohort of the Nonprofit Board Chair Fellows program, an initiative launched through the Foundation's Center for Nonprofit Excellence. This tuition-free program was created to strengthen nonprofit leadership across Greater Baton Rouge by equipping board chairs and executive-level staff with the skills and knowledge needed to govern their organization with confidence and clarity.

Over the course of six thoughtfully curated sessions, 19 dedicated board chairs representing organizations of all sizes came together to deepen their understanding of governance, refine their leadership strategies, and develop practical tools to enhance their boards' effectiveness. The sessions covered essential topics such as understanding governance, meeting and committee



Nonprofit Board Chair Fellows March Graduation





Nonprofit Board Fellows November Graduation

management, executive director evaluations, succession planning, and fostering board engagement in fundraising and advocacy.

Beyond the curriculum, the program also fostered valuable connections, offering fellows a chance to build relationships with peers and nonprofit partners who shared a common commitment to community impact. By investing in the development of board leaders, the Nonprofit Board Chair Fellows Program is helping to create a stronger, more resilient nonprofit sector, one empowered leader at a time.

In November of last year, the Foundation marked another milestone with the graduation of its latest class of Nonprofit Board Fellows. This program, also facilitated by the Center for Nonprofit Excellence, supports new or

aspiring board members who are eager to lead with integrity and purpose. Through seven dynamic sessions, participants gained essential insights and tools to navigate the responsibilities of nonprofit governance and leadership.

Tailored for professionals with fewer than five years of experience in board service, the program welcomed 28 individuals from diverse industries, all passionate about advancing nonprofit work in Greater Baton Rouge. Key lessons included effective board conduct, fiduciary duties, strategic fundraising, and identifying service opportunities that aligned with their values and strengths. Alongside practical training, the program also offered valuable networking opportunities, connecting fellows with a network of changemakers and mission-driven organizations.

Applications for the next cohort of Board Fellows opens in summer 2025, inviting a new generation of leaders to help shape the future of nonprofit governance in Baton Rouge.



**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CENTER FOR NONPROFIT EXCELLENCE AND STAY UP TO DATE ON THE UPCOMING BOARD FELLOWS APPLICATION PROCESS, VISIT**  
[BRAF.ORG/NONPROFITS](https://braf.org/nonprofits)



# New Opportunity Data Project Briefing



IN MARCH, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, in partnership with data science firm Common Good Labs, released the fifth installment of the Opportunity Data Project, focusing on disrupting violent crime through early intervention. Drawing on one of the most comprehensive education datasets in the country, this latest briefing explores how timely support for young boys can reduce the chances of future involvement in violence.

More than 150 community members gathered for the launch event, where Foundation leaders presented key insights from the report. Rhett Morris from Common Good Labs and Brenna Benson Lamb, chief operating officer of BRAF, shared the key findings detailed in the report. A panel discussion and Q&A session followed with District Attorney Hillar Moore, Juvenile Judge Gail Grover, and Chris Meyer, BRAF’s president and CEO, on how the recommendations can be implemented in the community.

Developed in collaboration with the East Baton Rouge Parish School System and the District Attorney’s Office, the briefing

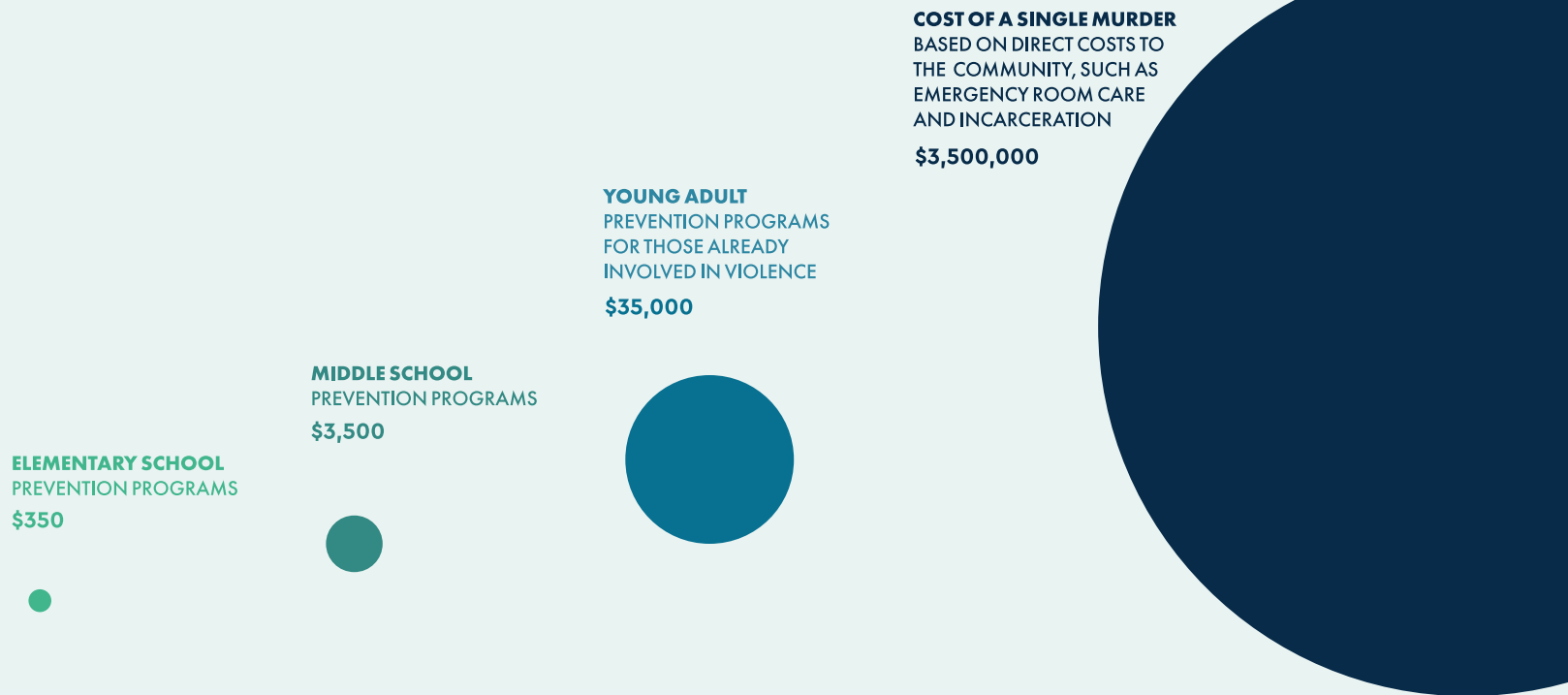
## HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN A LOCAL CHILD NEEDS MORE SUPPORT? Five “signals of disengagement” that show a student is at-risk of dropping out in the future

|                                          |                                                                                                                     |                  |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| LOW READINESS FOR KINDERGARTEN           | When a student scores at the lowest level of preparedness for learning at the beginning of their first school year. | Kindergarten     |
| CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM                      | When a student misses 10% or more of the days in a single school year.                                              | 1st to 8th grade |
| BEHAVIORAL INCIDENTS                     | When a student has two times more major behavioral incidents, such as in the same grade.                            | 1st to 8th grade |
| INABILITY TO READ AT BASIC LEVEL         | When a student fails to read at the minimum expected level for thier grade.                                         | 3rd to 5th grade |
| INABILITY TO PERFORM MATH AT BASIC LEVEL | When a student fails to master grade-level expectations in math.                                                    | 6th to 8th grade |



## HOW DO THE COSTS OF PREVENTION COMPARE TO THE COSTS OF VIOLENCE?

Cost per participant based on national benchmark estimates



leverages over 15 years of combined education and justice system data to identify patterns that inform preventive strategies tailored to the community's needs.

The report highlights five early warning indicators commonly found among individuals who later engage in violent behavior: low kindergarten readiness, chronic absenteeism in elementary and middle school, frequent behavioral incidents at a young age, reading below basic levels in third through fifth grade, and difficulties with basic math in middle school. While these factors do not predetermine a child's path, they provide crucial opportunities for early support and intervention.

Research indicates that programs supporting early childhood development, improving attendance, enhancing behavior, and increasing literacy and math skills are relatively low in cost compared to the value they provide. These investments can lead to significant savings by reducing future violence and preventing poverty, resulting in positive social and economic outcomes for individuals, families, and the community as a whole. A modest investment of a few hundred dollars in pre-K or elementary school can ultimately save millions in future costs for our community.

Available at [opportunityBTR.org](http://opportunityBTR.org), this latest briefing on disrupting violent crime

reinforces the Foundation's dedication to harnessing data-informed solutions to improve the quality of life across South Louisiana.



SCAN HERE TO VIEW  
THE FULL BRIEFING



## Kantrow Award

DURING THE BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION'S 2025 Annual Meeting in March, the late Brace Godfrey, Jr., was posthumously awarded the Marcia Kaplan Kantrow Baton Rouge Visionary Award. Now in its 10th year, this award honors individuals whose extraordinary dedication has significantly contributed to the development of a stronger and more vibrant Baton Rouge, with a particular focus on the revitalization of downtown.

The award is named after Marcia Kaplan Kantrow, the Foundation's first director of programs and a champion for new urbanism and thoughtful community development. Her legacy is carried on through the achievements of individuals like Godfrey, Jr., who transformed vision into lasting impact.

Godfrey, Jr. was a respected civic leader who played a key role in revitalizing downtown Baton Rouge. He was instrumental in redeveloping two of its most iconic landmarks: the Kress Building and Hotel Indigo. In addition to his contributions to the physical landscape, Brace served the community in leadership roles with 100 Black Men of Metro Baton Rouge, the Southern University Law Center, and Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church.

His legacy of service, leadership, and love for Baton Rouge continues to inspire us all. The Foundation was proud to present this award to his children, Nikki and Trey, who accepted it on their father's behalf.

The Foundation was honored to celebrate the remarkable life and lasting influence of Brace Godfrey, Jr., a true visionary whose contributions continue to shape the heart of our city.







# FELLOWSHIPS

## AT THE BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION

By AMY ALEXANDER | Photos by TIM MUELLER

Inside the walls of every nonprofit, hearts, minds, and hands yearn to make a difference. Enter BRAF's Fellows Program, administered through its Center for Nonprofit Excellence.

In 2010, BRAF launched its first training program, Development Fellows, designed to help nonprofit stakeholders and staff build their fundraising and stewardship efforts.

The program was successful, so BRAF asked organizations to help shape additional fellowships.

"Our team members meet with nonprofits to understand what their capacity building needs are," says Tammy Abshire, vice president of Nonprofit Excellence. "We develop our responsive programs based on those needs."

In 2023, BRAF launched its Board Fellows program, followed by its Board Chair Fellows program in 2024.

"There aren't a whole lot of training programs that train people to learn all of the various aspects of governance, leadership and fiduciary responsibilities of serving on a board," Abshire says. And when board members step into leadership roles, there are additional specific skill sets that they can learn to up their effectiveness.

The Fellows Program now offers three pathways to help talented and committed people who steer nonprofits increase their knowledge, skills, and power to make a bigger difference in Baton Rouge. Here are some of their stories.



## CINDY SONBUCHNER

### Gardere Initiative

#### Development Fellows | Class of 2024

Once a barrier, the tall pine fence that blocked access from the row of low-income duplexes next to the Hartley/Vey Community Park is gone.

Now, an inviting pathway leads through playgrounds, a basketball court, fruit trees, and into a flourishing winter vegetable garden. Cindy Sonbuchner, operations director of the Gardere Initiative, gently holds a vibrant carrot leaf, the orange root visible beneath. “We

will be picking these soon,” she shares. The neighbors take home boxes of fresh vegetables on harvest days.

As we walk through the park, Sonbuchner describes the various projects spearheaded by the initiative and its partners. The Gardere Initiative worked closely with BREC to revitalize the park, and the refreshed green space is an integral part of its programs. Fullness Farm collaborates

on the garden. Front Yard Bikes teaches children bike repair onsite.

Since its 2006 founding by local church leaders, the Gardere area has seen a 70 percent drop in its crime rate. Now, the focus shifts to financial sustainability – diversifying funding, building reserves, and improving cash flow – to secure the initiative’s future. To build key skills, Sonbuchner joined the 2024 cohort of the BRAF Development Fellows Program. The program provided robust learning sessions from experts in the field, not to mention support from the other fellows.

“There were so many ‘ah-ha’ moments with little details,” Sonbuchner recalls, emphasizing the impact of seemingly small things, like choosing green envelopes, instead of white, to encourage event attendance.

The most significant aspect of the Fellows program for Sonbuchner was her mentorship with nonprofit consultant Shelton Jones. Their monthly huddles helped refine her networking and board development skills, Sonbuchner notes: “She has been so generous with all of her knowledge.”

Walking towards the initiative’s headquarters next to the park, we meet a group of excited tween girls from the after-school program, one eager to share her “updates” with Sonbuchner. Moments later, a smiling little boy interrupts with a hug and a request for homework help: “Will you help me with my homework, Miss Cindy?” “Sure,” Sonbuchner replies, “as soon as I finish showing my friend around.”

These small interactions highlight the Gardere Initiative’s impact. The organization provides the space and structure, but it’s the warmth and engagement of people like Sonbuchner and the community members that truly revitalize the neighborhood.







## LEVAR GREENHOUSE AT&T

### Board Chair Fellows | Class of 2024

On any given day, the Knock Knock Children's Museum fills with giggles, whoops, and cheers. It's the sound of kids having fun. It's also the sound of learning.

When children play, their brains light up. The joy, excitement, and connection they experience as they pretend to drive a car, scan groceries, operate a crane, or craft a masterpiece builds cognition and strengthens neural pathways.

Knock Knock Board Chair Levar Greenhouse, dad to two daughters aged six and nine, has seen firsthand how the museum's interactive exhibits engage his daughters' curiosity and learning. Many of which – such as the crane on the first floor and the bank teller exhibit demonstrating pneumatics – resonate with his STEM background. This personal connection extends to his perspective as board chair.

When he stepped into the role last year, Greenhouse was selected to participate in BRAF's inaugural Board Chair Fellows program, which brought together board members preparing to take the helm at

their respective nonprofits.

"The Fellows program for me was right on time," Greenhouse says.

With a background in electrical engineering, Greenhouse possesses a strong analytical and problem-solving mindset that informs his approach to leadership both as a director at AT&T and as a member of the Knock Knock board. Yet he needed to build additional skills to maximize his impact as chair.

The Fellowship gave him a fresh lens on how to inspire others. The program equipped him with practical tools for effective governance, running streamlined and engaging meetings, and developing efficient agendas – particularly valuable given their lunchtime board meetings.

But it also matched him regularly with a roomful of like-minded volunteers. "You meet so many different board chairs from a diverse group," he says. "Not all were related to children."

Greenhouse listened carefully to the formal talks and the chats before and after meetings with other fellows.

"All nonprofits are going through the same thing," he says.

This shared experience – the constant need to engage their target demographic, seek new ideas, and identify revenue sources – fostered a sense of camaraderie among the fellows.

In many ways, the same elements that help kids learn can also boost a board's performance. Engagement is key. So is keeping it fresh.

"What worked seven years ago when the museum opened is not necessarily applicable seven years later," he says. External forces – think the pandemic and tariffs – change the strategy.

"There is a ripple effect that takes place when a board chair gains new insights and ideas," Greenhouse says. He will pass on what he has learned.

"It gave me the keys to give to the next incoming board chair."



## DANIELLE MACK

### Mary Bird Perkins

#### Board Fellows | Class of 2023

Danielle Mack can readily recite the mission of the Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center, no matter where she goes: “Our mission is to improve survivorship and lessen the burden of cancer,” she says.

The arduous task of applying that mindset to every decision? It falls to leadership and the board of directors. Mack has been at Mary Bird Perkins for 15 years, currently serving as vice president and chief philanthropy officer, yet she finds that there is always something new to learn.

That desire to constantly pick up new skills made Mack an ideal candidate for BRAF’s inaugural cohort of Board Fellows in 2023.

Mack found the deep dive into financial stewardship provided by the fellowship particularly insightful. Learning the nuts and bolts of reading an IRS form 990, for instance, and understanding the connections between resource decisions and programming.

“It transformed how I prepare and present board materials,” she says, underscoring “the importance of telling the story through the financials and the metrics.”

Spending time with a diverse collection of board members at fellowship sessions helped Mack reinforce the fundamentals of great fundraising. She was reminded of the importance of vision. A clear, specific

understanding of purpose drives decisive action and encourages support from others.

“If you are serving as a leader or champion of that organization, you are the face of that organization,” she says.

At Mary Bird Perkins, she daily reminds herself of the importance of remembering who it is she serves. It’s a good approach, no matter your nonprofit’s calling: “We treat moms, third grade teachers, neighbors, salon owners, we treat baristas, we treat everyone, and you absolutely never know who’s going to walk through those doors.” ■





# TEN WAYS TO LEVEL UP YOUR BOARDROOM

## FROM GRADUATES OF BRAf'S BOARD-FOCUSED FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMS

1

### REMEMBER YOUR WHY

"If you're not passionate about the work, then it doesn't inspire action personally or from others," explains Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center's Danielle Mack.

2

### DIVERSIFY YOUR BOARD

"You've got to have a well-rounded board," says Levar Greenhouse, president of the board at Knock Knock Children's Museum. Start by examining the needs of your organization – legal, logistical, and visionary – and select accordingly.

3

### PUT IT IN WRITING

"Encourage board members to write down what they want to accomplish and what skills they bring to the organization. "Be clear about what's motivating you to serve," Mack says.

4

### GET BOARD MEMBER BUY-IN

Mack emphasizes the importance of 100% of your board donating to the organization. It transforms volunteers into champions for the cause.

5

### NETWORK WITH BOARD MEMBERS

"People might not ask questions in the meeting, but they will one on one," Mack notes.

6

### GO BITE-SIZED

"Big goals are best accomplished incrementally," Greenhouse says.

7

### PROVE YOUR WORTH

"You need to have proof of impact conversations," says Cindy Sonbuchner, the Gardere Initiative's Director of Operations. Mack agrees: Stakeholders who can connect their time, talent, and treasure to measurable change become more motivated.

8

### SHARE YOUR "ONCE UPON A TIME"

"Tell them the story of how you were founded," Mack recommends. "Organizations that do this well have a lot of engagement from board members."

9

### STREAMLINE YOUR MEETINGS

"Don't be afraid to ask board members to read the minutes from the last meeting and crunch financial reports ahead of time," Greenhouse says.

10

### CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS

Communicate your needs to your board, Mack says. Explain how the board is structured, the time commitment board members can expect to make, and how hard they will be asked to work to deeply understand the organization that they are serving.



SUPERINTENDENT LAMONT COLE with students at a parish school system early childhood education facility in May.





# Early Childhood Education, Reimagined

COMMUNITY LEADERS ARE UNITING TO CHANGE THE GAME, AND THE OUTCOMES, OF EDUCATION IN EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH

By SARA BONGIORNI | Photos by JAMES PECK & TIM MUELLER

**BATON ROUGE WILL MOVE FORWARD** this summer with a first-of-its-kind push to get early childhood education right for vulnerable children from birth to age 4, the years when 90 percent of brain development occurs.

The undertaking carries transformational promise for families, schools and the economic and social well-being of East Baton Rouge Parish.

It will tap national best practices, elevate data-driven decision-making and seek insight from civic and education leaders, early childhood researchers, parents, teachers and childcare providers from Head Start to home-based centers.

The goal is a unified system of high-quality early education that gives every child in Baton Rouge the best start in life.

“That’s something that everybody wants,” said Chris Meyer, Foundation president and CEO. The systemwide reshaping of early education in Baton Rouge will require what Meyer called an “all-of-the-community approach and solution.”

Over the summer, a working group to be convened by the Foundation will start work on a detailed plan to implement the recommendations of the Baton Rouge Early Childhood Education Task Force, which it released in May.

The core recommendation advanced by the task force is the creation of a nonprofit entity to coordinate a unified system of early childhood education across East Baton Rouge parish.

Oversight by a coordinating entity that is distinct from schools, politics or care providers is itself a best practice, and one pioneered in cities with track records of early education success, Meyer pointed out.

“In communities that have done this successfully, where kids show up ready for kindergarten, there is an entity that is guiding and setting that vision... and focused exclusively on early childhood education,” he said. The new entity will pursue additional priorities identified by the task force, including expanded access to high-





SHENOA WARREN shares a book and a high five with a young child.

“ This isn’t just an education issue; it’s a city-wide priority.”

— Mayor-President Sid Edwards

20

quality early care, systemwide decision making informed by data, coherent communication with providers and parents and coordination of functions such as recruitment and workforce development. It will help develop a sustainable funding structure that considers public and private dollars, allowing care providers to focus on providing exceptional learning experiences for our community’s children.

It will also have access to systemwide information on available seats and funding streams that will allow it to

make the most of available funds, said Shenoa Warren, executive director of early childhood education for East Baton Rouge Parish Schools.

The promise of reshaping the system is expanding access to high-quality care to close achievement gaps and prepare all children for success.

“If they have access to high-quality early childhood education, we can get our children reading and they can graduate on time,” Warren said.

The initiative has the support of Superintendent LaMont Cole and

Mayor Sid Edwards, who asked the Foundation to spearhead formation of the implementation plan.

Mayor Edwards said he is committed to using the platform of his office to advocate for sustained early education funding, innovative practices and accountability measures to advance what he described as a foundational investment.

“This isn’t just an education issue; it’s a city-wide priority,” Edwards said.

A deep body of research supports the promise of investing in high-quality



early education for disadvantaged infants and toddlers. Nobel-winning economist James Heckman argues it yields the highest return of any social investment by promoting economic productivity and reducing social spending related to poverty and even violence.

Development of the implementation plan is the newest phase of Foundation work that began in 2024 with one of the most detailed analyses of educational data in the nation.

The Foundation's Opportunity Data Project looked at indicators from student test scores to attendance records to arrest records to pinpoint the source of educational disparities in the parish and identify where more investment is needed.

Among its findings: Just 50 percent of Baton Rouge children from low-income families show up to kindergarten ready to learn, and 30 percent scored zero on a widely used kindergarten assessment, roughly three times the national average. Of those who scored zero, more than 60 percent will not read by third grade, putting them at higher risk for dropping out of high school and limiting their individual earnings potential across their lifetimes.

"The ripple effect is far reaching," said Superintendent Cole.

The Foundation's early childhood initiative, including the six-to-eight-month timeline to develop an implementation plan, is ambitious by design. Pilot programs to give parents eligible for public subsidies new flexibility in where to enroll their children could begin as early as this year, Meyer said.

Meyer is optimistic Baton Rouge will see notable expansion in access to high-quality early education and gains in readiness over the next five to 10 years. That includes boosting from 50 percent to 80 percent the share of disadvantaged children who are ready to learn when they begin kindergarten.

As is the case nationally, limited funding is the biggest barrier to access to early education in Baton Rouge, and it was central to the task force's eight-month study of gaps and opportunities at the local level.

While some 5,000 children are enrolled in the school system's early education program, as many as 16,000 children from newborns to 4-year-olds from low-income households need early education but are not enrolled in a program, Cole noted.

Meanwhile, limited funding means that hundreds of families who qualify for assistance to cover the cost of early care

don't get it before the money runs out, said Dr. Sherrel Pointer, director of Treasures from Heaven childcare center on Mickens Avenue and a task force member.

Many children aren't enrolled in early education because their families don't meet eligibility requirements for public subsidies but can't afford to pay out of pocket. Pointer's highly rated center cares for 30 children from six weeks to 5 years old, but could enroll as many as 50. The difference underscores the fact that high-quality care is simply out of reach for many working families, she explained.



What if we had a system where we reached out to parents in the hospital with newborns to give them information about early education?"

— LaMont Cole







CIVIC PROJECTS



If they have access to high-quality early childhood education, we can get our children reading and they can graduate on time.”

— Shenoa Warren



DR. SHERREL POINTER surrounded by children at play.







“Funding has to be available,” Pointer said.

East Baton Rouge Parish School System’s early childhood program gets high marks for quality and a track record of innovation. It has opened six early education “micro centers” at Crestworth Elementary and other campuses in partnership with Type III childcare providers, an arrangement that reduces leasing costs for the operators and expands access for families.

It also raised about \$155,000 in local funds in collaboration with the Foundation for East Baton Rouge Parish School System, then doubled that amount with state matching funds for a total of \$309,770 in support of early education for infants to 3-year-olds.

The new coordinating entity will have additional flexibility to pursue creative partnerships and develop new local funding sources at scale. Data on early education enrollment highlights the scope of the challenge. While nearly 100 percent of at-risk 4-year-olds

have access to early education, just 63 percent of at-risk 3-year-olds were enrolled in publicly funded early care in 2023, school figures cited by the task force show.

Enrollment was lower still for infants and toddlers, at 23 percent for at-risk 2-year-olds and 9 percent for at-risk infants—the ages when economist Heckman said high-quality early care has the greatest impact on achievement and long-term well-being.

But communities are transforming early education with creative strategies for funding and access. Philadelphia funds its free preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds with a tax on sugary beverages. Denver’s preschool program uses a sliding scale based on family income to optimize public and private funds. Other innovators include Guilford County, North Carolina, where the Ready for School, Ready for Life initiative partners with healthcare providers to ensure high-quality care for children and promote early literacy.

The particulars of a revamped and unified early education system in Baton Rouge lie ahead, but Superintendent Cole is already imagining the possibilities.

“What if we had a system where we reached out to parents in the hospital with newborns to give them information about early education?” he wondered. “What if we started having these conversations then?” ■



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READ THE FULL REPORT**





# From Tragedy to Hope

## HOW A NEW SCHOLARSHIP IS HELPING FAMILIES HEAL

By SARA BONGIORNI | Photos by COLLIN RICHIE & EMERALD MCINTYRE

Julia Letlow was reeling after the death of her husband when she dug out the dissertation she'd written 20 years earlier as a Ph.D. student at the University of South Florida. Her dissertation centered on interviews with families who had lost a family member about how they'd rediscovered meaning after the death of a loved one.

Letlow was no stranger to grief. Her 17-year-old brother, Jeremy, died in a car accident in 2002. She had written about sibling grief for her master's thesis at the University of Louisiana at Monroe after discovering there was little research on it.

Two decades later, Letlow again went looking for hope in the experience of others, this time after her husband, Representative-elect Luke Letlow, died from complications of COVID-19 in December 2020, days before the 41-year-old was set to take office as U.S. representative for Louisiana's 5th District.

His death left her to raise their children, a 3-year-old son and 11-month-old daughter, on her own. In the days after his loss, she felt the tug of what she'd learned about coping with loss from the families she'd interviewed two decades before.

"I wanted to know what had helped others," said now U.S. Representative Letlow, who went on to win a special election in the 5th District in 2021 and become the first Republican woman to represent the state in the U.S. House of Representatives.

She found wisdom in the pages of her student work, including this bit that struck home for her: Looking outside of yourself for a way to serve others will ultimately help you find hope.

That insight helped lay the groundwork for the Hope in Action Scholarship. The scholarship, which is administered by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, honors Luke Letlow's memory by supporting college or trade-school students in the 5th District who lost a parent to COVID-19.

As a former university administrator, a memorial focused on education was a natural fit for Letlow, whose husband

had sat alongside her as she delivered her final presentation during a bid for the presidency of the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

"We were true partners, and it was Luke who helped me craft a vision statement for what the work of a university can be," she said.

The scholarship's aim is to ease the burden of families already coping with loss. Initial funding came from individual donors. Later, chambers of commerce and economic development entities chipped in during the 2023 Washington Mardi Gras economic development luncheon when Letlow, then-event chairperson, was asked to highlight a fund or nonprofit of her choosing.

"I couldn't help but think about my own children, but also about other children around the state who had lost a parent to COVID," she said. "I wanted to





U.S. REPRESENTATIVE JULIA LETLOW speaks about the origin of the Hope in Action Scholarship.





help survivors, and especially moms and dads, by taking one thing off their plate.”

The scholarship’s inaugural recipient is Summer Fortenberry, who graduated in May from Louisiana Tech University with a degree in marketing. The scholarship will fund a master’s degree in business administration that she will begin this fall on the Ruston campus.

Fortenberry’s story is gut wrenching and inspiring.

Paul Fortenberry was a farmer, truck driver and father of five whose tireless good humor and ever-present smile made him a local legend in tiny Tallulah in Madison Parish. He was hospitalized in Jackson, Mississippi, in January 2021 after experiencing cold-like symptoms and died there about three months later, weeks before Summer Fortenberry graduated from high school.

The 22-year-old has her father’s smile. She looks so much like him that she’s long been called Mini Paul. She’s the focus of gentle ribbing by her siblings about her luck in being both the baby of the family and her dad’s favorite.

She spent much of her childhood trailing after her father in his fields of corn, cotton and soy beans he cultivated, sometimes climbing up into his tractor with him. She sat next to him up front in his 18-wheeler as he delivered fertilizer across Louisiana and into Arkansas. He taught her to hunt and, as he’d done with her siblings, almost never missed one of her softball or basketball games. He especially enjoyed watching her play first base and outfield.

“If he didn’t have to be on the tractor, he’d be there,” said Fortenberry, who hopes to stay in the region and work in medical sales after completing her master’s degree.

The Hope in Action Scholarship did for Summer Fortenberry what Representative Letlow had hoped it would do in removing a weight from her mother’s shoulders after the loss of the family’s main breadwinner.

“It’s been a huge help in taking stress

off my mother,” Fortenberry said.

Writing the scholarship essay was tough. Losing her father in spring of her senior year meant parties and senior celebrations without him. He was not at graduation, when she was honored as salutatorian.

“It was hard not having him there for those big events,” Fortenberry said.

At the same time, she was grateful to be able to tell her story, to talk about how much her father’s death had affected her, to share how much they loved each other. She wrote about struggling some school-day afternoons over whether to do ordinary teenaged things, as her mother encouraged her to do, instead of driving to the hospital in Jackson to see her father.

She wrote about the call the morning after a sleepover at a friend’s house when she learned that her father was dying and that the family should come to Jackson. She recalled gathering in his hospital room, her father slipping away as visiting hours came to a close and everyone gathered their belongings to leave for the night.

“It was hard to write about that,” Fortenberry said. “[The essay] made me think about how much it had impacted me.”



**She made me feel important... It meant a lot to me to know what was behind the scholarship, and that someone wanted to hear my story.”**

— Summer Fortenberry

It also helped Fortenberry realize how much support she’d had from family, friends and neighbors in Tallulah, where

her father’s easy connection with others made him a beloved figure.

“He would talk to everybody,” she said.

The call from Letlow telling her she had been selected for the scholarship was likewise healing.

“She made me feel important,” Fortenberry said. “It meant a lot to me to know what was behind the scholarship, and that someone wanted to hear my story.”

While the scholarship has deep personal meaning for Letlow, partnering with the Baton Rouge Area Foundation to bring it to life also provided new insight into the role of community foundations in bringing people together to positively impact their communities.

Letlow had experience there, too. Years earlier, she had helped run a nonprofit organization to honor her brother after his death, but soon found herself overwhelmed with the details of its operations. By comparison, the Hope in Action Scholarship was developed quickly with assistance from the Foundation, which manages it with her input.

“For BRAF to be a conduit to make it come to life was a blessing,” Letlow said. “I had expert guidance this time.”

While the work is in its early days, Letlow is exploring the idea of developing a congressional caucus on community foundations to maximize their impact on communities in Louisiana and elsewhere. The organizations are trusted entities that know their communities and have the resources to bring people together for positive impact, she said.

“They are the bridge to help people make dreams for their community a reality,” she said. “When a donor wants to help people but don’t know where to start, foundations are the logical place to turn.” ■



SUMMER FORTENBERRY, Hope in Action  
Scholarship recipient.





# YOUR STRATEGIC PARTNER

Launched in 2023, the Center for Nonprofit Excellence at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation supports the nonprofit community through leadership training, professional fellowships, and membership opportunities. Plus, for over a decade we've offered consulting services focused on board governance, strategic planning, and fundraising to nonprofit organizations in the capital region.

Hear from one of our consulting clients:

*“Working with BRAF felt like gaining a true thought partner. Their team brought a thoughtful, collaborative approach that respected where we were while helping us envision where we could go. I used to joke that meeting with them felt like nonprofit therapy—holding space for big questions, tough decisions, and bold possibilities. I would highly recommend them to any organization that is ready to grow with intention and clarity.”*

*Morgan Hilliard, MBA  
Executive Director  
Thrive Foundation*



**BRAF**  
BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION

225.387.6126 | [nonprofits@braf.org](mailto:nonprofits@braf.org)



# 2025 ANNUAL AWARDS

By BAILEY BROOME | Photos by TIM MUELLER



*E*ach year at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation's Annual Meeting, awards are presented to exceptional individuals who have significantly contributed to improving our beloved community.

For over two decades, the John W. Barton, Sr. Excellence in Nonprofit Management Awards have enabled the Foundation to recognize and celebrate the most dedicated nonprofit leaders in Baton Rouge. This award is named in honor of John Barton, one of the Foundation's founders, who provided invaluable guidance to its leaders and staff during his tenure.

Since 2016, the Marcia Kaplan Kantrow Baton Rouge Visionary Award has allowed the Foundation to spotlight individuals whose dedication has profoundly shaped Baton Rouge, with a special focus on revitalizing downtown. You can learn more about this award and its recipient on page 12.

This year, the Foundation introduced the Champion for Giving Award, a new recognition for professional advisors who encourage their clients to engage in charitable giving by connecting them with the Foundation.

In the following pages, winners of the Barton Awards and our inaugural Champion for Giving awardee share about their efforts to make Baton Rouge better each and every day.



## Q&amp;A

## LIBBIE SONNIER, Ph.D.

## BARTON AWARD WINNER

**Tell us about your organization.**

The Louisiana Policy Institute for Children is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that serves as an independent source of data, research, and information for policymakers and stakeholders on issues related to early care and education for young children and their families in Louisiana.

**How did you start working in the nonprofit sector? Tell us generally about your journey to your current organization.**

I began my career working in government as an early interventionist, early childhood special educator, home visitor, and behaviorist, gradually moving into leadership roles. Along the way, I had the great fortune of being mentored by the late Alice Thomas, CEO and Founder of what is now known as the Center for Literacy and Learning. Without her guidance, I may never have entered the nonprofit sector. She taught me invaluable lessons, especially about pursuing mission-driven work — for which I am eternally grateful. Alongside her, my academic mentor, Dr. Sharon Landesman Ramey, helped me recognize that my training as a practitioner, researcher, and scientist could uniquely serve the world of policy.

**What is the most valuable lesson you've learned while leading your organization?**

The most valuable lesson I've learned is to slow down and take the time to listen to and understand the community's perspective. In crafting smart policies based on research and data, it's critical to also consider the unintended consequences and the real-life impact on those we aim to serve.

**Do you have a favorite quote or guiding mantra?**

Erma Bombeck said, "When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'"

**If you could describe the community you serve in one or two sentences, what would you say?**

We serve Louisiana's youngest learners, from prenatal through age four. They are worthy, brilliant, and deserving of our collective efforts to create a stronger Louisiana — a foundation that begins with successful children.

**What inspires you to keep serving your community?**

I am inspired by the endless possibilities that open up for children when they have access to quality early childhood experiences, supports, and services. Our children do not choose the circumstances they are born into; it is our duty to help prepare them for success in school and in life.

**What skill do you consider to be your secret superpower?**

I consider my ability to remain calm and decisive in chaos to be my superpower. It's been invaluable when working with partners across the state and with elected officials.

**Success rarely happens in a vacuum; can you share a bit about others who have helped support your work?**

I am a reflection of all those who have invested in me — my family, mentors, friends, partners, and our incredible team at LPIC, including our fabulous board. I am especially grateful for my husband, Jorge, and our family. They are my constant cheerleaders, comic relief, and the safe place where I land when the work feels daunting ahead.

**What is your hope for the future of your service area?**

My hope is for Louisiana to have a unified early childhood system that ensures all families have access to seamless, high-quality early childhood development, health, and education services — a foundation that allows every child to thrive.





**LIBBIE SONNIER, Ph.D.**  
CEO, LOUISIANA POLICY INSTITUTE  
FOR CHILDREN



LUCAS SPIELFOGEL  
CEO, BATON ROUGE  
YOUTH COALITION





# Q&A

## LUCAS SPIELFOGEL

### BARTON AWARD WINNER

#### **Tell us about your organization.**

The Baton Rouge Youth Coalition helps teens – called “Fellows” – excel in high school, plan and execute their postsecondary pathways, succeed in those pathways, and secure jobs that offer family-sustaining wages. We fulfill this mission through outside-of-school programming, in-school courses and services, and an alumni program that follows Fellows through postsecondary and into their careers.

#### **How did you start working in the nonprofit sector? Tell us generally about your journey to your current organization.**

I came to Baton Rouge by way of Teach For America. Just as I was finishing my two-year TFA commitment at Baker Middle School, the founder of BRYC was looking for a successor during the organization’s third year. I applied for the position in 2012, and the rest is history.

#### **What is the most valuable lesson you’ve learned while leading your organization?**

There have been too many valuable lessons to narrow it down to one, but I will say that leading a successful organization takes equal parts impatience and patience. Strong leaders have an impatience that drives urgency, but also, it’s wise to accept that building something great takes a long time, and to be patient with yourself along the way.

#### **Do you have a favorite quote or guiding mantra?**

“The grass is greenest where you water it.”

#### **If you could describe the community you serve in one or two sentences, what would you say?**

BRYC serves students who work extremely hard and have serious future plans but who generally lack access to high quality postsecondary and career support services.

#### **What motivates you to keep serving your community?**

My personal mission, to increase equity and decrease suffering, inspires me to work hard every day.

#### **When you have out of town guests, what do you insist they must see or do before leaving South Louisiana?**

My family and friends know that my wife, son, and I are homebodies, so when they come to visit, they can expect lots of hanging out in and around the house. Recently I’ve been taking visitors to my new favorite restaurant, Brasas Peru near the Perkins and Essen intersection.

#### **Success rarely happens in a vacuum; can you share a bit about others who have helped support your work?**

BRYC has the best team, which includes our staff, board, and hundreds of volunteer mentors and tutors. None of what we do would be possible without the devotion of these people, many of whom have become my adoptive family. Speaking of, my wife Bree and son Quinn are the loves of my life and my support system, and Bree in particular has been riding with BRYC since my earliest days in 2012. And of course, the heartbeat of the BRYC Community are our Fellows, parents/guardians, and alumni. I’m most thankful for their trust in us.

#### **What is your hope for the future of your service area?**

Our vision is that all youth in South Louisiana have a clear understanding of the available postsecondary pathways and a support system that will help them convert these pathways into financial stability and personal contentment. This is not a radical vision. Indeed it is an economic and human imperative.



# Q&A

## PHERICA PERKINS

### BARTON AWARD WINNER

#### **Tell us about your organization.**

The Pointe Coupee Early Childhood Coalition formed in 2005 to share information, connect partners, and work with the community to provide the best environment for our youngest children (and their families!) to be happy, healthy, resilient and successful.

The Coalition office is open 5 days a week. We offer coaching, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities to serve families and childcare providers. We partner with pediatric health care providers to provide free books for well-child checks and promote developmental screenings and referrals for early childhood special needs.

#### **How did you start working in the nonprofit sector? Tell us generally about your journey to your current organization.**

I was attracted to the nonprofit sector because I saw education, and early childhood education especially, as a key lever for uplifting our most vulnerable. Kids should all have the opportunity to learn how to read, but if you don't provide those most basic foundations in early childhood, you're handicapping a generation.

#### **When you have out of town guests, what do you insist they must see or do before leaving South Louisiana?**

We always have to sample the local cuisine. If you've ever read the children's book "the very hungry gator" we sort of look like that at the end of their visit; very happy, very roly-poly.

#### **What skill do you consider to be your secret superpower?**

Pragmatism! You're never going to have unlimited resources for your unlimited needs. When you can be pragmatic and focus on how to make things work now, not in some hypothetical perfect world, you can make progress. Letting go of perfectionism and focusing on incremental progress is important.

#### **Do you have a favorite quote or guiding mantra?**

"Are the children well?", it's something Dr. Quentina Timoll would say when she was at the Department of Education. It always stuck with me.

#### **What motivates you to keep serving your community?**

The work I do every day is so that children can thrive and realize their full potential. Whenever things feel tough, I always come back to the heart of making the future bright for our children.

#### **Success rarely happens in a vacuum; can you share a bit about others who have helped support your work?**

I would be remiss if I didn't thank the incredible board and team at PCECC; Caryl Ewing is quite possibly the best board chair you could ever hope for, but the entire board has talent oozing out of their pores. We also have incredible partners who support our work: the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children, the LSU Early Childhood Education Institute, LANO, Capital Area United Way, the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation' Capacity Building Institute. I would not be the leader I am today without that program. My wonderful friends and family have also been incredible (it's true that behind every successful woman is a group chat hyping her up and proofreading her emails).

#### **What is your hope for the future of the Baton Rouge area?**

The challenges we face in educating children and eradicating poverty require thoughtful, research-informed solutions. Yet, there's too little interest in comprehensive, aligned data reporting and analysis. My hope is that Baton Rouge, and Louisiana in general would lead the way in using our rich research resources to pilot and scale initiatives that work for kids.





**PERICHE PERKINS**

OUTGOING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, POINTE  
COUPÉE EARLY CHILDHOOD COALITION



SIDNEY M. BLITZER, JR.  
ATTORNEY, BUTLER SNOW LLP





# Q&A

## SIDNEY M. BLITZER, JR.

### CHAMPION FOR GIVING WINNER

#### **What initially drew you to estate planning, and how has your motivation evolved over the years?**

When I began practicing law, I had the opportunity to work on both business and trust and estate planning matters, and I enjoyed those assignments. Gradually my practice evolved to doing more trust and estate planning, with the tax overlay, and less business matters. Eventually, I was able to limit my practice to trust and estate planning matters, including the taxes related to those matters.

#### **What's one common misconception people have about estate planning that you frequently encounter?**

Some people worry about the cost of the initial estate planning documents (will, power of attorney, living will and beneficiary designations for life insurance, annuities and retirement accounts), but then find out that they have ways of saving taxes in the process. When they are through, they often express how glad they were to get it done and how comfortable they feel about what they chose to do.

#### **How do you ensure your clients feel informed and empowered throughout the estate planning process?**

Clients are encouraged to ask questions about the topics we discuss, and I try to answer them. This applies to the initial conversation, subsequent discussions and the documents we have drafted for them based upon the decisions that they made relative to what they wanted the documents to provide.

#### **In what ways do you give back to the legal community or mentor up-and-coming attorneys in your field?**

I taught as an adjunct professor at the LSU law school for about 20 years. During most of that time I taught Estate Planning, hoping to introduce students to and interest them in wills, trusts, successions, donations, generation-skipping transfers, charitable gifts and other estate planning rules and transactions. In addition, for many years I spoke to students in law schools across the state (LSU, Tulane, Loyola and Southern) and to professional societies and organizations.

#### **How has partnering with BRAF helped you meet your clients' needs?**

The Foundation is very flexible. It can cooperate and help most clients with their charitable objectives, whatever they may be. The Foundation offers Donor Advised Funds which permit donors to transfer cash or other assets to the Foundation to be held in a fund in the name of the donors who can make recommendations as to the organizations or areas of interest which they would like the Fund to support. These Funds can be endowed and provide an income stream for posterity for charitable purposes. The Foundation also can serve as Trustee of trusts or be used in place of a private foundation. Many of my clients have chosen to include the Foundation in their charitable giving plans.

#### **Is there anyone who has been particularly pivotal in your journey as an advisor?**

A new lawyer develops habits (good or bad) from the lawyers they work with. I was extremely lucky to begin my practice in a firm with great lawyers. Byron Kantrow and Carlos Spaht were the senior partners of the firm, and I could not have had better role models and mentors than they were. My parents and my wife, Carol Anne, who also is a lawyer, also provided sage advice to me for which I will always be grateful.

#### **How would you encourage others, clients or colleagues, to take an active role in improving lives in our community?**

Identify what they want to happen, then get involved: volunteer, work on committees and projects, serve on the Board of an organization, underwrite projects at the level each is comfortable. If there is no organization appropriate for the objective, they can start an organization and get others involved.



# CELEBRATE OUR STAFF!



**The Foundation takes pride in our staff's dedication to professional excellence and their commitment to continually enhancing their skills to better serve our community. We are proud to celebrate their accomplishments, which contribute to the betterment of themselves, our organization, and the Baton Rouge community we serve.**



**TAMMY  
ABSHIRE**

Vice President  
of Nonprofit Excellence

Tammy Abshire, CFRE, vice president of nonprofit excellence, has been named a mentor for the 2025 AFP Blackbaud Emerging Leader Mentor Program. Now in its fifth year, this program cultivates the next generation of fundraising professionals by connecting them with experienced leaders in the field. Tammy's appointment as one of fewer than a dozen mentors from around the world speaks to her expertise, generosity, and leadership in the philanthropic sector. Her guidance will help shape ethical, effective fundraising professionals committed to making a lasting impact.



**PATIENCE  
BUTLER-  
GASPER**

Grants Manager

Patience Butler-Gasper has been promoted to grants manager. Since joining BRAF, Patience consistently demonstrated initiative, attention to detail, and calm leadership under pressure. Within just 90 days of her start date, she played a pivotal role in processing nearly 1,500 disaster applications, an impressive feat during a particularly active storm season. In her new role, Patience oversees grant application processes and a team of two administrative coordinators.



**EMILY  
GLASCOCK**

Director of Philanthropic  
Partnerships

Emily Glascock, director of philanthropic partnerships, has graduated from the 2024 John W. Barton Leadership Program. Over the course of eight months, Emily and her cohort explored key challenges and opportunities facing Baton Rouge through site visits, leadership discussions, and civic engagement. The program provided participants with a deeper understanding of the city's history and culture, while strengthening connections across sectors. The graduation ceremony, which was hosted at the Foundation, marked an exciting milestone in Emily's ongoing journey as a leader committed to community progress.





## CARISSA GRAVES

Vice President  
of Philanthropic  
Advancement

Carissa Graves, vice president of philanthropic advancement, has earned her 21/64 Certification in multi-generational philanthropy. This professional training program equips advisors with tools to engage families in meaningful conversations about legacy, values, and long-term impact. Carissa's certification deepens her ability to guide donors through complex planning, especially those seeking to align charitable giving with purpose across generations. Her thoughtful leadership continues to elevate our work and expand how we support the evolving needs of philanthropists.



## TRAVIS HUTCHINS

Director of  
Donor Services

Travis Hutchins, director of donor services, has earned his Chartered Advisor in Philanthropy® certification from The American College of Financial Services. This designation represents a deep commitment to guiding donors through strategic and meaningful giving. With this achievement, Travis is even more equipped to help individuals and families align their philanthropic goals with long-term impact. His thoughtful approach, combined with this advanced training, enhances our ability to serve donors with excellence and intention.



## LAUREN CRAPANZANO JUMONVILLE

Vice President  
of Enterprise Strategy

Lauren Crapanzano Jumonville, vice president of enterprise strategy, has been selected to join the 2025 class of Leadership Louisiana. Participants make a year-long commitment to six two-day long regional sessions, beginning in January and concluding in November. This respected program brings together a diverse group of leaders from across the state to explore pressing issues with leading experts such as education, criminal justice, healthcare, workforce development, and more. Lauren's strategic thinking and dedication to civic progress make her an ideal participant in this initiative. Through this experience, she is further strengthening her role in shaping the future of the Foundation and Baton Rouge.



## ALLY RENNHOFF MARTINEZ

Director of  
Nonprofit Consulting

Ally Rennhoff Martinez, director of nonprofit consulting, has been named a 2025 Chamberlain Scholar by the Association of Fundraising Professionals Foundation for Philanthropy. AFP is the largest association of fundraisers in the world, representing over 31,000 fundraising professionals globally. The AFP Foundation for Philanthropy supports programs and initiatives that train fundraisers and enhance knowledge and awareness of ethical fundraising practices. Named in honor of Ralph Chamberlain, CFRE, the program highlights dedication to service, leadership, and growth within the fundraising profession. Ally's selection reflects her impact in the field and commitment to strengthening the nonprofit sector through knowledge, innovation, and collaboration.



## CENTER FOR NONPROFIT EXCELLENCE HOLIDAY PARTY

DECEMBER 2024



## FOUNDERS FORUM

FEBRUARY 2025







# ANNUAL MEETING

MARCH 2025



## OPPORTUNITY DATA PROJECT

MARCH 2025



## UNIVERSITY LAKES VISIT

APRIL 2025



## PLAN BR III

APRIL 2025





# BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PHILANTHROPISTS



The Baton Rouge Area Foundation works tirelessly to cultivate a stronger philanthropic community by fostering a culture of **giving, collaboration, and social responsibility.**

There are multiple ways to partner with the Foundation to accomplish your charitable goals. **Contact a member of BRAF's Philanthropic Advancement team** to chart your path.



[braf.org/donors](http://braf.org/donors) | [cgraves@braf.org](mailto:cgraves@braf.org)

# Youth City Lab

Youth City Lab, a collaborative initiative from Front Yard Bikes, Big Buddy Program, Line4Line, and Humanities Amped, is redefining how Baton Rouge supports and uplifts its next generation. Youth City Lab partners are creating a state-of-the-art youth center at the former Sarkis Rug Store on Government Street in Mid City.

Designed to be a hub for youth wellness, job training, and civic, social, and economic empowerment, the reimagined space will provide young people with a dynamic environment where they can grow, learn, and lead.

Planned features include a brand-new Front Yard Bikes shop, a performance stage with seating, a second-floor landing, a Line4Line barbershop and lending library, a fully equipped commercial kitchen, a peaceful courtyard, and a robust community garden. Each element is purposefully designed to serve the diverse needs and talents of Baton Rouge's youth.

The renovation, led by Arkel Constructors LLC, began in late January and is on track for completion by the end of 2025.

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation's Strategic Consulting team, now operating under the Foundation's Center for Nonprofit Excellence, partnered with Youth City Lab in 2022 to develop a capital campaign to support the organization's first permanent space on Government Street. Foundation staff worked closely with Youth City Lab's founding executive directors to define the organization's mission and case for support, playing a hands-on role in shaping the campaign.

To support this effort, the Foundation facilitated strategic planning sessions, led branding and marketing initiatives, redesigned the website, and helped prepare organizational leaders and the Youth Council for donor engagement and major gift solicitation.

This work is part of the Foundation's broader commitment to strengthening the region's nonprofit sector through its Center for Nonprofit Excellence. The Center offers consulting services, including strategic planning, board development, and fundraising design, that help organizations grow their capacity and deepen their impact.

Together, Youth City Lab and its partners are working to ensure every young person in Baton Rouge has access to the tools, spaces, and support they need to thrive. With a newly transformed space, even more opportunities and curiosity can flourish.



**FOR UPDATES ON THE  
PROJECT'S PROGRESS, VISIT  
[WWW.YOUTHCITYLAB.ORG](http://WWW.YOUTHCITYLAB.ORG)**







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# PARTNERSHIP *makes it* POSSIBLE

There's more than one way to support our community, and BRAF is generating opportunities at every angle. We connect the right people to the right resources in pursuit of a healthy community that can access excellent education, achieve economic prosperity, sustain a high quality of life, live in safer neighborhoods, and display resilience in our changing world.



**BRAF**  
BATON ROUGE AREA FOUNDATION

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