C
Closing the gaps * Expanded newborn screening helps save lives**

J.D. VENTURA; LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON
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Closing the gaps *** Expanded newborn screening helps save lives

Ashli Kennedy had been home from the hospital with her newborn daughter for a week when a doctor called her with an urgent message.

A blood screening performed at Baton Rouge General Medical Center showed that little Alaysia Lands had tested positive for a potentially fatal genetic disease called galactosemia.

The 23-year-old, firsttime mother panicked.

The condition means babies cannot break down galactose, which is produced when dairy products are digested. The build-up of galactose, which starts to store in cells, becomes toxic, and causes the infant's body to produce harmful chemicals, which can lead to cataracts, liver disease, mental retardation and even death.

Kennedy had to stop feeding the baby dairy-based formula immediately, and she was told to bring the child back in for further testing.

Luckily for Kennedy and her baby, no damage was done. Alaysia was immediately put on a soy milk formula and all was well. But the experience rattled the new mother.

"When I found out that regular milk can kill her, I was crying," said Kennedy. "I went and looked up (galactosemia) on the Internet, and it really panicked me."

According to the Web site http://www.savebabies.org , an organization that advocates for expanded newborn screenings, one in 7,500 live births will have "some form of galactosemia." The Web site also reports that death can occur as early as the child's first two weeks of life, with many newborns dying from E. coli infections leading to sepsis.

While Kennedy's baby had a condition covered by 10 screenings mandated by the state, babies with other genetic diseases can fall through the cracks when hospitals don't order the expanded screening regimen.

When it came time to decide whether Baton Rouge General would run the required 10 genetic screens on newborns or run a more comprehensive test that checks for 29 additional disorders, Cheri Johnson, director of maternal child services, knew what she had to do.

To Johnson, who has worked extensively with the March of Dimes and whose child has a vision impairment from a birth defect, testing the blood of newborn babies for additional, and often preventable or treatable illnesses, was something she felt the hospital should be doing ethically. After lobbying for the change for more than a year, the hospital began the expanded screening process after the hurricanes.

The decision, however, had a price tag on it.

Because the state gives health-care providers free newborn test kits, which check for 10 disorders, running the more complete battery of blood work would require the use of an outside lab, and the turning down of the free kits. After some number crunching, she determined her department would need $30,000 a year to administer the more complete testing. Budgets were tight, but she found the money.

"We basically had to scrape, borrow and steal to pay for this," said Johnson. "... But these are our children."

Woman's Hospital has also been screening newborns for 39 different illnesses since October, according to spokeswoman Jodi Conachen. Samples were being tested in New Orleans, but since the hurricane, are now sent out of state.

Using a single drop of a newborn's blood, specialized laboratories can check for the 39 serious, sometimes life- threatening, inherited diseases. Experts estimate that, if the tests were performed on every baby at birth, hundreds of deaths and life- threatening bouts of illness could be prevented.

Today, every baby born in the United States is tested for two rare diseases that can cause retardation if untreated: congenital hypothyroidism and the metabolic disease phenylketonuria, or PKU. Most are also tested for sickle cell anemia, according to the U.S. National Newborn Screening and Genetics Resource Center.

Additional tests, not required by all states, can screen for other rare diseases, many of which are treatable if discovered early. Another benefit is that parents will have crucial information to make informed decisions about having additional children.

Louisiana law requires that newborns be screened for galactosmia and the three diseases listed above, as well as arginiosuccinic aciduria, biotinidase deficiency, citrillunemia, homocystinuria, maple syrup urine disease and medium chain Acyl-CoA dehydrogenase deficiency, according to Charles Myers, administrator of the Louisiana Office of Public Health's genetics program.

There is a bill before the Legislature this session to expand screening. House Bill 293 is in line with the recommendations of the American College of Medical Genetics, which are supported by groups such as the March of Dimes, Myers said.

In addition, based on recommendations from Louisiana's Newborn Screening Advisory Committee, plans are underway to start a pilot program around the first of fiscal year 2007, which would expand newborn screening to the same recommendations. Adoption of testing for cystic fibrosis is not as far along and will occur after planning with the cystic fibrosis medical community.

The state's genetics disease program offers more than just screening tests, he emphasized. It is a comprehensive system that includes follow-up and specialized care. The program cost about $4.8 million last year, covered by Medicaid, fees and state funds.

The program also collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and the University of Iowa on a project to identify infants born just before and after Hurricane Katrina, who had not been screened, to ensure that they were later tested.

"I believe the expanded testing will become the standard of care in all states in the next couple of years," Myers said.

"It's been a slow process, and it hasn't been easy, but it is worthwhile. These tests are lifesaving for many children," he said.

Caption: Color mug of Cheri Johnson; Color photo of parents Ashli Kennedy and Joery Lands holding their daughter Alaysia Lands; B.W photo of 4 wk. old Alaysia Lands reacting to her father's smile. (by Travis Spradling)

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C
Sing from the heart * Hurricane Choir's goal to raise spirits, money for relief**

J.D. VENTURA
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Sing from the heart *** Hurricane Choir's goal to raise spirits, money for relief

Martin Meader was halfway around the world when Hurricane Katrina hit. But, like it did for so many, the storm would change his path.

As a choral director and filmmaker living and working in

Perth, Australia, Meader might have been like so many millions of people around the globe who only experienced Katrina from news reports. But he had some friends in Baton Rouge. After the storm had blown through, and the details were emerging about its overwhelming ferocity, he picked up the phone, desperate to reach his friends.

Initially he couldn't get through. The waiting was worryfilled.

Whenever he called, he would reach a confounding recording informing him that

"Due to the hurricane, all circuits are busy " Finally, after much trying, his buddy answered the phone. "How bad was it?" Meader asked. "Very bad," came the answer.

After learning it was as horrible as television reports had detailed, Meader's next question was, "What can we do?"

What Meader "did" next would change Nick Abraham's path, too.

Abraham, a mental-health counselor based in Baton Rouge and former choir director himself, had been doing work with the Volunteers of America (VOA), trying to help emergency and disaster relief workers handle their stress. He soon realized his own stress level was increasing exponentially. It was time for some relief.

Through his volunteer work with the VOA, he happened to attend a local choir gathering and, after dealing firsthand with the disaster's aftermath for so many months, found singing to be amazingly therapeutic. It got him thinking.

Meanwhile, back in Australia, Meader was doing more than thinking, he was planning. He would go to Louisiana and assemble a choir. He had done it before, put together huge choral groups.

He knew, perhaps better than many, how powerful, say, 1,000 voices singing together could be, and just how much healing power was contained in that kind of sound.

Not long after Meader arrived in Baton Rouge he partnered with the Volunteers of America.

The vision took shape: the "Hurricane Choir" would involve "thousands" of voices, raising not only money for hurricane relief, but spirits. When Abraham found out what Meader was trying to do, it was like the perfect storm, with both men completely sold on the healing power of song.

Things got underway quickly from there.

On a recent Saturday about 70 people showed up for one of the first rehearsal sessions for the

Hurricane Choir, which is supposed to have its debut on the steps of the State Capitol in a benefit concert on May 21, followed by another show on June 3 at the Baton Rouge River Center.

Gathered in the Jefferson Baptist Church, the group was clearly mesmerized by Meader. It was difficult not to be. He waved his arms animatedly, loudly praising soloists, getting people to clap crazily for their choir mates and exuding a heavily accented charm somehow inherently Australian.

Abraham seemed to be solidly under Meader's spell, too. When it came time to solo, the tenor's voice was forceful and full of conviction, unwavering, much like the belief the two men now share: that the relatively low turnout by no means overshadows the building interest they say the movement has acquired.

"I saw a power (at that rehearsal) that I think will gain momentum," said Abraham. "I think we are establishing something that will go on for a number of years."

Meader thinks so, too. He intends to appeal to church choirs all around Baton Rouge, to unite them in a federation of voices that could possibly tour the country and appear on national television shows. He thinks it's possible, especially when he considers the feeling of "safety" being in a large choir affords a disaster victim. The power of song is universal and can be universally experienced, he said.

"We turn nonsingers into singers, through the process of singing," Meader said. "Basically, we just want people to sing from the heart."

Abraham said that, in fact, many people who showed up for the first practice session can't sing. But, he agreed with Meader, that isn't the point.

"We have found that the numbers of people who are seeking or who are going to seek mental-health care after Katrina is astronomical," said Abraham. "Singing in the choir has really helped me."

Much of the funding for the initiative thus far has come from Meader's own personal investment in the project, although he said the group has received some private donations from sponsors in Los Angeles and Chicago.

Meader hopes attendance will increase after Easter, when many church choirs have more time for activities outside of their own churches. Until then, the group still plans on conducting public rehearsals, performing for customers at Whole Foods supermarkets in Baton Rouge, Hammond, Metairie and Lafayette. There is even a plan to perform at the Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer village in Baker.

Although the hope for "1,000 voices" still remains (the group is hoping people sign up through its Web site, http:// www.hurricanechoir.com), both Meader and Abraham said that whether it's "500 or 2,000" the concerts will happen. They are confident that the six songs their 70 members already know can be easily taught to many more of the willing.

"This is what we need to be doing," said Abraham. "And it's just incredible."

Caption: Color photo of choir director Martin Meader, from Western Australia, emphasizing a note during the Hurricane Choir's rehearsal at Jefferson Baptist Church; B.W. photo of singers rehearsing at the Jefferson Baptist Church to raise money for Katrina rebuilding (By John Oubre)

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C
Merchandise gets new life at Trash and Treasure Sale

J.D. VENTURA
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Merchandise gets new life at Trash and Treasure Sale

People move on, move up, move out, move back and, sometimes, just plain die. But their stuff never does. It sticks around. Conceivably forever.

Of course, things left behind by kings and pharaohs find their way into guarded glass museum cases.

But the artifacts of everyday life - once worn, used or cherished by ordinary people - sometimes get shipped off to landfills, sometimes are given to others and sometimes wind up in a sprawling warehouse space behind the Baton Rouge Community College.

The Inner Wheel's 17th annual Attic Trash and Treasure Sale, put on by the wives of the Rotarians, is like a drain at the bottom of a sink, catching assorted bits of this and that before it all swirls down the hole of history. It is an event that relies on several truths of human behavior: namely that people decorate their lives with things, some useful, some not, and that repurposing such objects, at a bargain sale price, is better than throwing said things or paying, God forbid, r-e-t-a-i-l.

To get a guided tour of the Warehouse of Forgotten, Discarded and Ultimately Donated Things, is, in a sense, like walking through the shadowy memories of past lives, existences separated from their possessions by time, distance or death. It is easy to recreate these bygone days, using the material props that, at one time, were useful, or at least beheld.

There is a room full of books, run with fastidiousness by a woman named Becky Wilson. Who once prized the Ansel Adams coffee table tome now for sale, kissed with a round orange sticker revealing the $100 asking price? How many children, their heads on soft pillows, were read to from the kids' books for sale there? Ten, 20, 30 years ago, a single light shown in the bedroom of a house, on the first floor, or the second, illuminating a room full of concentration and the page-turning rustle of a good read. The book is now there. The whereabouts of its reader, unknown.

That reader most likely had no idea that some day their book would be sold in a secondhand sale that has, collectively over the years, brought in upward of $700,000 for various charities. This year most of the proceeds, which planners hope will be more than $100,000 like last year, will go to Volunteers in Public Schools, a local charity.

Organizers like Eula Smith said the charity was chosen in part because the East Baton Rouge school system has been inundated with New Orleans-area schoolchildren due to Katrina. The hurricane, she explained, made it difficult to find available warehouse space. So an event that usually takes place in February will instead happen now, in a building full of falling prices, if not temperatures.

This year there are some items that are of particular pride to the way-less-than-retail Rotarians. Someone donated 1,000 pairs of plaid knickers (one volunteer explained that the loud pants are worn by golfers and hikers - presumably to avoid being hit by a golf ball, or to be spotted quickly by aerial search teams). There are also "two 18-wheelers" full of brand new furniture. One volunteer quickly hushed another before the name of that donor was revealed.

Things in the great warehouse do not enjoy any sort of shared socialism. Even the objects of outcast must adhere to a classicist structure. So designer shoes, looking, in many cases, as used as the thousands of noncouture pairs, are removed from the masses, marked up and given their own display. Designer clothes all retain the status their labels bestow upon them, even if the name brand has long-ago faded from fashionable fad to retro joke.

Of course, to the Inner Wheel, the sale is no joke at all. It is a year-round business, and it is run like one. Many of the volunteers now use eBay to determine the market price of things. Important decisions are made, like the good call not to resell adult underwear this year (although sports bras are still being sold). Other

decisions need to be made: for example, is the giant aquatic stuffed animal in the toy section a whale or a dolphin? And will that determine the sale price or, for that matter, whether or not the giant blue mammalian replica will find its way into a toy box or a dumpster?

Other questions have been worked out in years past. Like, will people buy and wear someone else's shoes for 50 cents? Yes. Or, will people purchase and sleep on an old mattress? Absolutely.

"We have everything from Tiffany to toilet seats," said Bonnie Holliday, "that's with two 'l's'."

Some things seem like they'll sell, no problem. Of course, kids will buy a softball for 25 cents. And maybe a couple of bucks for a digital alarm clock is better than buying a new one for 800 cents more at Radio Shack.

But some things seem doomed to drift into the outgoing tide, a current that probably leads to the 18th annual Attic Trash and Treasure Sale. Like the plastic football that Holliday guessed was a fondue pot. Or the framed print of a teddy bear dressed as a princess.

Still, one man's trash

17th annual Attic Trash and Treasure Sale

The fund-raiser, sponsored by the Inner Wheel of the Baton Rouge Rotary Club, will feature thousands of items. Included will be furniture, appliances, gifts and collectibles, books, clothes and more.

WHEN: 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday. WHERE: Old Flea Market building in the former Rebel Shopping Center, Baton Rouge Community College campus, 5310 Florida Blvd. TICKETS: No charge.INFORMATION: (225) 926-8007

Caption: Color photo of volunteer Lynn Federick talking on her cell phone while arranging merchandise for the Inner Wheel's annual Attic Trash and Treasure Sale; B.W. photo of volunteer Sam Coker, left, helping James Paul move donated furniture into storage at the Old Flea Market building on Florida Boulevard in preparation for the Inner Wheel's Attic Trash and Treasure Sale (By Patrick Dennis); B.W. graphic is the 17th annual Attic Trash and Treasure Sale fund- raiser information

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C
"Daredevil" got start in Baton Rouge * U High grad gains fame in Bud Light ads**

J.D. VENTURA
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"Daredevil" got start in Baton Rouge *** U High grad gains fame in Bud Light ads

BY J.D. VENTURA Advocate staff writer

He is the biggest thing since Spuds McKenzie, and he is from Baton Rouge.

If you haven't heard by now, Ted Ferguson, the "Bud Light Daredevil," who has appeared in several zany commercials for the brand, is actually 30-year-old Baton Rougean Jeb Quaid.

Quaid isn't an actor, however. (Unless you count the time he "made people cry" with his heartwrenching performance as a tree at University High.) He is, however, a copywriter for a Chicago-based ad agency that works on the Anheuser Busch account.

After a pitch meeting with the beer company's executives, at which many of the proposed ideas seemed to fall flat, Quaid "spitballed" one last back-pocket concept. What about a stuntman who performs everyday feats for Bud Lights?, he asked.

Soon, Quaid was asked to propose the spot formally. He and the team of ad execs assigned to the account made a prototype commercial "on the cheap," with Quaid playing the Ferguson character. Eight agencies pitched commercial ideas, but the beer execs loved the Ferguson proposal. Quaid's firm won the account.

Unbeknownst to Quaid, the execs had specifically loved him in the role. Soon, the halls of the agency were buzzing with the rumor that Quaid would not only write the spots, but star in them.

"One senior VP came up to me and said, 'I hear you are going to be Ted,'" Quaid recalled. "Even then I was, like, I need more proof."

He doesn't need proof anymore. Quaid is presently touring the country as Ted Ferguson. He attends sporting events and does radio interviews. Many people believe his character is a real person. Proof of that came recently, when, at an appearance before the local advertising federation in Baton Rouge, an audience member raised his hand during the Q&A: "Ted .um, may I call you Ted ?"

The Advocate sat down recently with Ferguson, um, Quaid, and had some fun with our own Q&A

Did you grow up entirely in Baton Rouge?

Well, I grew up in Richmond, Va. I moved to Baton Rouge when I was, like, 1, so it really wasn't a tough move for me. I didn't lose a lot of friends when I moved.

I went to Trinity and then St. James and then Episcopal for like fifth and sixth grade. Then for seventh, I went to U High.

What crowd did you fall into at U High?

I played sports and all. I guess I hung with the cool crowd and all, but I was never big enough to play football or basketball in high school. I didn't have the size actually I did joke around a lot in high school. I was in a band. We used to play homecoming.

What instrument did you play?

I played drums. And we played pranks and stuff. Beavis- and Butthead-type stuff.

What year did you graduate U High?

1994.

Were you a star pupil?

I was the middle person who split the GPA pool. I remember being the middle person.

Are you comfortable being the middle person?

Yeah, well, it got me into Vanderbilt.

What was Vanderbilt like?

Vanderbilt was fun. I had a great time. I remember my freshman year I thought I could just party. I didn't realize that studying came with it.

What did you study there?

It was called human and organizational development. It was business psychology. I ended up doing an internship at Capitol Records.

How did being from Baton Rouge prepare you for where you are now?

It was great. I guess you could say it keeps me grounded and stuff. None of this has gone to my head. I love coming back here. Being in the South is so laid back. I loved growing up here, and I will always want to come back here.

Do you like working in corporate advertising?

Yeah. Basically all I do is sit around all day and tell jokes. Our office is like, people throwing Frisbees in the hallways and riding scooters. There is a long line of people who want my job When I got the job, I knew it was my dream job.

What have you learned about comedy since your specialty is "comedic" copywriting?

My sense of humor has always been to take something and exaggerate it beyond any kind of normalcy. Especially in advertising, with a 30-second commercial, you have to get your point out. You have to tell your story and have a joke that hits in 30 seconds. It's harder than it sounds actually.

What is one of the most quirky things about you?

One weird pet peeve is, if I am in a car at night and I'm driving, I hate when a person turns on the inside light.

Why? Do you feel exposed?

I don't know, I just don't like it.

Speaking of exposure, do you like your newfound fame? Do you feel famous?

Only with the helmet and goggles on. There have only been like four or five people on the street who have been, like, "Ferguson!"

What about contemporary culture in terms of humor? What really makes you laugh?

Well, he is not contemporary any more, but my favorite comedian was Richard Pryor. I got his box set after college. I was taking a road trip back to Baton Rouge and I was just dying listening to him. As for current stuff, "Anchorman" was hilarious. And Ben Stiller's character in "Dodge Ball" was really funny to me, too. But I don't watch many sitcoms.

Is the real you similar to the character of Ted Ferguson?

Ted probably isn't a person who has his life organized, and I am the same way. He is probably a more intense version of myself. There are similarities. Ted loves pizza and that's me.

Do you have a girlfriend?

I did but I am not dating anyone right now, with this tour that's going on. It would be tough to make a long-distance relationship work right now. I dated a girl two years before the Ferguson spots started. So she called me and said that all her girlfriends thought my girlfriend in the commercials was based on her.

What has it been like touring as Ted Ferguson?

Well, with the tour we are literally hearing direct feedback. People are like, "Ferguson!" I recently completed my 10,000th high five. I've been counting. I think it's because the character is real. You see these commercials and there are these cool dudes hanging out, but they are all cast from Hollywood they didn't want someone who would walk into bars and be like, "Hi, I'm an actor."

How have mom and dad been about your newfound fame?

Oh, they are really happy about it. My mom's basically outside of our house with a megaphone: "Attention neighborhood! His sixth commercial is on the air today." My dad is a doctor here in town. People at his office have started calling him Dr. Ferguson.

Are you at all interested in becoming a personality? A performer? Rather than the guy behind the scenes?

It definitely pulls you in. There was a point where I could have done that. When I was doing stand-up in Nashville, other comedians there wanted me to really pursue it. But I wanted a real steady job. But this just came out of nowhere.

Is Ted popular with the ladies?

Yeah, he's not bad with the helmet and goggles. Of course, the goggles fog up so much in the bars, he can't really see what they look like.

How many Bud Lights can you drink when you go out? Are you a six- pack guy?

I'll go out with friends and have a beer or two.

How old are you?

I'm 30.

Caption: Color photo of Jeb Quaid posing as his Bud Light Daredevil character (PP); B.W photo of Jeb Quaid sitting on a sofa with a picture of Jeb Quaid and Dennis Quaid sitting on a mantel in the background (by James Chance)

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H
Building a reputation * LSU theater department evolving into serious dramatic arts program**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Building a reputation *** LSU theater department evolving into serious dramatic arts program

LSU is a football school. Understood.

But while the various athletic departments seem to garner a lot of attention, both in media coverage and budgetary dollars, other departments more quietly go about their notable business.

For example, even though they don't have a live wild animal as a mascot or a tour bus, LSU's theater department has, over the last several years, quietly evolved into a serious dramatic arts program that is on the verge of finally receiving accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Theatre.

Graduates of the program, which offers three degrees (bachelor's, master's and the Ph.D.), continually go to work in professional theaters around the country, or find employment in television and film. And many undergraduates get accepted to other prestigious graduate theater programs.

Director John Dennis is perhaps the school's patriarch. A stout man with a shiny bald head, Dennis, who currently heads up the graduate MFA program, first arrived on the scene as "a guest" instructor for a year, in 1980. Back then the department was merely a few courses within the speech program.

Dennis brought with him a pedigreed vitae from the Mark Taper forum in Los Angeles and a newfound love of Louisiana culture, which sprung from how "verbal" he found Southerners to be.

But while the South held some allure, the LSU program was "30 years behind" many other programs at similarly sized universities. Still, there was something authentic about Louisiana. "At the time, this was the only place trying not to look like Los Angeles," remembered Dennis.

Dennis was eventually asked to come on board full time. The offer was enticing. At LSU he had broad license to do any plays he wanted. The theater on campus, the Shaver, was a proscenium design, unlike the Taper's, which was a more contemporary "thrust." He sat in the Shaver and just stared at the stage, imagining the shows he could put on there. He took the job.

Go forward in time to 1999. LSU's theater department was looking for a new chair. The search wasn't going well.

The two first choice candidates already said "thanks, but no thanks." And the third choice, Michael Tick, wasn't blind to the program's flaws, either.

While Dennis had seriously strengthened and developed the graduate program, the department as a whole had some formidable problems. The founder of the Actors' Equity theater company affiliated with the department, Swine Palace Productions, was "at odds with most of the faculty," according to Tick. Moreover, the department's anemic enrollment and faculty made putting on departmental shows and Swine Palace productions difficult. Not to mention the music and dramatic arts building, a structure that was literally impeding departmental accreditation because it was so "dirty, dangerous and dilapidated," as one consultant pointedly put it.

So, all things considered, Tick became the third guy to say, "No," describing the department at the time as "a house of cards waiting to tumble." But top administrators wouldn't take no for an answer. Promises were made, namely that departmental budgets would be boosted by "several hundreds of thousands" of dollars if he'd come on board. The university's provost at the time pulled the department of theater out of the college of arts and sciences, forming a new autonomous two-unit college: music and dramatic arts. Suddenly the deal was sweet enough. Tick had a canvas upon which to paint.

When he accepted the position, morale was low. It was a very transitional period, and people were adjusting

to all the change. "It just wasn't a good time in the history of the department," recalled Tick. "We were spread very, very thin."

Tick made his first order of business restoring that morale and regaining a trust among the faculty members he felt had been lost (although he literally resisted unpacking until he knew for sure "the dysfunction could be fixed"). Soon after, "the planets lined up" when the department's building, which had been awaiting facelift money for more than 30 years, was selected to receive $23 million worth of funds earmarked for its complete revitalization. Better times had begun.

"You had a chancellor at the time who saw the value of having a wonderful theater program on campus and a supportive provost and dean," said Tick. "It was just bang, bang, bang."

Brody gets tough

One of those proverbial "bangs" was the hiring of Jane Brody four years ago to head the undergraduate theater program. Like Dennis, Brody was a considerable talent. She had a resume that spanned 35 years in the business, having been an actress, producer, director, agent and casting director. (Brody is particularly proud of the casting she did for the movie "Fargo"; she is also known for an acting school she helped establish in Chicago, The Audition Centre).

"John Dennis" is the answer Brody matter-of-factly gives when asked why she decided to head south to teach. The two had worked together 20 years ago, doing summer stock in Wisconsin. Although they hadn't spoken in the two decades since, Dennis' intuitiveness for the stage left a lasting impression. "He was literally the person who inspired me to investigate what acting was," recalled Brody.

Although the department had come a long way since the arrival of Dennis and then Tick, Brody had her work cut out for her, too. Tick had received a mandate from top administrators to grow the undergraduate ranks. When Brody arrived, there were only 35 undergrads enrolled in the program.

Beefing up enrollment, as far as Brody was concerned, came down to creating an "undergraduate culture" among the theater majors that she felt simply didn't exist. The family-knit cohesion which is often emblematic of performing arts programs wasn't evident. Students didn't know each others phone numbers, let alone those of their professors.

"The normally incestuous nature of theater departments wasn't there," said Brody. "To create a theater culture became my stated goal once I got there."

Whatever she did, it worked. Enrollment steadily grew to 190 students. The increased class size, explained Brody, is important because it fuels a competitive spirit among classmates that importantly emulates how cutthroat the real world can be.

Brody's tough approach has won her fans and a few detractors among the student body. She isn't afraid to tell a student, "I don't believe you," when their acting is less than inspiring. She has plainly asked less-than-serious students in her class, "Do you know who I am?" And she isn't a fan of crying actresses. Still, on the flip side, she sometimes refers to her students as "my babies."

"I have a different style with people I think are seriously going out into the world," said Brody. " I will do anything possible to get what I need (as a director). My job is not to get the students to love me; my job is to make them as good as they possibly can be."

The department today

The department consists of more than just Brody and Dennis. There is the Ph.D. program, headed by Les Wade, and professors who teach nonacting courses that support undergraduate concentrations in design and technology; theater studies, literature, theory and history; arts administration; and dance.

Three other MFA programs, in directing, design and theater technology, were offered, but have been suspended pending their re- evaluation once the music and dramatic arts building is completed in 2008.

Until that day, the department lives somewhat peacefully in Hatcher Hall. Somewhat because it hasn't escaped certain growing pains.

The school's affiliation with Swine Palace Productions sets it apart from many other programs around the country. But being tethered to a professional theater hasn't always been easy, either.

Shortly after Tick arrived, he pressured the board of Swine Palace, which was then running huge deficits, to

terminate its artistic director. Swine Palace is its own nonprofit, and although LSU owns the building and pays the utilities, the company puts on professional shows, often with a mix of paid actors and unpaid students and always with a union stage manager. It is expected to be largely self-sufficient.

After cleaning house, it was a while before Tick could hire another artistic director. For three years he would wear two hats, both as department chair and the top position at Swine Palace. In that time, however, he convinced the university to create administrative positions to support the theater. A managing director, a marketing director and a costume director were added to the LSU payroll. Only the director of development would be paid out of Swine Palace's account.

Attendance for Swine Palace shows, usually put on at the Reilly Theatre, began to steadily grow. This, of course, was good news, but the theater remains a financial risk. Tick explained that the theater department still sinks $30,000 of its roughly $2 million budget annually into Swine Palace. And that figure is only if Swine Palace raises the required $250,000 a year to keep its doors open.

Despite all of the requisite financial pressures associated with it, Tick still sees the tremendous benefit of having a professional theater associated with the school.

"The students who are lucky enough to be cast in Swine Palace shows start earning equity points to get into the union, and that's huge," said Tick. "But we have to be more sensitive to the patrons' whims, of course, when we do a Swine Palace show. We are not going to do something more edgy at Swine Palace and risk driving off patrons."

The students

The students still do edgy stuff. When Tick decided Charles Mee's experimental "Big Love" had to be turned into a lower-cost LSU Theatre production, rather than a Swine Palace show, a group of graduate students, loyal to the show's now-departed director, staged the production on a shoestring budget, producing the play successfully with just a few weeks of rehearsal time.

And, on the undergraduate level, students gathered recently in the basement of Hatcher Hall, holding their own auditions for "Othello." The "Renegade Shakespeare" theater group assembled to give the undergrads more stage time.

"I love that group within an inch of my life," said Brody. "One of the most important things I have ever done is inspiring those people."

Undergrads also put on performances in Hatcher Hall, which has taken the place of the Shaver while it undergoes renovation.

Rebecca Buller, a 20-year-old junior graduating early from the program in December, starred in a Hatcher play recently, which was directed by another undergraduate.

Buller credits Brody for getting her "hooked" on theater, something she thought would never happen.

"All the teachers, faculty and students just embraced me," recalled Buller, who plans on setting out to be a professional actress in either New York or Chicago after graduation. "I was surprised at how communal and supportive the atmosphere was, that I was a part of this world."

Buller's confidence, the kind that enables someone so young to get on a bus bound for the big city, isn't without precedent at LSU.

Many alums, from both the undergrad and graduate programs, have gone on to work in the business, both as actors and, as Brody likes to say, "citizens of the theater."

Buller need only look at someone like Andrea Frankle for inspiration. Frankle graduated from the MFA program in 2001 and has worked as a professional actress ever since, landing a part most recently alongside Hillary Swank in the upcoming feature film, "The Changeling."

Her praise for her LSU training is resounding. "I cannot imagine where I would be if I had gone anywhere else," said Frankle. "What they prepared us for was acting."

Caption: Color photo of John Dennis, director of the LSU MFA acting program; Jane Brody, director of undergraduate performance; and Michael Tick, chair of the LSU department of theater, from left, standing outside the music and dramatic arts building, which is undergoing a major renovation. The trio is widely credited with growing the department into a competitive program that competes nationally for talented

students. (by Richard Alan Hannon); Color photo of Andrea Frankle (seated before mirror), an alum of the MFA theater program at LSU. She has worked professionally doing stage and film work since graduating. She recently landed a movie role opposite Hillary Swank. 'It's not so much about making it big,' said Frankle. 'I just want to keep working.' (by Arthur D. Lauck); Color photo of Undergraduate theater major Rebecca Buller spends time in her dressing room before taking the stage. Buller recently starred in a student-directed production of 'Marisol.' 'I feel like not only do I have a technique for acting, but for auditioning and being noticed,' said Buller. (by Kenneth Wilks); B.W. photo of Actor Joe Chrest, 42. He was in the first Master's of Fine Arts class to graduate from LSU's theater program in 1989. Since then, he has gone on to have a successful career on stage, as well as in television and film. He attributes much of his success to the program, saying that professors like John Dennis 'instilled a sense of the artist in him.' What would he say to newly minted alumni aspiring for a career path like his? 'In your quest to be the best artist you can be, you do lose sense of the fact that there are two words in 'show business,' said Chrest. 'One is show, and the other is business, so it's important to also focus on the business side you have to have a real tough constitution. Sometimes you feel like a traveling salesman, only the product is you and you will have the door slammed in your face multiple times a week.' (by Richard Alan Hannon)

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C
Inspecting "Inpector" * LSU student production worth seeing despite flaws**

J.D. VENTURA
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1
English

Inspecting "Inpector" *** LSU student production worth seeing despite flaws

To the modern audience, JB Priestly's "An Inspector Calls" runs the risk of being more of a "Who cares?" than a whodunit. At the time it was first put on, in 1946, much of the political and social commentary Priestly had installed into the work had undoubtedly more resonance in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

The play takes place in 1912, a period in England, and much of Europe, when industrialization was creating a more classist society, with the nouveau riche lording over a miserably poor working class.

As he as a champion of the welfare state, Priestly's play looks at how the indifference and selfish actions of one wellto- do family indirectly leads to the suicide of a blue collar woman. Political parallels are intended through references in the dialogue to Germany and Russia, which, like the woman who commits suicide, are ignored with great peril.

Many of the undergraduate students in attendance at the production's pay-what-you-can (meaning nearly free) night were there because professors told them they had to be, or were the (annoyingly giggly) friends of those in the cast. Whether anyone found Priestly's political analysis interesting in its more modern context (like what his work says about this country's shrinking middle class or the dangers of taking global military supremacy for granted) wasn't apparent.

More noticeable, however, was much fidgeting and wristwatch watching by the second act. And this was hard to blame on short, Internet-nurtured attention spans or the promise of an imminent Wednesday night kegger.

It was just kind of boring.

Lots of talking, which led to lots of yelling, which all took place in one room, between six people. Director Michael Tick had his work cut out for him, particularly since it was decided that a voice coach would bring the entirely undergraduate cast up-tospeed on variants of upper-crust British and Scottish accents of that particular period.

The attempt was more than admirable, and everyone in the cast is to be commended for the consistency they maintained.

Keeping up such complicated, nuanced accents could not have been easy while, at the same time, integrating emotion and movement into their roles.

They weren't perfect, but they were impressive.

And, before it's forgotten, the costumes were truly gorgeous, particularly the women's dresses.

Whereas the lighting effects were about as silly and ineffective as the fake moustaches worn by some of the men.

As for the acting, Lyndsay Kimball as Sheila Burling was the show's standout. Kimball played the daughter of an industrialist who fires a woman for asking for a raise. A police inspector who visits the family's home points out that, starting with the woman's dismissal, they were all morally complicit in the girl's suicidal spiral. But it is Shelia and her brother Eric, played by Garrett Bruce, who ultimately take responsibility for abetting in the young woman's demise.

Kimball understood she is not immediately the heroine, so she slowly and convincingly transforms Sheila's feelings about not only her own guilt, but about the other implicated family members.

Less convincing was Bruce, whose exaggerated facial expressions gave away too much. The actor should have relied less on the gimmick of repeatedly raised eyebrows and more on the mystery evoked, just as effectively, by actually feeling his character's inner torment and shame. He did "rage" well, when it was explosive and theatrical, but he needed work on what should have been a haunted emotional implosion.

Which brings up a good point. This production has moments of levity, but it should also be deadly serious. Tick perhaps let his kids have too much fun. It could have been quietly darker, rather than busy and bold. There was no need to add any sweetener to such perfectly bitter coffee.

Which is why Zach Harvey's Mr. Birling missed the mark. Harvey's Birling was too silly, too much of a caricature. Much of that, arguably, could have been derived from Priestly's lampooning of such a relentless materialist, which leaves the character, perhaps intentionally, devoid of much depth. Still, Birling is the first cancerous cell in a sickness that sends an entire family's moral compass spinning. He is the epicenter of evil indifference, but, too simply, he was delivered only as a one-dimensional blowhard.

Chris Greenwood, as Sheila's fiance, Gerlad Croft, and Lauren Schneider, as Mrs. Birling, were adequate, although both needed to take more time with their emotions. For example, when Sheila breaks off her engagement with Gerlad, the impact of broken love didn't fully register with Greenwood. And Schneider's role as the family's matriarch, who is ensconced in comfortable denial, could have been more layered, which would have made her inevitable breakdown more powerful.

James Rieser's Inspector Goole was appropriately creepy. His calm, calculated reserve worked, and as the role mandates, his Goole was the type of sly inquisitor for which the truth springs forward. His presence was convincingly intimidating and, in that, Rieser's mission was resoundingly accomplished.

Criticisms aside, this was a strong student production. It contained much food-for-thought about social responsibility, political accountability and, chiefly, morality.

It is certainly worth seeing, even with its flaws. But it's also one of those plays that becomes far more worthwhile if it's appreciated for its various subtexts.

Otherwise, a dangerous and all-too-familiar indifference can set in by the third act.

'An Inspector Calls' WHEN: Performances at 7:30 p.m., Mar. 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31 and Apr. 1; matinees, 2 p.m., Mar. 26 and Apr 2. WHERE: Hatcher Hall, basement, LSU main campus. TICKETS: Adults, $15.50. LSU students and children, $8.50. LSU faculty, staff and senior citizens over the age of 65, $13.50. INFORMATION: Call 225 578-3527 or visit www.theatre.lsu.edu .

Caption: Color photos of James Rieser pointing a finger of blame at Lyndsay Kimball (Sheila Burling) in LSU's production of "An Inspector Calls; B.W. photo of Zach Harvey's Mr. Biring, left, trying to reason with James Rieser's INspector Goole, as Lyndsay Kimball's Sheila Birling looks on (By James Chance); B.W. graphic is "An Inspector Calls" performance information

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H
A space of their own * BR MySpace members link up with friends, share often trivial details of their lives**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

A space of their own *** BR MySpace members link up with friends, share often trivial details of their lives

OK, so by now you know what MySpace is, right? Business pages all over the country have been yammering about how the Internet social networking site has eclipsed Google in terms of site traffic and that Rupert Murdoch paid the site's creators more than $500 million in cold, hard cash for it.

But the real story of MySpace.com can be found in the community that lives there. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Baton Rougeans are already signed up, living out a considerable amount of their social existences on MySpace blogs, photo albums and postings.

MySpace's public relations company won't say exactly how many in the city are members of the service. But local profiles abound.

Since one of MySpace's biggest attractions is that it links one group of friends to another, thus creating larger and larger circles of cyber buddies, the second half of this article looks at four interconnected people and reveals some of the things they are already sharing with countless numbers of people on the Internet.

Much of what the MySpacers are divulging is fairly trivial. It's day-to-day chatchit, random observations and countless candid photos of people in various states of revelry. Yet, despite the routine nature of its content, the site's popularity continues to grow.

Baton Rouge user Rachel East used to use the Friendster site. But when her friends started all talking about MySpace, she signed up and liked the site's increased usability and technical sophistication. (The free site currently has 60 million members, who create their own homepages, where they can keep journals and blogs, paste pictures for anyone to see, instant message each other and send out mass e-mails to all of their friends linked to their site.) The unprecedented growth is good and bad.

"Everything said, it's a way cooler version of Friendster," said East. "I haven't touched Friendster since (signing up to MySpace) but (MySpace) has gotten pretty teeny-bopperish, full of a lot of people who don't know how to use computers. So it's a bit dumber, too. Anybody and everybody is on it, but not necessarily in a good way."

David Silver, an associate professor of communications at the University of Washington who has studied the site's allure, describes the average MySpace profile as "a virtual teenage bedroom." Instead of band posters taped or tacked into plaster, the site allows members to share what bands they like, or for whom they have a crush, only "on an unprecedented scale."

So finding people with similar interests is no longer something special that happens every now and then. Like-minded people are, in fact, plentiful in the My- Space universe. Which is something Silver worries about.

"In adolescence, you don't know how to act around other people and negotiate your identity," said Silver. "If I can just look for everybody that loves a certain band, there is no navigating the waters of identity."

That real life social skills suffer comes with a companion concern, Silver added: that teens, already challenged with maintaining one identity at home and one at school, now must maintain a third persona, their MySpace self.

For some people, however, there may be a benefit in being able to create that third persona. Pepper Schwartz, a sociologist, author and expert in online dating, sees MySpace as an outlet for an otherwise anonymous person to "be a star." It gives kids "a chance to brag" about their lives, even if much of what's said seems numbingly inane.

"Maybe the trivial stuff is all we've got," said Schwartz. "Most people's lives are not soap operas. We get used to sitcoms jampacked with laughs and poignant moments not only is life not like that, teenage life is really not like that."

But the devil may be in the details. Alice Marwick, a Ph.D. candidate at New York University who is studying how people express their online identities, said that MySpace has represented a turning point for how people portray themselves on the Internet. In the early days of the Web, it was widely assumed that people were not very authentic in online personal ads and profiles. Not so anymore.

"People now are using their real names and real pictures," said Marwick. "They are replicating their offline social networks online and most of them have a very singular and significant (online) identity."

For example, Joshua Barrett, a Baton Rouge MySpace user linked to East's site, includes, like many of the site's members, a lengthy profile on his page of some of his likes and dislikes underneath the page's standard "About Me" section. Aside from his self-written bio, snapshots of him with friends round out his online identity.

"When I first got on MySpace, I barely used it for the first six months," recalled Barrett. "But then all my friends started signing up. Soon I was reconnecting with people from high school."

Reconnecting with old friends is, most would agree, pretty harmless. But privacy advocates like Marwick warn that information seemingly shared among friends could be used nefariously. She and others have already raised red flags about over-sharing on MySpace. Aside from the much-publicized risk that young teens may be vulnerable to cyber predators on social networking sites, Marwick said the real threat is from marketers and government agencies who could conceivably use data collected from such sites to amass and compile intricate and revealing personal profiles of people.

"If I say (on MySpace) that my favorite movie is 'The Godfather,' then it's easy for them to try to sell me 'The Sopranos,'" she explained. "Many people think this kind of micro-targeted advertising is great but what's good for an individual may not be good for society as a whole when you consider the loss of privacy."

So, again, below is a story about four random MySpace friends. Most people on MySpace don't use their last names, but more often than not, their first names are legit. East and Barrett revealed their identities to us. The other two people we profiled are anonymous here. They all live in Baton Rouge and, perhaps in keeping with Marwick's privacy warning, the admittedly trivial details of their lives are free for the taking

Once upon a time, in the land of MySpace, a pretty blond named Rachel was frustrated. Men! They had become insufferable.

Maybe it was her main profile picture that lured them to her, like sharks to chum. In it, her hair hooks and curls across her forehead, her head slightly tilts, her hand pulls at her long bangs, as her one unobscured eye seductively spies the camera lens.

She warns lecherous boys on MySpace not to e-mail her. She doesn't want the attention. And, after all, she has lots of virtual friends already.

Many of them posted Valentines for her on Feb. 14. They write her little notes, inviting her to visit, or making dinner plans. One of her few boy friends sends her jokes.

And she shares her feelings with all of them. Her blog reveals that on Jan. 29 she was feeling lonely. She was up at 2 a.m. listening to one of her favorite bands, Better Than Ezra. On Feb. 8 she craved doughnuts and blamed it on her PMS. The next day she complained of a brutal hangover from "sangria margaritas." And three days after that, she was bedridden with a cold that made her miss work.

What color was her hair, as she lay curled up on the couch, sniffling? Her photos show that sometimes she is a brunette. And that she has tattoos, and a beagle. And that she can be poetic, writing under one image: "Oh...summer wine; my eyes grew heavy and my lips they could not speak."

Josh is a friend of Rachel's. He is obsessed. With Tabasco sauce. And he hates the knock-offs.

He's been accused of being gay, but also of being a womanizer, and a lush. He wears eyeliner and "punkish grungy clothes."

In his pictures, his face is long, almost oval. The 22-year- old's hair is black, straight and shoulder length. A goatee adorns an otherwise clean-shaven countenance. He looks like he's in a band. He seems tall, posing

for the camera, wearing a tight white T- shirt, his arm around a giant Viking of a man, with bushy red hair and an orangey ZZ Top beard.

It is unclear from her posting where Josh met Lolly. She is a buxom, 26-year-old redhead from White Castle, a Sagittarius Catholic who likes Marilyn Monroe movies. In one picture, she is posing with a blond woman, who has a tattoo down the length of her arm. Lolly is wearing a red dress, a V-neck halter-style evening gown.

Back in August, Lolly hung out with Josh. He texted her, but his last late-night missive to her went unanswered. She fell asleep. Too much booze. In September they saw each other again. He bought her a drink. She later thanked him for the gesture, simply writing: "I had fun the other night."

It's not apparent how Josh knows Natalie, either. But that hardly matters.

Because Natalie is obsessed with her boyfriend, Todd.

In fact, her MySpace page is a shrine to the lanky 18-year-old who loves speed boats, Bud Light and, yes, Natalie.

They are both unconditionally mushy about one another (for example, one of her blog entries reads: "Well, to start off, everything with Todd is fantastic!!! Who's Todd you ask? The other half of my heart. He's so freaking amazing...I'm so lucky to have him! Every girl needs a Todd. If every girl had a Todd then the world would be a better place."). It sort of goes without saying Natalie's world seems to be in a fairly tight orbit with her boyfriend's these days.

On his site there is a video of the two of them making out in front of the camera. On hers there are Valentine's Day photos, one of which shows Todd reading his card from her, on a bed surrounded by lit candles. His smile is from ear to ear. This is, after all, the girl he wants to marry.

Although they've been together for only five months, things couldn't be more serious. Most of Natalie's friends offer her quick "hellos," but Todd often posts his unrequited love.

A girl named Kelsey got a phone call back in December from one of Natalie's MySpace friends, Chaz, at 4:30 in the morning. She posted a holiday greeting to him on Christmas Eve and thanked him for the call. Hard to say what it was about.

For those friends who read his blog, on Saturday, Oct. 23, he told of his excitement about homecoming and his want for some serious tailgating. An upcoming Halloween party was also on his mind. That there would be six kegs there and those who wore costumes would drink for free was an added plus.

Exactly one month later, on Nov. 23, Chaz added another entry. A night of drinking caused him to sleep through his 10:30 class. When he awoke, he was still drunk. He added, "I'm gonna make my next class in case you were wondering "

Who knows who was actually wondering if Chaz made it to class? But if anyone cared to know, a quick check of Chaz's MySpace page would let them know. Proving, once again, for those who want to keep up with the lives of four complete strangers, or 5,000 of their friends, random digital intimacy is just a click away.

REAL NAME: Rachel East. A QUOTE FROM HER MYSPACE PAGE: "I'm not like the girls that you've known...." BECAME A MYSPACER: 2003. NUMBER OF MYSPACE FRIENDS: 289. WEIRDEST MYSPACE MOMENT: A guy she didn't know came up to her in a bar and started talking to her because he recognized her from the site. MOMENT THAT MADE HER THINK ABOUT PRIVACY CONCERNS: When her boss asked her for her MySpace address. (She refused to tell him.) WHY SHE LOVES MYSPACE: "Your acquaintances become more than acquaintances through this site A lot of people I do keep in touch with on there I don't normally talk with on the phone Now MySpace is a conversation bridge in the real world; it's an ice breaker to say, 'Hey, did you see this or that on a MySpace profile.'"

REAL NAME: Josh Barrett A QUOTE FROM HIS MYSPACE PAGE: "I like to reinvent myself every 6-7 years." BECAME A MYSPACER: 2003. WEIRDEST MYSPACE MOMENT: He has received repeated emails from girls he doesn't know. When he doesn't reply and they keep sending them, it sort of feels like stalking. MOMENT THAT MADE HIM THINK ABOUT PRIVACY CONCERNS: He says he is not worried about getting fired, but he has worried when certain girls make comments on the site that certain other girls shouldn't see. WHY HE LOVES MYSPACE: "It's nice to sign on and see that you have 'comments' and just keep in touch with people who are out of state."

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D
Baker Little Theatre has hit with "Picnic"

J.D. VENTURA
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1
English

Baker Little Theatre has hit with "Picnic"

By J.D. VENTURA Advocate staff writer

Anyone who is familiar with William Inge's "Picnic" knows it's a complicated little play. It's funny, sure, but just below that comedic patina dwells characters imbued with terrific pain, a suffering wedded to unrealized dreams and broken hearts.

So, putting this play on like a straight comedy is the landmine in the middle of the road. An amateurish pitfall the Baker Little Theatre avoids brilliantly.

It was probably no picnic for director Kelly St. Germain to exact such amazing performances from community theater actors. But she does. The result of her efforts is a masterful production inhabited by believable characters who struggle to conform to societal expectations and the demands of their own wild hearts.

Set in 1950s Kansas, the storyline, in keeping with the title, revolves around an upcoming town picnic, a social affair on which the entire community places a great deal of importance. Much like a high school prom, who takes whom to the function is closely watched and the topic of much gossip.

Kathy Wilson plays Flo Owens, a single mother with two eligible teenage daughters, Madge and Millie, played by Kristen Campbell and Tara Dixon, respectively. Things get tense when hunky drifter Hal Carter (Tony Arieux) comes to town, and, much to Flo's chagrin, catches Madge's eye - a problem given that she is dating Hal's old fraternity buddy, a more upstanding Alan Seymour (Charles Pineda).

Below the surface, "Picnic" is chock full of feminist commentary, as the various female characters strive to either accept their roles or refute them. Millie tries not to be a tomboy. Madge tries to resist falling in love with Hal. Flo tries to stop Madge from following her heart, a path that previously led the older woman to heartbreak. And Flo's friend, Rosemary Sidney, played by Nancy Litton, tries holding on to her womanhood as the specter of being a spinster looms large.

Litton's performance is not only spellbinding, it is also a perfect example of what a crafty signature St. Germain scrawls across this show. Litton's Rosemary is at once a tender catastrophe of womanly wisdom and wantonness. The actress understands well the pain Rosemary harbors, like a sheathed weapon waiting to be drawn. And when it is, the stage is electrified with tension and pathos.

The pre-picnic dance sequence, in which Rosemary gets drunk and rages at Hal, simply cannot be more powerful. Litton shows us a woman unhinged, a character cornered by her fears of mortality and loneliness. The whiskey-soaked devolution of Litton's aging schoolmarm is so decorated with nuance and subtlety, both actress and director are to be resoundingly commended.

Save some champagne for Kristen Campbell as well. Her Madge is a perfect house of cards, an impressionable ingenue teetering under the full weight of her passion. In short order her chemistry with Arieux's Hal goes from a convincing simmer to a very believable boil. And while Campbell could go deeper, it is not necessary for her to swim to the ocean floor to find pearls.

Arieux is shining brightly alongside her. (Where has Baker been hiding this guy?) The actor got off to a haltingly slow start on opening night, but when he finds his stride, his Hal is a precious underdog, a misunderstood bad boy whose innocence is somehow mistaken for insolence. Arieux makes his Hal the dreamer, a fitting personification of all the other characters' spirits, both imprisoned and released. We feel for this simple man, much to Arieux's credit.

It should be said that this play is a serious departure for Baker Little Theatre. Some of the actors in this show (Keller Klinker- Simonin, Kathy Wilson, Lindsay Voinche, Jannean Caddy, Dave Besse and Tara Dixon)

have given only mediocre performances in some of the company's other productions. But all these Baker veterans exhibit amazing flow this time around. Lines are delivered conversationally. The integration of movement with dialogue is clearly agonized over. Nobody stands around doing nothing. Everyone seems to understand that good acting sometimes requires less, not more. There are, dare it be said, dramatic pauses and well-placed silence. St. Germain has raised the bar in Baker considerably.

Speaking of, the set also goes beyond what Baker usually does. Nick and Jane St. Germain designed farmhouses that lend so much authenticity to the place. Screen doors and china carefully arranged in kitchen hutches, creaky porches and lamp lit interiors, all define a slice of Americana that is accessible and identifiable. And lighting director Stephen Lee's day, dusk and moonlight are simple, yet magically real.

There are problems, too. Baker newcomer Charles Pineda, as Alan Seymour, at times shows how good he can be. But the richness and complexity of the role is not fully appreciated by him. St. Germain most likely could fine-tune Pineda's rigidity and inconsistent performance, but her other achievements here seem to show her attentions are directed elsewhere.

Elsewhere - like making sure actors who aren't speaking still do something, like convincingly feigning conversation with others. And elsewhere - like, time and time again, making sure elaborate physical blocking is elegant and natural.

"Picnic" is a slice-of-life piece, plain and simple. But Baker Little Theatre's version of it is neither plain nor simple. Their picnic basket is full of delicious direction and carefully cooked characterizations. If you've never been to the tiny theater just north of here, perhaps it's time you went.

"Picnic" is an undeniable hit.

"Picnic"

WHEN: Performances are at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Saturdays, through March 25. WHERE: Baker Little Theatre, 3121 Van Buren St., Baker. TICKETS: Adults, $10; seniors and students, $7. INFORMATION: Call (225) 578-3527 or http:// www.bakerlittletheatre.com

Caption: Color photo of Kristen Campbell and Tony Arieux during a scene of the Baker Little Theatre production of "Picnic"; B.W photos of Kristen Campbell and Kathy Wilson starring in the Baker Little Theatre during the "Picnic" production (by Kenneth Wilks); B.W. graphic of information on the play "Picnic".

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C
Graveside theater * Stories told about city's past notable residents**

J.D. VENTURA
867 words
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1
English

Graveside theater *** Stories told about city's past notable residents

It must have looked strange from the road. Anyone driving by the Magnolia Cemetery a couple of weeks ago, around sunset, would have caught a glimpse of Blake Williams, animatedly pacing alongside a grave, while four people stood there, just looking at him.

Williams, an up-and-coming actor who is graduating from LSUs undergraduate theater program, was standing with a script in his hand over the grave of Little Willie Nelson, an ancestor of one of the cemeterys well-known volunteers, L.C. Gates.

Where will our light be? Williams asked Walter Brody, a local director who is, for the third year in a row, preparing five actors for the Magnolia Memories event. The show, which raises money for the cemeterys preservation, is put on by The Foundation for Historical Louisiana.

Aside from telling Williams how the evenings performance will be lit (simply, a 100-watt bulb), Brody also offered the actor some other direction, like: dont stand right over the grave, that would be disrespectful; point downtown when talking about Baton Rouge, since points immediately east were not very populated yet; tell the narrative like a ghost story, taking it slowly to a dramatic and louder reveal.

Of course, the events aesthetic should prove dramatic enough. After nightfall, robed angels will take ticketholders in groups on a guided tour through the darkened gravesites. Then, at preset times, escorted guests will stop at the tombstones of Nelson, Mary Bird Perkins (a lawyer for whom a local cancer center was named), Nelson Potts (a brick maker and mason whose Main Street home is on the National Register of Historic Places) and Russell Lobdell (a member of the prominent Lobdell family who was killed in combat during World War II).

And this year, in acknowledgment of the hurricanes, the shows planners will also create a composite character sketch of a victim of the 1927 flood.

The first year Brody directed the show he wrote all but one script and even played a character. But this year the actors and playwrights are culled from LSUs theater department, where Brodys wife, Jane, is a professor.

We are getting better at understanding what we are trying to do and in keeping it pure, so to speak, said Brody, when asked how this years production might differ from prior years. Ideally, the audience should have some feeling that this is a real graveside and that this person has somehow just appeared.

Such seamlessness can be a challenge for the actors, he added. They have to project their voices without microphones, competing with the din of nearby traffic and possibly wind. There is no stage. And they must do the same monologue eight times in the same evening, which makes keeping things fresh an issue.

There is also the added pressure of recreating someones ancestor, while performing in front of the deceaseds actual descendants.

Williams has felt that pressure.

Because you are portraying a real person, you do want to make sure you do that justice, said Williams, whose nearly 15-minute monologue of Nelson has the ghostly character surreally describing his own death. I know I am going to have ancestors in front of me, and the mans entire family buried behind me.

Gates was on hand at the recent rehearsal. His great-great- uncle, Samuel Hawes, died in the same house fire that killed Nelson. Willies story had been passed down from generation to generation. When Gates started looking seriously into his familys genealogy, details of his ill-fated ancestors life and death began to

emerge. He is happy with what Williams, Brody and an undergraduate playwright at LSU have created.

Basically the story went along the right lines, Gates said. Theres some embellishment, but its pretty close.

The dead coming figuratively alive may sound a tad gruesome, but FHLs executive director, Carolyn Bennett, said the event is geared for third-graders and up.

Not that she needs every third-grader in town showing up for the event. Seats are limited and attendance was quite healthy the first two years.

In year one, for example, they sold out and tickets were being scalped on eBay, she reported.

This year, organizers plan on selling all 425 tickets. So why is the event so popular?

I think people have a great affection for cemeteries, by and large, said Bennett. They are going to feel quite wonderful and happy they attended. And, hey, its a lot more fun than reading a history book.

Magnolia Memories III WHEN: Performances start at 6:30 p.m. and end by 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday. WHERE: Magnolia Cemetery, corner of North Boulevard and 22nd Street. TICKETS: All seating is reserved. Cost is $20 for Foundation for Historical Louisiana members. All others are $25. INFORMATION: Call (225) 387-2464 for tickets.

Caption: Color photo of director Walter Brody, left, giving some pointers to actor Blake Williams; B.W. photo of actor Blake Williams rehearsing his graveside monologue at the Magnolia Cemetery (By Patrick Dennis); B.W. graphic is "Magnolia Memories III" performance information

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C
Calcium not always good * While its good for bones, deposits in heart can be deadly**

J.D. VENTURA
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1
English

Calcium not always good *** While its good for bones, deposits in heart can be deadly

Everyone knows calcium is great for your bones. But calcium in your heart, it turns out, isnt such a healthy proposition.

Calcium itself doesnt cause heart problems. But the soft, metallic element that is essential for a range of body functions, including muscle contraction and the regulation of heartbeat, if present in the hearts arteries, is a known indicator of heart disease.

And while many people know to get their cholesterol checked or to have a classic stress test, fewer are aware of the CT-scan procedure that can illuminate cardiac calcium deposits, which can be a sign of a potential arterial blockage.

Raymond Templet, of Donaldsonville, knows his calcium score. 257. Its great if youre bowling, but not if youre having your heart scanned for calcium.

Templet, whos 60, had never heard of the calcium scoring test until his sister and her husband had it done. Her test came back with a score of 0. But Templets brotherin- law scored 200 and was told he had a 30 to 40 percent blockage in one of his coronary arteries.

At the urging of his sister, and given that their father died of heart trouble at age 42, Templet decided to ask his doctor for the noninvasive scan.

He didnt expect to find a problem. He had been proactively discussing his heart health with his doctor for 20 years, all the while working to get his cholesterol under control. He hadnt experienced any shortness of breath or chest pain at all. Fit as a fiddle, he thought.

But after scoring high on the calcium screen, a more invasive test, performed while Templet was under sedation, uncovered what his calcium score had alluded to: a 90 percent blockage of one of his coronary arteries.

I was just going to be one of those guys that drops dead of a massive heart attack, said Templet, who is a lab analyst for Georgia Gulf. It really was a shock. I didnt think what they were going to find (with the calcium test) would be life-threatening.

But it was. His doctor recommended that he be stented immediately. These CT scans of the heart have been going on for five years, at least, said Dr. Boyd Edward Helm, Templets cardiologist. They allow you to see calcium in the arteries better than a heart catheter.

Helm said before the calcium scoring technology was introduced, determining cardiac health was less definitive, with standard EKG or stress tests having only a 70 percent accuracy rate. He added that an even newer technology, known as the 64 slice CT, will go way be yond calcium scoring by showing very refined cross sections of the artery, detecting actual blockages with almost a 99 percent accuracy rate.

(We) do not recommend this for routine screening, said Wendy Till, a Baton Rouge-based spokeswoman for the American Heart Association. But (CT scans of the heart) can be helpful to address those individuals at intermediate risk for coronary heart disease.

Ricky Hebert, one of Templets co-workers, would certainly recommend the test.

Back in 2004 Hebert had several episodes of chest pain. He had ruptured a disk, and at first he figured the chest discomfort had something to do with his back.

He aced a standard EKG test, running on a treadmill for 10 minutes. All seemed well, until the summer of 2005 rolled around.

While mowing his grass, he felt the chest pain again, so he figured another trip to the cardiologist was in order.

Before getting a heart catheterization, his doctor gave him a calcium screening test. The scan showed excess calcium build-up in two specific areas of his heart. It was determined he should be cathed immediately.

When they went in, doctors found a widow-maker blockage of his left main artery at the first branch of his aorta. While he was still sedated, they told Heberts wife he was a walking time bomb who required an emergency triple bypass. He had the surgery the next morning.

The gravity of his condition was somewhat surprising. Over the years Hebert had decent cholesterol scores and, as an active hunter, exercised. He figured he was only about 20 pounds overweight.

But the onset of heart disease isnt always obvious.

A 2003 University of Illinois College of Medicine study looked at 5,635 men and women with no symptoms of heart disease.

Over a three-and-a-half-year period after being scanned for calcium, 224 of the participants in the study required bypass surgery or angioplasty to open up clogged arteries or died of heart attacks.

The studys findings, which were published in the American Heart Associations journal, Circulation, showed that of those people who ultimately experienced heart disease or heart failure, 95 percent of them had high amounts of calcium in the arteries based on their original screenings.

Large studies have shown that half of the deaths due to heart disease occur in people with no symptoms, said the studys author, George T. Kondos, in a statement issued by the American Heart Association. And a third of the people with heart disease dont have any of the traditional risk factors diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, family history or peripheral vascular disease. These individuals would go undetected by traditional screening methods.

Hebert is happy he didnt solely rely on traditional screening methods to uncover his heart disease. He is in his sixth week of recovery from his triple bypass, an operation the 55-year-old describes as a painful, humbling experience.

But pain and suffering aside, that the calcium CT scan was an accurate indicator of his arteriolosclerosis is an outcome for which he remains most thankful.

I do believe the calcium scoring test saved my life, Hebert said.

Caption: Color photo of Raymond Templet of Donaldsonville kneeling in his garden; B.W photo of Raymond Templet sitting in his garden (by Patrick Dennis); B.W photo of a CT scan of a heart revealing calcium deposits (PP)

Document BATR000020060228e22r0004o

H
Hot wheels * Scooters becoming popular transportation option around town**

J.D. VENTURA
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1
English

Hot wheels *** Scooters becoming popular transportation option around town

Think Clark Kent, Army-issued glasses and 70s hair are the only retro-chic trends surfacing in Baton Rouge?

Think again.

Theres a transportation trend afoot. If you guessed scooters, step to the front of the line.

Long ago adopted as the best way to get around many European and Asian cities, scooters are quickly gaining popularity in the United States, and Baton Rouge seems to be no exception.

The Motorcycle Industry Council reported that in 2005 113,000 scooters were sold in this country. Thats a big leap from total sales in 1997: 12,000. The third quarter of last year saw a huge spike in sales from the same period in 2004. While conventional motorcycle sales only climbed 16 percent, scooter purchases jumped 65 percent.

Its hard to say how many scooters are in Baton Rouge. But as more hit the road, its getting easier to spot them.

Students at LSU might spot a flash of purple (or, plum, really) on their way to morning classes. That would be Patricia ONeill, zipping along on the new Vespa the opera professor has affectionately named Plumbeaux.

ONeill, whose students think she is cool because of her twowheeled sense of adventure, is a self-proclaimed tomboy who would never buy a motorcycle, but became intrigued with the idea of owning a Vespa when a friend in Switzerland gushed about his. She finally bought one three weeks ago.

I just made up my mind I was going to do it, said ONeill. Its just like riding a bicycle.

Well, not quite. Most scooters, whether they are the Italian- made Vespas or less expensive Asian brands, go a lot faster than bicycles. In fact, most can easily attain speeds over 50 miles an hour. To ride one in Louisiana, you need to get a motorcycle license from the Department of Motor Vehicles.

For ONeill, that meant learning a few things about motorcycles that really dont apply to scooter riding in order to pass the written portion of the exam. The actual driving component was much easier, remembered ONeill.

They told me, If you dont fall down, youll get your license, ONeill said with a laugh.

ONeill isnt the only scooter-riding faculty member at LSU. Photography professor Tom Neff, 57, has been tooling around on scooters since he was a kid living in Southern California. He took a 28-year break from them, but after visiting Italy in 1991, he got the scooter bug again.

Now Neff has four Vespas, two of which he restored to pristine condition. One of his project bikes he found while on a trip to Tokyo. To get it back to the United States, he disassembled it and shipped its parts separately, with some pieces of the scooter crammed into his luggage.

Restoring them is fun, but riding them is, of course, the real thrill. Its just the feeling of not being in a car, out in the wind and sun, riding this crazy contraption its just a lot of fun, said Neff, who several years ago started an informal scooter-riding club called The Vesperados.

Its just nice being in the open air on a nice day watching the simple things as they go by.

Neff said The Vesperados is a loosely wrapped group that sometimes meets for Sunday rides. Ten members of the club went down to New Orleans in October for an annual scooter rally.

Scooters have actually come to Baton Rouge from New Orleans. When Vespa New Orleans sustained water damage from Katrina, the owners knew they needed a second base of operation. They had been thinking of opening up a second location in Florida anyway, but suddenly a Baton Rouge locale made more sense.

Upon arriving in Baton Rouge, the business operated out of a residential house near LSU before opening its storefront on Airline Highway.

There is definitely a lot more scooters in New Orleans, said Vespa Baton Rouge store manager Jen Sharp, who added that the original New Orleans store is scheduled to reopen Tuesday. Here, in Baton Rouge, there are a lot of guys who have motorcycles, and many people dont know a lot about scooters its going to take a while to educate people that scooters are a smart, fun way to get around.

Davis Rhorer needs no education. As the executive director of the Downtown Development District, he spends a lot of time, well, downtown. Much of it is atop his blue Vespa, which his wife bought him a year ago.

There was probably little doubt in his wifes mind that Rhorer would take to the Vespa like a fish to water. He was, afterall, the same man who endured the chidings of friends and colleagues for riding an electric-powered razor scooter to work (that vehicle died).

Now Rhorer rides the scooter year-round, and almost daily to work. While his wife drives her Acura SUV, Rhorer can be found every Saturday morning down at the Red Stick Farmers Market on his Vespa, which he wont drive on the Interstate or at speeds over 45 miles per hour.

Its also recreation for me, said Rhorer. Its just a great way for me to relax.

Like Rhorer and ONeill, Denise Zeringue drives her new scooter to work, too. She has had it for two weeks and says she decided to buy it, in part, because of its fuel efficiency (She can ride for weeks after filling her 2-gallon tank.).

The 31-year-old didnt skimp on her new Vespa. Fully-loaded, the bike cost $6,000, a price which included a matching helmet and weather cover.

I have noticed since I have gotten mine I get lots of looks, said Zeringue. Im not sure if they think its not supposed to be on the road, because its so much smaller than a motorcycle.

The threat of possible midlife motorcycle purchases is what drove the wives of Tom Adamek and Walter Morales to buy their husbands scooters instead.

Morales, 43, got his on his 38th birthday. Its a bit smaller than his Cadillac Escalade and a heck of a lot better on gas.

Every now and then, my wife jumps on the back, and we go to an LSU football game on it, he said. Its great for beating the traffic.

Adamek, whos 44, describes his Vespa as a relatively safe midlife crisis. He loves taking any one of his six kids for rides on the bike, which became his only vehicle for a time after Katrina hit (His car was trapped at the New Orleans airport.). He loves to ride around the LSU lakes, but wont ride in the rain or on four-lane roads. So far, hes crash free.

There is still enough of a novelty factor to it, said Adamek, in describing all the attention he gets zipping around town. It still turns heads.

Who rides scooters?

52% are married re college graduates re retirees re male

Source: Motorcycle Industry Council

Caption: Color photos of Denise Zeringue riding her new Vespa home from work; Patricia O'Neill sitting on her scooter (by Mark Saltz); B.W. photo of LSU professor Patricia O'Neill parking her scooter on the

university's campus (by Kerry Maloney); B.W. graphic is Who Rides Scooters info box (Source: Motorcycle Industry Council)

Document BATR000020060219e22j0001k

C
Forum 35's secret weapon * New president makes connection, has plan to diversify**

J.D. VENTURA
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1
English

Forum 35's secret weapon *** New president makes connection, has plan to diversify

The new president of Forum 35 had a hell of a year in 2005. A month before his wife was due with their first child, Jeff English felt nauseous. After nonstop vomiting, a hasty trip to the doctor resulted in an emergency admittance to the hospital to remove an angry appendix. Not long after that, he was wearing a hospital gown again, this time for a hernia operation. All this was at about the same time his wife was giving birth to their daughter and the family was closing on a new house. Oh, and Katrina. So it perhaps says a lot about English when he agreed to be the new president of the nonprofit group, the mission of which is to provide young professionals with networking, volunteer and leadership opportunities. (English describes the organization as something to join after college but before the Rotary Club.) The groups profile was raised considerably after it spearheaded the initiative to light the Mississippi River Bridge. More recently, Forum 35 was instrumental in producing the wildly successful Art Melt, a multimedia art show held last year at the Shaw Center for the Arts. When he is not watching Netflix with his wife (going to the movies isnt as easy with a 9- month-old in the house), English runs his own advertising and public relations agency, Creative English. But he estimates that at least an hour of every day is now also spent in his new role as president of Forum, of which he has been a member for six years. He acknowledges that there are still misperceptions about the organization. Yes, there is this perception of it being a traditional, nondiverse (group) with white male leadership, he said. but one of my goals this year is to form a subcommittee to help diversify membership. English, who is 38, said membership has grown to between 500 and 600 people. Although he admits there is not a large African-American contingent in the group (the board has four black members), English is looking to change that by making connections with young leaders coming out of Southern University, as well as LSU. Making connections is what English does best, said Pamela Price, Forum 35s 2004 president. She described her successor as the groups secret weapon, a man adept at turning testy business meetings into opportunities for true coalescence. I am really curious to see what he will do, said Price. Because it is such a high profile position everyone calls you up and tries to tell you what you should do. You learn that you cant fix the city, nor should you really try.a lot of (Forum 35s) progress is hard to chart, but its there.

Some proponents of the organization say Forum, which was originally started with seed money from the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, serves an important function in that it provides a structure for civic duty among young professionals who might not otherwise know how to donate their valuable time and expertise to the community.

Some others have questioned how much of an impact the group actually has on the city, beyond serving as a professional network for young up-and-comers.

English, for one, said the impact is certainly there, and he is looking to take everything up a level. That means, he explained, ensuring that members, corporate sponsors and the community all benefit from Forum 35s initiatives.

The main vehicle for that going forward will be Art Melt. Last year the event brought in 3,000 visitors and English is intent on doubling that success this year.

He believes in the creative class, and says if Baton Rouge is to become and remain cosmopolitan, the community must value, retain and celebrate its artists.

Getting a city the size of Baton Rouge to embrace and incorporate an event on the scale of Art Melt isnt easy, but Elmy Savoie, the communications director at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, thinks English is the man for the job.

He is just one of those energetic guys, she explained, adding that English was her mentor when she interned at a local public relations firm at which he was employed. He was very adamant about starting projects from scratch and doing it yourself. He left a huge imprint on my work.

The bad times of 2005 left an imprint on Englishs life. He is committed to having a better 2006, professionally and personally.

On the personal side, the coming year, if all goes well, will be filled with LSU football worship and perfecting home-cooked Cajun dishes, most of which start by melting a pound of butter.

On the professional side, theres his day job, and his aspirations at making Forum 35 better.

Former presidents have improved the organization through their particular professional experiences (fund-raising, accounting, law). Englishs forte is communication. Another fan of his thinks that will serve the group well, too.

He is just an excellent person to make people more aware of Forum 35, said Leslie Cole, the president of the Advertising Federation of Greater Baton Rouge.

His ad background will bring a huge amount of awarenessand now that he is a dedicated dad, he understands what improving Baton Rouge means to his daughter as she grows up, Cole said.

Caption: Color photo of John Jackson, Jeff English, Adele Martin and Chris Dupuy, from left, planning upcoming events during a Forum 35 executive meeting at Phil's Oyster Bar (By Mark Saltz)

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C
Slices of Tennessee * Play powerfully presents some Williams' best works**

J.D. VENTURA
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1
English

Slices of Tennessee *** Play powerfully presents some Williams' best works

When Tennessee Williams died in 1983, the New York Times obituary noted that the playwright would be remembered for his deep sympathy and expansive humor about outcasts in our society.

Thanks to Hurricane Katrina, thousands of New Orleanians were cast out of the city that Williams not only loved, but where he set some of his most famous works.

Which is precisely what makes Swine Palaces latest production, Tennessee Williams in Quarter Time, so deeply personal and hauntingly evocative to anyone affected by the disaster. The scenes from his various plays, some taking place in New Orleans, stand as bold testament to the places rich history and its profound impact on American literature and culture.

Director John Dennis is to be commended for conceiving of and bringing to the Reillys stage, in such a short amount of time, a production that serves as a powerful reminder of just whats at stake should New Orleans be forgotten.

That Dennis packaged the work so expertly is one of the chief strengths of Quarter Time. The play is like a perfectly wrapped gift, opened gingerly out of respect for its marvelous presentation.

The stage is a post-hurricane wasteland, complete with a thrown- out refrigerator, a debris- covered car and scattered garbage. Each act begins with a light and sound show that so effectively emulates a violent storm, the visceral response it elicits for some is downright uncomfortable.

We are immediately troubled. Which is a perfect state of mind to connect with Williams tortured characters.

Nels Anderson must be singled out here for his set design. And Louis Gagliano (lighting) and Eun-Jin Cho (sound) do wonderful things, too, not just in recreating a hurricane, but also an earthquake that felt real and the glow of a fireworks display that was magical in its delicate simplicity.

Back to Dennis, however. Rather than let audience members struggle to orientate themselves with 11 scenes plucked from Williams' various works, the director resurrects the author in the form of Derek Mudd. Mudd's Williams is our guide, serving as a ghostly echo of the playwright's own words, taken from his memoirs, letters and poetry. He also is a sort of human Cliff Notes, giving the audience just enough context to enjoy the work.

Mudd is mesmerizing. His Williams is cool, sly, comic or conflicted, introspective and philosophical. Perched on elevated staging, he watches over his scenes with a knowing paternity that shows the actor did his homework.

The scenes, and Mudd's monologues, are full of observations about New Orleans, some merely colorful, but others poignantly relevant to the city's current predicament. When, for example, two characters scramble into a farmhouse attic in "Kingdom of Earth" after nearby levees break, the immediacy of the piece is intense and unnerving.

Much of the production's electricity is attributable to an almost untouchable cast. Swine Palace brought in three professional, "equity" actors for this show, and all three hold court commandingly.

"Quarter Time's" jewel is unquestionably Andrea Frankle. Her Blanche, from "A Streetcar Named Desire" (which is smartly withheld as sort of a finale at the end of the second act), perfectly captures the dark lyricism found in unmanageable despair. Blanche's fear of Stanley, played like a ticking time bomb by a captivating Shawn Halliday, is animalistic, an exhausted cat cornered by a fanged dog.

And her emotionally incremental confession about provoking her husband's suicide is like the slow, painful removal of a bandage from a festering, infected wound.

Like many of the other actors in the cast, Frankle's portrayal of Blanche showcases the universal struggle to maintain dignity in the face of undeniable calamity.

In the post-Katrina world, it's a theme that is as contemporary as it is literary.

Cristine McMurdo-Wallis as Amanda from "The Glass Menagerie" is yet another woman quite perfectly inhabited by demons thieving her dreams of a better life. In all three of her roles, she limps lusciously along, dragging her characters' hobbled hopes behind her.

Other standouts include Libby King, as the disillusioned tomboy Willie in "This Property Is Condemned." King's portrayal is perhaps one of the play's wispiest and most poignant.

Two criticisms: Coating the characters' costumes with hurricane mud just didn't work; and the dance number at the end looked at first like one of the routines from Michael Jackson's video "Thriller." Whether it was intentional or not, it didn't work, either. It was, in a sense, a bit of unwanted levity, even if its presumed intention was to show that the spirit of New Orleans will dance on.

But "Quarter Time" has few shortcomings. It does much service to Williams' works, which, when sewn together in such a fashion, explain much about human frailty and the sometimes infertile harvests of the human heart.

And, maybe more importantly, it shows that struggle, strife and ultimately, salvation, often come in indistinguishable forms, delivered in a lover's kiss or in a merciless storm as unforgettable as the work of a literary giant.

"Tennessee Williams in Quarter Time"

WHEN: Performance at 7:30 p.m., Feb. 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17 and 18, matinees, 2 p.m., Feb. 5 and 12.

WHERE: Reilly Theatre, Tower Drive, LSU campus.

TICKETS: Adults, $25; faculty, staff, and seniors, $15; students; $12.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 578-3527 or visit http:// www.swinepalace.org

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C
Weak script dooms BRLT production of Wintertime

J.D. VENTURA
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1 February 2006
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1
English

Weak script dooms BRLT production of Wintertime

There is a fine line between farcical and silly. Just ask the folks at the Baton Rouge Little Theater.

The company is now putting on one of Charles Mees plays, Wintertime. Like many of Mees works, it has gotten mixed reviews around the country.

This review will be mixed, too.

First, though, lets play a game of multiple choice. Heres the question. Why does BRLTs production of Wintertime fall short?

A) almost all of the actors play their emotions too loudly

B) in several scenes the director leaves his cast as frozen and motionless as snowmen

C) its just too long

D) all of the above

OK, so you know the answer. But this is not all director Keith Dixons fault. Blame must first fall to Mee. From weak scripts come weak plays, and Wintertime does little to disprove

that notion.

In a snowbound chateau, two lovebirds, Jonathan and Ariel, played by Blake Williams and Tara Dixon, settle in for a romantic weekend alone. Only they are far from alone. Jonathans mother, Maria (Nancy Litton), is already there with her lover, Francois (Kevin White). And soon, Marias ex-husband (whos also Jonathans father), Frank, arrives with his boy-friend, Edmund (Robert Wilson), the two also intent on spending a romantic weekend. Throw in two lesbian neighbors, and you have a full house that promises to provide hilarity.

But Wintertime largely fails to keep that promise. Thats in part because none of the instantaneous emotions the characters so intensely feel make any sense at all. Defenders of this farcical style would ask you to suspend such disbelief. So, for example, when the womanizing Francois merely offers a few flirtatious comments to Ariel, it is supposed to be perfectly plausible that such innocent flattery would send Maria and Jonathan into uncontrollable, paranoid fits of jealousy.

And from this, huge grandiose drama ensues. Mee pays no attention to tension. His characters dont slowly ascend to a nice cruising altitude. Instead, they are plucked from realism as if by helicopter. The effect is a collective bipolar disorder, with characters moods swinging from ecstasy to despair, with little exploration of the emotional terrain in between.

That terrain, unfortunately, is where good acting can take place. But Mees characters are all just mouthpieces for his often sophomoric and obvious observations on love. The fact that he has two different characters deliver the exact same monologue is akin to lovesick adolescents overusing exclamation marks in mushy study hall missives. The script is really a bunch of heavy-handed speeches sewn together. But people dont talk that way.

Which is why all of the actors struggle, nobly, to breathe believability into their characters. It was clear Dixon and his cast spent a great deal of time fine-tuning reactions and developing each characters personality, if not their person. This effort went a long way, and paid off in the way of a few very solid laughs.

Kevin Whites, Francois, for instance, came across as an A-plus Pepe La Pew impersonation. But White worked hard for his laughs, consistently nailing his bits of physical comedy, and endearing himself to the audience by developing the predictability of his character, if not the feisty Frenchmans authenticity. Though White often played more to the house than to those he was supposed to be interacting with on stage.

Tara Dixon did this a lot, too. Her dippy Ariel too often went cosmic, with Dixon delivering her lines to the heavens, or out over the audience members heads. These soap box monologues are more of Mees trademarks, which leave theater traditionalists craving more convincing emotional entanglement between the characters. Much of what could be delicate and delicious dramatic nuance between the various sets of lovers is exploited by way of endless amounts of internal monologue converted into actual dialogue.

Like White, though, Dixon made the audience expect Ariels air- headedness, which paid off in the second act.

If anyone can be credited with giving Mees one-dimensional characters depth, its Blake Williams. His Jonathan is a presence. Williams finds Jonathans subtleties and accomplishes much by, at times, doing little. So when he is angry, it is not always anger that occupies his face, but disbelief, or disillusionment. Unlike many of his fellow cast mates, Williams understands the power of stillness and silence.

The same cannot be said for Terry Byars, who, as Frank, insisted on registering every line of dialogue on his face. Watching Byars do this was like watching a mime perform in the park. All he needed was pencils. Why director Dixon didnt put an end to this and save what would have been an interesting character is not clear.

(P.S.: Mee expecting his audience to believe that a divorced gay man would still have sex with his ex-wife once a week is ludicrous.)

Not enough can be said about the stage and lighting design. Kd Amond and Karalyn Pytel are to be commended for creating a sumptuous and magical atmosphere of shimmering ice and glowing snowscapes.

And while all of the performers held their own, Wintertime seemed to lumber under the weight of the playwrights ego. In his zeal to defy convention with gimmicks he uses in other plays (referencing Greek mythology, throwing things, body slamming), Mee also flouts a tenet of good storytelling by allowing his experimentalism to obscure and sometimes obstruct the plot.

Wintertime says a million things about love. But none of it is authoritative or particularly authentic. Its a little bit of funny wrapped up in a whole lot psychobabble.

Wintertime WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 12. WHERE: Baton Rouge Little Theater, 7155 Florida Blvd. TICKETS: Tickets are $18. INFORMATION: Call (225) 924-6496, or visit http://www.brlt.org .

Caption: Color photo of Kevin White and Nancy Litton performing in "Wintertime" at the Baton Rouge Little Theater; B.W photos of Terry Byars, Kevin White, Robert Wilson and Marian Wood performing in "Wintertime"; Tara Dixon and Blake Williams performing in "Wintertime" (by Liz Condo); B.W. graphic is "Wintertime" performance information

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H
Youth movement * Local NAACP president trying to get new generation involved in organization**

J.D. VENTURA
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1
English

Youth movement *** Local NAACP president trying to get new generation invioved in organization

The new president of Baton Rouges NAACP chapter wants new rims on his black Escalade.

But Kwame Asantes not getting them, mostly out of concern that pimping his ride will give off an unprofessional image.

Such reserve seems somewhat unnecessary given Asantes mission: to encourage a younger demographic of African Americans to get involved with an organization that, for many of them, is more of a historic symbol than a relevant voice in their modern lives.

And while he may not be using shiny, spinning chrome to catch the attention of younger blacks, the 34-year-old attorney is no flop in the recruitment department, either. In the year that he has been president, local membership numbers have taken an impressive upturn: from 200 dues-paying members, to 800.

So whats his secret?

Well, for one thing, he understands what he calls the huge demographical divide the organization faces nationally. Asante is fond of this statistic: of the NAACPs 500,000 members nationwide, under 15 percent of them are under the age of 50. And, as far as chapter presidents go, he is in a very tiny minority (just 1 percent) of those under the age of 35.

With youthful exuberance on his side (hes a fiend for his Sony PlayStation, particularly Madden NFL Football), the former college fullback engages in outreach to the next generation of African Americans, attempting to explain why they should become involved in a retooled NAACP.

Understanding how the organization has changed, Asante explained, really requires a fundamental change in how the NAACPs mission is perceived. At one time the organization was essentially about the acquirement of civil rights. It had very physical manifestations: organized marches and protests, fiery leadership and involvement in several high-profile lawsuits (like the infamous, and recently settled, desegregation case with the East Baton Rouge school system). There is, of course, still some of that struggle and grassroots unrest, but many of the basic freedoms and equalities sought by the pioneers of the movement have been achieved.

The mission now, asserts Asante, is about todays black youth taking full advantage of all of the opportunities vanguards of the movement previously secured. I am part of the changing of the guard, said Asante, from the expensively appointed waiting room of his Florida Boulevard law office. I am part of a generation that has benefited from but not participated in (the civil rights movement). To accuse himself of nonparticipation wouldnt be exactly true. After leaving his hometown of San Diego for a football scholarship at Southern University back in 1989, it didnt take Asante long to find a reason to join the NAACP.

When the organization rounded up students to attend a 1992 rally protesting the controversial police shooting death of McKinley High School student Chauncey Thomas, Asante made sure he was on the bus. It was a moment that crystallized his commitment to the organization.

That same year Yoshihiro Hattori, a 16-year-old Japanese foreign exchange student, was shot and killed by a Baton Rouge man, whose home the teen had mistakenly arrived at for a Halloween party. Many alleged that race played a factor in the shooting.

Soon after that, Asante found himself lost at sunset in Central. He remembers being too afraid to get out of the car and ask for directions. When the panicking 22-year-old finally did, he recalls being told by the homes owner, Nigger, get off my property.

From that point on his participation in the NAACP grew. By the time he started law school in 1996, he was already the vice president of the NAACPs Baton Rouge chapter, working closely with former President Alvin Washington, on what would be the last decade of the deseg suit.

(Kwame) has a unique ability to motivate people by example, said Washington. He is more of a field general in that he would rather fight with the troops on the battlefield than be in the war room.

The battlefield, Asante will tell you, is now in the classrooms of a school system within which black students are still failing. Its why he spent his Saturday recently at the Park Forest Middle School, wearing a yellow NAACP T-shirt and mentoring a group of adolescent boys enrolled in his organizations achievement academy.

The new era in black empowerment isnt all volunteerism. Its one part tough love, evidenced by Asantes reaction to one of his students arriving late to the program.

Lemme ask you something, he said to the 14-year-old before ordering him to tuck in his shirt and pull up his trousers. Why are you here today?

The reprimand continued in the schools office. The boy mumbled an explanation while looking down at his feet. Asante demanded eye contact, saying, Im over here, son.

Through the closed doors, snippets on Asantes sternness escaped with his tenderness.

Do you want to be here? You show up late and you have attitude

I called you at home, thats how much I care about you

this is just as much your program as it is my program

people look at you as a leader

you know we love you

Then he headed off to speak to his class. The discussion was about rappers. Asante told the group that worshipping and emulating the thug image recording artists portray in their videos probably isnt going to deliver them success or respect. That image can destroy you, he warned. your attitude is going to determine your altitude. Period.

He has this real calm way with kids, said Deborah Jones, the program director for the Baton Rouge Parent University, who joined the NAACP after meeting Asante three years ago. He elicits responses from them with respect, not screaming.

Its a tactic Asante seems to employ with grown-ups, too. When he recently issued a press release criticizing the Baton Rouge Police Department for its use of Tasers on suspects (Asante is suing the department on behalf of an alleged victim of police Tasering.), he was the even-keeled, neutral moderator, sitting on the same side of the table as the chief of police, and letting members of the community ask the tough questions rather than doing so himself as a representative of the NAACP.

He is just not one of those guys that digs in his heels and comes in with his guns loaded, said Demoine Rutledge, who served as general counsel for the East Baton Rouge Parish school system, a role that, theoretically, placed him and Asante in adversarial positions. He is a wait and see kind of person. That is his training as a lawyer. He always emerges as a voice of reason.

Giving a voice to those without one is still an aspiration of the new NAACP. Asante wants to make economic development a central issue for the Baton Rouge chapter going forward, and wants to help the African-American community with certain credit issues, like resisting predatory lenders and boosting home ownership rates.

And one of his biggest fears?: that the deseg battle will be all for naught, that those who have always had equal rights and educational equality wont recognize the value of what they now have.

The solution is simple, he said. People have to not only sign up to the NAACP, but do something other than pay their dues.

I learned this from Billy Graham, said Asante. When someone said to him that they didnt like to go to church

because they didnt like dressing up, he said to them, Well, then wear jeans.

And even if he believes action is more important than appearance, one thing is still very clear.

The Escalade will remain sans rims.

Caption: Color photos of Kwame Asante; NAACP President Kwame Asante finishing up some tough talk with a 14-year-old student (By Travis Spradling)

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C
Moving music: instaPod will transfer CD collection for you

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Moving music: instaPod will transfer CD collection for you

Remember how frustrated you were when you realized all of the albums you had been collecting over the years were being replaced by cassette tapes.

And then remember how annoying it was when all your cassette tapes were slowly and painfully switched to CDs.

Well, brace yourselves. Digital technology has once again made our lives easier by making things difficult.

If Santa gave you an iPod for Christmas, you were undoubtedly impressed to learn that some models of the device hold literally thousands upon thousands of songs enough hard drive space to accommodate your massive collection.

So

Step one: call your boss and take a week off.

Step two: put on your pajamas, power up the CD burner and get ready for tedium the likes of which you havent experienced since the days when youd fix your unwound cassette tapes by cranking a ballpoint pen in their holes.

Because transferring all of your CDs onto that shiny new iPod is a huge investment of time.

But fear not, entrepreneurism has saved the day in the form of Jennifer Hannie.

Hannie, a 35-year-old Baton Rouge resident and self-proclaimed gadget gal, started instaPod, a home business that will load your entire CD collection onto your iPod (or any other MP3 player) for you.

I know how painful the process is, said Hannie, who has been an IT consultant for the last 15 years. I did some research and realized other people were providing the service.

Although she has run newspaper ads, and been featured in a local business magazine, Hannie hasnt had any takers yet. But she is confident her first big order is coming.

Of course, if your collection is huge, your bill for the convenience might give you pause. Hannie plans to charge $1 a CD. But that includes not only having the CD tracks converted into a digital player format and loaded onto the portable device, but also having the digitized music files stored to backup discs, should something ever happen to the music player.

"I will still laod a customer's player at no additional charge." Hannie explained in an e-mail. "However, the customer now has the option to load his music files himself or let me do it all."

For many, the benefit may be worth the cost. Hannie will go to the customer's house and pickup the CD collection. In no time the customer gets back their device with every piece of music they own sitting in the palm of their hand.

"It will not only provide them with convenience,' explained Hannie, whose Web site is http://www.instapod.com . "It will allow them to rediscover their music collections."

Caption: Color photo: Jennifer Hannie opened an in-home business, instaPod, which will provide customers with a relatively new service: transferring their often massive CD collections to their portable digital music

players. (by Patrick Dennis)

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C
Model behavior * LSU student highlights local boutiques in fashion show**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Model behavior *** LSU student highlights local boutiques in fashion show

Just dont make out with another model, like last time, implores Rachel Loehrer, addressing the 20 or so whove gathered in the cold back room of the Spanish Moon nightclub for tonights fashion show. Thats why the drinking this time will be controlled.

The evening, which Loehrer advertised as London Calling, will feature clothes from several boutiques around Baton Rouge: Time Warp, Frock Candy, Material Girl, Rock-N-Sole. Basically its retro- U.K. second-hand clothes integrated with more contemporary wear.

With just a few hours to show time, theres no original designer present. No stereotypically effeminate, ascot-wrapped runway patriarch glaring commandingly at gaunt models from behind Gucci sunglasses. But there is nervous energy, much of it belonging to Loehrer, a 24-year-old senior in LSUs textiles, apparel and merchandising program with four selfproduced shows already on her rsum.

Nobody is going to hire me to do this, so I am doing it myself, she says, clutching an as-yet-to-be-used megaphone, while standing before two huge garment racks crammed with outfits she smartly pre-coordinated debunking, she says, an unfortunate perception that fashion majors are stupid. This is a fourdimensional event.

During the shows trial run, five hours before the 11 oclock start, one of the two male models, James Ault, strikes a pose: arms over head, back arched slightly forward, hands against the wall, as if about to return a volleyball over a net. The LSU freshman (who says he is too short to model professionally, but looks as if he has leapt off the cover of the latest Abercrombie catalog) has good reason to grip the exposed brick behind the stage: the catwalk consists of wobbly wooden risers that have seen better days.

Models openly discuss the frightening possibility of being deposited, headlong, into the audience in the event of structural failure. Loehrer is dismissive. Theyve used them for other shows.

Backstage, Catherine Tillson, an LSU junior, remembers how racy the last show got. She tells the other models, who are slouching around her on couches like glamorous Girl Scouts around a campfire, about the clearly inebriated models who walked the runway before her.

Tonight, everyone agrees, will be more tame. That unbridled raucousness may occur doesnt seem likely. People are chilly and chill as they chit-chat.

But by 8 oclock the mood is more frantic. The two hairstylists have arrived, and the backstage room fills with excited, harried motion and the sweet smell of hairspray. A blonde and a brunette are getting their hair teased high, the body heat in the room seemingly rising with their sculpted locks.

I love her hair! Loehrer praises hairdresser Nikki Walker, who is putting the finishing touches on the do of Jennifer Hembree, an Ashley Judd look-alike from Bossier City who has never been in a real fashion show before.

Bossier City? Walker asks. I learned how to put on blue eye shadow up there, at camp! It was so countrified.

This gets everyone laughing. For Hembree, the chuckle seems to diffuse a bit of jittery tension. Her mom, Cathy, already at a wedding in Opelousas, is expected to arrive at the show with a few family members in tow.

Its just after 9 when Loehrer exclaims: I would like to send everybody on stage with a sparkler. You dont want to burn your clothes, or the audience. Do you think we can do this?

Yes! Woo! Yeah!

And if you dont get a sparkler, dont feel bad, Loehrer adds.

Jen Hebert, another model, apparently has no intention of feeling bad. She walks into the dressing room with some Red Snapper shots. Whiskey to warm the soul! she announces with piratelike zeal.

At 10:15 Loehrer, wearing purple boots, fishnet stockings and a silver lam dress, returns to the suddenly frantic dressing room, now as foggy from hairspray as a San Franciscan morning.

Ault, wearing a Pink Floyd jacket and vintage pink-striped tie, is dancing to the trancey dance music someone has put on the stereo.

With 15 minutes left until show time, some of the models cant be still.

They have to pee. Badly.

But the second-floor womens room is flooded, and going downstairs now that a crowd has finally amassed is out of the question.

At Loehrers urgings, fidgety fashionistas get creative and manage to use the urinals in the stall-less mens room.

At 11:30 the show begins. The crowd goes wild as certain models parade onto stage.

Hebert gets sassy, sticking out her hip and tongue at the cheering audience.

Ault elicits catcalls with his tight leopard print shorts, black leather cowboy boots and white jacket.

And the Ashley Judd look-alike from Bossier City, Hembree, who somehow seems as if shes walked the runways in Paris and Milan before, points at her proud mother, who squeals with excitement.

Shes a natural! Cathy Hembree exclaims, before pointing at another model, clad in an extremely scant outfit. I just hope she doesnt come out in something like that.

Caption: Color photos of stylist Niki Walker fixing model Caitlin Bella's hair backstage at the London Calling fashion show; Models Shermel Beckham, Isabel Varela, Madeline Taylor, Elizabeth Rathbone, Lauren Fussell and Erin Sullivan waiting to rule the runway at ta local fashion show; B.W photos of model Isabel Varela dressing in her first outfit for the London Calling fashion show; Show organizer Rachel Loehrer watching the models rehearse on the catwalk; Model Christina Buzana lighting a sparkler for the finale of the London Calling fashion show at Spanish Moon (by Liz Condo)

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H
A place worth saving * Ninth Ward residents gather, vow to return to devastated neighborhood**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

A place worth saving *** Ninth Ward residents gather, vow to return to devastated neighborhood

NEW ORLEANS Emptied of people, the Ninth Ward filled with a thick fog on New Years Eve. It floated low, down deserted streets, where children once played. It crept into silent back yards, where families barbecued. And it wafted in fingerlike wisps through open doors and windows, haunting homes now dark and devoid of life.

But there was hope hidden in the haze.

In the final hour of 2005, a small procession of cars crossed the draw bridge that lifts St. Claude Avenue over the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal. A group of Ninth Warders and their friends were headed to a New Years Eve party at the Jourdan Avenue home of Greta Gladney.

The event, which was hosted by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, a social activist group, would include a candlelight vigil and the relighting of four homes using a gas generator. As much a protest as a party, organizers hoped the evening would make a simple statement: We are coming back in 2006.

Yet uncertainty mixed with solidarity. They have seen the policy wonks and politicians arrive in Blackhawk helicopters to survey the damage, before heading back to countless conference rooms to essentially ponder one key question: Can, and should, the Ninth Ward be rebuilt?

Still no answer.

And while they wait for it, some residents of that neighborhood want to remind those debating the fate of their homes that the destruction of brick and mortar belies the real loss. Whats at risk, they say, is the forfeiture of something far more priceless and abstract: community. Loyed Lonzo attended Gladneys gathering.

Lonzo and his wife, Lois, both in their 60s, have lived in 70117 all their lives. They remember a closeknit community, a family- oriented place where everybody knew each other. But Loyed also remembers the little things that now make him grieve for whats gone.

He recalls riding the city buses a long time ago from downtown, and when he neared the Industrial Canal, he could always smell the water and somehow even catch a whiff of the green trees, which were always filled with birds. It just felt like you had left the city, said Loyed, a strong man who held back his emotion. It was full of large lots, where you could raise your kids.

Most of the greenery is now gone. So are the squirrels and the birds. But Lois memories have not faded or flown away. She grew up on the 2100 block of Egania, which wasnt even an official street until her father unfurled a big roll of tar paper and ran it between the houses.

The city later thought it prudent to pave it.

Back then, neighbors were close, said Lois. You knew they were because everyone kept an eye on each other's kids. It was even OK to reprimand someone else's children, as if they were your own. Everyone "looked out" for each other.

People talk about the levees these days as something terrible, an emblem of government neglect, a source of unthinkable suffering. But they provided decades of enjoyment, too.

On the Fourth of July, families sat on the levees in the Ninth and watched the fireworks. Generations of children rode their bikes along them. Lois did that with her kids. Another Ninth Warder, who attended the

New Year's Eve party, 51-year-old Vanessa Johnson Gueringer, loved the levees, too. As a girl she would walk along them, coming to rest at one of her two favorite spots: near the "Holy Cross school" or the "St. Claude bridge."

"I would watch the ships pass by and read my book until it got dark," said Gueringer. "If my mother only knew how far from home I had gone!"

'From the Nine and '

Some residents of the Ninth Ward bristle at the old saying: "From the Nine and don't mind dyin.' " Were there problems in the neighborhood? Of course. But there were more good people than bad. It seemed as if every block had someone who was looking out for trouble.

Some neighborhood watch programs were effective, if informal.

Gueringer recalled a "Ms. Campbell." She owned a couple of four- plexes on the block and was known for the "frozen cups" she would sell out of her kitchen. Her little side business had everyone in the neighborhood coming and going through her screen door. And payment was made in coins, and conversation.

"She had the '411' on everyone," said Gueringer, laughing from the nostalgia. "Then she would call me and tell me everything."

Tanya Harris, one of the ACORN members who organized the New Year's Eve party, remembered a similar figure from her childhood: "Ms. Peet." A tomboy, Harris couldn't resist climbing the huge tree in her grandparents' back yard, despite an edict from her elders forbidding such activity. It wasn't uncommon for her to ensconce herself between its broad branches only to hear the phone ringing in the house.

"She would call my grandfather and tell him I was up in it," Harris said, laughing. "He would come out of the house, mad, saying 'Dammit! Get down from there!'"

Her grandfather would also sit with her, in silence, on the rocks at the end of Delery Street, their cane fishing poles pointed out toward the Mississippi, as giant cruise ships made their way slowly up the river.

Theirs was not a neighborhood ruled by gangs and violence. It was a place where older generations plotted the success of their children, from the kitchens of owned homes, which lined some of the city's lushest streets.

A place full of memories. A place worth saving.

Happy New Year

At Gladney's two-story neo-colonial, about 35 people lit candles at 11:30 p.m. and gathered in a circle. The fog moistened cheeks and left ship captains blowing their horns in the distance.

The pitch-black windows and doors of adjacent homes looked like toothless jack-o'-lanterns, their expressions frozen in horrified surprise.

"I have had this house for 11 years now," Gladney told her guests. "I bought it from a 92-year-old woman who I am confident loved it as much as I do. She kissed it goodbye as she left."

The building had received a "red tag," which essentially means it is condemned and is at risk of being bulldozed by the city. Gladney appealed the decision and got the red tag status reversed. So have some of her neighbors.

"With pressure," she told the group, "you can move these things forward."

Then Gueringer spoke.

"I'm saddened every time I come here," she said, choking back tears. "I want to come home so bad. And I know our commitment is strong to come back from the ashes and rebuild Even without the help of public officials, we are coming back."

In the glow of his candle, with wax dripping over worn fingers, Lonzo spoke his piece, too.

"It seems the politicians are serving to the rich," he said. "What are we? These are our homes."

A teenager then played "Caravan" on his saxophone, the bruised and achy brassiness, as haunting as the fog, instantly absorbed by the black, soundless void.

At the stroke of midnight, a switch was thrown and the generator illuminating Gladney's house lit the porch light of a neighbor's home, like a candle lighting another.

And just before that, before the crackle and pop of the city's unseen fireworks display echoed over the Mississippi, everyone at the party identified themselves and explained where in the Ninth they were from and why they thought it important to start the New Year there.

The last to go was the 13-year-old saxophonist. With the instrument still around his neck and his proud mother by his side, he said, "My name is Stephen Gladney, and this is my house."

Caption: Color photos of Lower Ninth Ward resident Stephen Gladney playing his sax on the porch of his flood-damaged home prior to a candlelight vigil on New Year's Eve; Greta Gladney wearing her Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now T-shirt at a protest held at her Ninth Ward home, at which residents of the decimated neighborhood reaffirmed their committment to return in 2006; Greta Gladney, flanked by her son Stephen, hosting a New Year's Eve party at her Ninth Ward home (AP); B.W. photo of Loyed Lonzo, left, speaking his piece at a candlelight vigil held in the Ninth Ward as Stephen and Greta Gladney, Kalamu Salaam and Vanessa Gueringer look on (By Mark Saltz)

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C
"Right thing to do" * Bell ringers' goal to remind shoppers to give**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

"Right thing to do" *** Bell ringers' goal to remind shoppers to give

Down at the Hobby Lobby on O'Neal Lane, Roger Morris wasn't making much noise recently.

Which is unusual for a Salvation Army bell ringer.

Morris didn't swing his arm to and fro like some crazed town crier. His ringing sounded more like the bell of a child's bike, only softer. With the handle of the instrument held between the knuckle of his index finger and his thumb, he rang it daintily, like a wealthy man requesting a butler.

He knows people don't want to hear the dissonance constantly, so he jingles it softly, and only as people approach.

His humility is evocative, his demeanor plaintiff, leaving passersby spellbound and generous. They give, keeping his kettle always full.

Despite some bumps in the road namely the ban on bell ringers by some national retailers collections continue. Except at three entrances at the Mall of Louisiana where ringers usually collected a combined $18,000 a season, according to Maj. Mark Slattery of the Salvation Army.

The welcome mat is still unfurled at Hobby Lobby. There, a little boy walked up to Morris' pot and, with pudgy, rosy red hands, struggled to put a couple of dollar bills through the slot. His mom coached him along, Hold it like you do for your pig.

Good job. Good job, Morris congratulated in a hushed and gentle tone.

It's just not about him, Morris insisted when pressed for unshared details about why he has come back to ring the bell for a second year. In fact, it's not even about the bell ringers at all. It's all about the people who give, and the Salvation Army as an organization, he explained.

It's the right thing to do, said Morris, who also made it clear that bell ringers were not banned from the mall entirely, nor are they required to sing Christmas carols. It's about the people. It's not a selfish thing.

It is, however, seven plus hours of standing on your feet in chilly temperatures, providing stressed shoppers with an auditory reminder Christmas is nearly here, like it or not.

Morris presses the door open button for almost everyone. Some thank him for the gesture. Others don't. Some remember his kindness and give on their way out. Others just say "Merry Christmas."

Many pull their wallets out from a great distance and spend the walk from their cars folding their bills precisely, like origami.

Some don't give Morris even a look, walking past him as if he was a ghost who haunts the arts and crafts chain.

A few miles away, at the other Hobby Lobby on College Drive, some people walked right past Craigery Bradford, too. But he is a bit harder to ignore.

That's because he sings Christmas carols in a booming baritone that would make any church choir director take notice. Where Morris' presence flickers, subtly, like a votive candle, Bradford's burns brightly like a freshly stoked yuletide log. His kettle fills quickly too.

His passion for the job resulted recently in a froggy throat, which he coated with Chloraseptic in between renditions of "Silent Night" and "The Christmas Song."

"I taught myself to do different ranges," he said, walking to grab a French vanilla cappuccino out of a machine at the adjacent gas station. "For 'Chestnuts Roasting' I emulate Nat King Cole. For 'White Christmas,' Frank Sinatra."

On the walk back from his break, the 40-year-old opened up about his reasons for deciding to ring the bell. He is a recovering addict, he explained, and not a stranger to "hard times."

Manning the red kettle is a way to give back and to see, first hand, that the "milk of human kindness hasn't dried up."

Bradford said that at the O'Neal Lane Hobby Lobby, the one Morris recently staffed, he has "a following" of people who come to hear him sing. Some make requests. Some ask other bell ringers to also belt out a few numbers, an appeal that is mostly refused, except by the burly baritone.

One woman, rushed and purposeful, walked out of the store and past a singing Bradford. Seemingly determined to get a reaction from her, he hurled lyrics at the back of her head.

"And so, I'm offering this simple phrase,

To kids from one to 92"

As if struck by a tossed snowball, the woman stopped dead in her tracks, turned around and, arms folded in surrender, stood and listened to the rest of the tune. A smile crossed her face, which seemed to fill with the nostalgia of many bygone Christmases.

"That was beautiful," she yelled back to Bradford, as she clapped at the song's conclusion. "Thank you so much."

The singer smiled, his bell still silent and his face flush with cheerful pride.

Caption: Color photos of Craigery Bradford singing the same five Christmas carols over and over again; Roger Morris ringing his bell alongside his Salvation Army kettle outside the Hobby Lobby on O'Neal Lane (by Kenneth Wilkes)

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C
Real world rehab * BR General's new "Around Town" wing helps patients learn to function in home setting**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Real world rehab *** BR General's new "Around Town" wing helps patients learn to function in home setting

Bilateral knee surgery is no walk in the park. In fact, after the procedure Buddy Chauvin couldnt walk at all. Until recently, Chauvin and the many others in need of physical therapy at Baton Rouge General Medical Center worked with therapists in a traditional setting: a clinical- looking room with weights and special rehab equipment. But then reality set in. Thats because the hospital opened Around Town, a remodeled wing made to look like the inside of a typical home. Theres a living room with a sofa and chair. And a working kitchen, complete with stove, washer and dryer. And a bedroom, with a plush bed and a nightstand. The idea makes so much sense, its difficult to not wonder why it hasnt been done sooner: teach rehab patients how to function in a real-life home setting, where they can retrain stiff, unresponsive limbs how to perform basic tasks again: putting wet laundry in the dryer, baking an apple pie, getting up from a soft, sunken couch. We have had the desire to do something like this for the last five years, said Charmaine Bailey, the hospitals clinical coordinator of physical therapy. the realm of rehab is really turning this way and (this model) is really motivated by outcome. Therapy becomes more purpose-driven. Bailey said over the last 10 to 15 years rehabbing rehab has been popular, with many hospitals creating a Main Street environment, a simulated street featuring, for example, shops, a post office and a bank, where patients could re-assimilate back into the motion of daily routines. The hospital considered emulating a popular, out-of-the- box model of this concept, but decided instead to focus on creating in-home rehabilitation challenges since it was determined that many newly discharged rehabilitation patients will spend a good deal of time at home, often alone.

What resulted transformed an entire hallway on the rehabilitation unit at the hospital into what looks like an actual apartment, complete with exterior hallway-facing shingled walls (adorned with painted shrubs), windows and framed exterior door frames.

Bailey said the Main Street model is Phase II and will take up the other side of the hall sometime in 2006.

If Chauvin has anything to say about it, he wont be an inpatient by the time he reads this article. The 55-year-old investment officer, who lives with his wife in a two-story (yes, stairs!) condo in Baton Rouge, plans to go home fairly quickly and credits the Around Town wing with a recovery that, he said, is better preparing him to meet practical challenges at home.

Its a real confidence builder, he said. You start to realize theres a lot more things youre capable of doing, and that (your legs) arent going to break off.

His confidence is a far cry from how he felt right after his surgery, which was performed to relieve crippling arthritis pain he had suffered for 10 years. The day after the procedure the hospital staff had him on his feet.

After the first week I decided I was going to live again, Chauvin said. This (program) is fantastic because it brings you to the next level.

Bailey stressed that the program does not substitute for more traditional physical therapy, but rather services as a useful supplement.

One of the unexpected upsides to the program, Bailey explained, is the ability for staff to modify it and expand its scope easily. For example, if a patient planned on using a computer extensively at home, then a computer could be set up in the Around

Town model upon which they could practice.

The only real challenge the model posed was the limited amount of available space. The ward had to install the new living space within the floor space it already occupied. But they made it fit.

Now visitors to the ward come upon what looks like a cottage within the hospital. The illusion is completed with the smell of real apple pie baking in the oven. The enticing smells from a real kitchen serve as a reminder to patients like Chauvin, that working through the pain is rewarded with the very real promise of home.

Caption: Color photos of Baton Rouge General Medical Center physical therapist Angie McCoy, right, walking Buddy Chauvin, 55, through the facility's new "home," which allows rehab patients to see how they will do in real-life settings; Buddy Chauvin making his way through the kitchen inside Baton Rouge General Medical Center's new "Around Town" rehab wing (By Richard Alan Hannon)

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D
Local food bank uncertainof future role with evacuees

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Local food bank uncertain of future role with evacuees

Over on Choctaw Drive, there is an entire warehouse full of food. Filling it is not a worry for the executive director of the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank, Michael Manning. At least not yet.

But Manning is worried these days. Hes heard that the Federal Emergency Management Agency may want local food banks to feed displaced hurricane evacuees when the federal government stops. Right now, FEMA is catering food to some trailer villages, and, said Manning, if they abruptly stop, that sudden burden on his nonprofits stockpiles could create a problem.

His biggest complaint? Not lack of food, but rather information.

Im not even guessing, Manning replied, when asked how much more food he will need should FEMA ask his organization, which is a member of the national, Chicago-based nonprofit, Second Harvest, to step in. Im just sitting and waiting.

Hes waiting for Michael Cosbar, or someone from FEMA, to call him.

Cosbar, the FEMA administrator who oversees operations at the Louisiana trailer parks, said FEMA will continue feeding evacuees three meals a day for at least four more months.

There will be plenty of notice, said Cosbar, when asked if people will be told when food catering will be halted. And we have noticed a drop of people taking food in the trailer (parks), because many are going back on food stamps.

Cosbar said he doesnt envision the food bank playing much of a role once FEMA stops its feeding program because he regards the food bank as primarily serving the homeless. Sixty percent of (evacuees) have jobs and only a fraction of them were homeless before.

Out of touch is how Manning describes Cosbars understanding of how food banks work. Many people use the banks foodstuffs to supplement the food stamps program, explained Manning. And a large number of evacuees, who were receiving food stamps in New Orleans before the hurricanes, were also receiving food bank donations.

Food stamps only go so far, added Manning.

Food stamps only go so far, added Manning.

Recent experience in feeding the hurricane-affected hungry involved moving a lot of product, which is what is so worrisome to Manning. For example, in just the first two months after Katrina, the local food bank distributed 3 million pounds of food. Comparatively, that figure was 7 million pounds for all of last year.

Those numbers and some new figures contained in a Nov. 29 FEMA- issued report titled Hurricane Katrina/Rita PFO Housing Group Multi- State Action Plan underscore the sheer number of displaced people relying on the government for housing, and, in many cases, food: 18,102 people in Louisiana living in government-supported living situations, with 11,378 of those people staying in travel trailers.

As of now, its the best data Manning said he has, although he admits translating those figures into exactly how much food might be needed is a moving target.

I just dont know whats going to be expected of us, said Manning. I am worried about the FEMA villages in our service area and that we are not going to be able to assist them.

Manning added that although many people currently being fed by FEMA in trailer villages will also qualify for food stamps, those evacuees living in remotely located trailer parks may have difficulty finding transportation to grocery stores.

It doesnt surprise me that (Manning) is nervous, said Chris Rebstock, vice president of member support, who manages disaster response activities for Second Harvest out of their Chicago headquarters. (FEMA) does expect us to be involved, but what that is going to look like we do not know yet. But they are working out the details of their withdrawals.

Like Manning, Rebstock was not aware of the four-month window mentioned by Cosbar.

Rebstock said that without FEMA having a definite plan for how, or a time line for when, they will stop feeding evacuees, the future role Second Harvest will play will continue to be unknown. What is clear, however, is his agency is going to be involved in the long- term recovery.

Manning said a worst-case scenario would be a sudden and total stoppage of food provision by FEMA, which, he predicted, could cause immediate distribution problems and an emptying of current food stockpiles in perhaps a month.

But even stopping the FEMA food program four months from now may cause problems, said Manning, depending on how many people are still living in the trailer parks.

In the meantime, its Manning who goes hungry: for that definite plan from FEMA that Rebstock mentioned.

Tell me where these parks are, whos in them and who needs food, said Manning.

We are ready to help, but were not being told how.

Caption: Color photo of Drew Contine checking the inventory in the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank's warehouse (by Mark Saltz); B.W mug of Michael Manning

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H
"He's our cowboy" ** Volunteers from Michigan help Forked Island man rebuild after Rita**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

"He's our cowboy" **** Volunteers from Michigan help Forked Island man rebuild after Rita

FORKED ISLAND The fields where the legless cowboy roams look snow-covered.

When Rita spat the ocean northward, like the unfurled tongue of a snake, she flooded the pastures with salt water, turning everything gray.

A man driving down Highway 82 stops at a house looking for Buster Willie. Rumor has it his floors were badly damaged in the storm. They say some Yankee carpenters have offered to replace them.

The visitor first asks, Why do I smell the ocean?

The owner of the place, which is the wrong house it turns out, replies, Because the Gulf came in.

It did indeed.

By some accounts the storm surge that raged out of Vermilion Bay was 10 feet high. Weeks after Rita made landfall, Forked Island (pronounced Fork-Ed) still smells like a seaside town, even though the bay is a good 15 miles southeast of here.

Are you looking for Buster, the guy with no legs? asks the man, who is repairing his floors, too. Hes down the dirt road, just over there. Look for the green roof.

The road of crushed white shells runs for a mile, spine like, through the muddy marshland. The trenches just off its shoulder are still filled with water. And the water is still full of large saltwater fish, betrayed by the retreating tide.

Willies little house is a modest ranchers shack, sitting on a barely noticeable hill, surrounded by monstrous oak trees and barbedwire fencing.

The guys from Highland, Mich., are inside. Hammers are banging. Work boots step heavily on the exposed plywood floors. The sound of debris being thrown into the back of a pickup truck competes with the whistle of a cool wind that passes through a dead white oaks branches, and the manes of curious horses.

Willie looks uncomfortable. He isnt used to this. Such unsolicited help wasnt his idea. His youngest daughter met the volunteers from Rebuilding Together through the local Red Cross. She explained her father had lost both his legs to diabetes. And now his floors.

And here they are. For the second day. Three generations of Ruschlows: grandfather Paul, son Kirt and grandson Jeremy. The men are joined by a family friend, 50-year-old Jon Vernier.

They drove down to Louisiana in a crew cab, with a sleeping camper in tow. They originally offered to go to New Orleans, but, they were told, there were enough volunteers already. Rural Louisiana, however, needed help, too.

Not that Willie is entirely helpless. Far from it. After evacuating in advance of Rita, he and other ranch hands returned to rescue their surviving cattle. He put on both his fake legs, jumped in his truck and went to work alongside old friends, like Hank Moss and Raywood Stelly.

After 40 years of ranching he had never seen anything like it. Livestock from two hours away roamed the interstate in Forked Island. He worked and worked and worked until he got a staph infection. When the water finally receded fully, he managed to drive down the white-shelled road for the first time since the storm, to

survey the damage. Tired, and using crutches, he opened the front door, and found more water.

His nephew, who lives nearby, but on lower ground, lost everything. Basically, I am lucky, says Willie.

Lucky enough to have the family photos high on the wall, above the water line. He managed to save the picture of his parents with his 13 siblings; the snapshot of him and his rancher friends whooping it up at the Curve Lounge nine years ago, on his 46th birthday; the portrait of his sonin- law killed in a hunting accident and the other of his brother-in-law, who died in the auger at the local rice mill.

The little house he helped build 15 years ago, with some other guys from the Flying J Ranch, wasnt placed on the hill because anyone had imagined such a catastrophe. It just belonged among the trees.

He is explaining all this leaning on his crutches, in the doorway, awash in slanting afternoon sunlight, his cowboy hat creating a dark shadow over his eyes, like the Lone Ranger.

Im usually the type of fellow who does his own thing, he says, as if the sudden presence of helpful Northerners in his house needs explanation. But I am in no position right now to do anything Im broker than a church mouse.

Payment is hardly necessary. The guys from Michigan cant stop talking about the beautiful people theyve met in the week theyve been here, who have served them gumbo and pork jambalaya and black- eyed peas, and who have done their laundry and shown them a good time down at the Curve.

Willies pride hasnt stood in the way of his gratitude. Yesterday he had bags full of McDonalds breakfast waiting for them when they pulled up. And he insisted they go down to the Cajun Diner for lunch and say, Put it on Busters tab.

The Northerners didnt do that because the local sheriff bought their meals. Just plain insisted on it.

And, after all, the experience of just meeting Willie seems payment enough for services rendered.

A grateful Paul Ruschlow puts it this way: Hes our cowboy.

Caption: Color photos of Buster Willie looking out at horses on his ranch; Jon Vernier, Paul Ruschlow, Kirt Ruschlow and Jeremy Rushlow helped Buster Willie replace his hurricane damaged floors. (by J.D. Ventura)

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C
"Desire NOLA" encourages small business * Nonprofit wants to keep professionals in New Orleans**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

"Desire NOLA" encourages small business *** Nonprofit wants to keep professionals in New Orleans

Think all the young professionals who have portable skills have fled New Orleans for greener pastures?

Not all of them.

In fact, some of them have banded together and formed a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging and supporting small businesses reopening in the beleaguered city.

They call it Desire Nola (http://www.desirenola.org). Its more of a Web presence than a brick-and-mortar organization, but it is real, active and already making an impression in the Crescent City.

The core group, a dozen or so New Orleanians who are back living and working in the city, are behind the popular I-(Love)-NOLA T- shirts, which have a fleur-de-lis symbol instead of a heart and are available for purchase on their Web site.

It all started when Chris Kane, an attorney with the firm Adams and Reese LLP glimpsed Mayor Ray Nagin, clad in a T-shirt on which appeared the word Desire, during a televised press conference. Kane had a light bulb moment: just as certain logos (like NYPD and NYFD) became popular symbols of solidarity after 9/11, wouldnt the Katrina disaster warrant a similar initiative?

And there was just something appealing about the word desire.

Within eight hours Kane and some of his friends had a design to a silk screener. But the rallying cry around the Tshirt project seemed to warrant the taking on of bigger issues. Soon an apartment full of urban 20-somethings was working on building a Web site and incorporating a nonprofit, Desire NOLA.

It was a case of sheer volunteer willpower, explained Kanes friend and professional colleague, Jody Montelaro, also an attorney. There was a huge snowball effect.

The snowball effect Kane likes to refer to as the prongs of the newly formed organizations mission. Chiefly, he explained, they are working to make their Web site a clearinghouse of information for small businesses that are either already back open for business, or looking to be.

The Web site is clearly still being built, but the group points to a nascent grant program it has established for small business owners as one of the first solid byproducts of the groups efforts. Funded by proceeds from the T-shirt sales, Desire Nola is distributing five grants in the amount of $2,000.

Its not a lot, but its something. Kane sees the restoration of small business as vital to the citys reemergence: If we dont do something to support the mom-and-pop businesses, we will lose an important thread in our communities, one that is an underpinning of our music and tourism industry.

Kane lives in Algiers Point, and Montelaro lives in the Warehouse District. Both men have teamed up with Stephanie Mayne, a professional event planner, and city councilmember John Batt Jr.s office to help launch Desire NOLAs first sponsored event, Home for the Holidays, a music and food fair to be held from noon to 6 p.m. Saturday, along a large swath of Magazine Street in the citys Uptown section.

Batt, who said he thinks the world of these (Desire NOLA) folks, said what the nonprofit is attempting to do is integral. Its a piece of the whole equation on how to rebuild and repopulate our city, said Batt, who plans on having his staffers on hand to answer returning residents questions about utility restoration and various rebuilding initiatives. And getting people out just shopping and interacting socially (is also important) because, at the end of the day, a city is comprised of people.

And, as Mayne pointed out, people spending money on Magazine Street is a helpful first step.

The event is both a thank you (for coming back) and one that will hopefully stir up some business for these folks, said Mayne, who returned to New Orleans in early October to find much of the city still closed, National Guard patrolling the streets and three refrigerators outside of her apartment. I appreciate what the city has to offer so much more now.

And what the city has to offer young persevering professionals, according to Kane, Mayne and Montelaro, is slowly but surely returning. A few popular bars on Magazine Street have reopened, and, over beers and cocktails, some of the citys up-andcomers now talk about rebuilding and strategize how to keep themselves relevant in a city struggling to do the same.

(Katrina) has galvanized New Orleanians, said Kane. There is a lot obviously missing, and so we are doing the best we can with what we have.

And what they have is a strong desire to be there.

Caption: Color photo of a Desire NOLA T-shirt (PP)

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C
Healthy community * Nonprofit offers health care for displaced**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Healthy community *** Nonprofit offers health care for displaced

While hurricane evacuees staying at the River Center and other Red Cross shelters received medical care during their stays, many others staying in private homes and churches did not.

At least not until the Greater Baton Rouge Community Clinic decided to organize Community Health Day.

The Baton Rouge nonprofit, which normally connects the working poor with free health and dental care for up to six months at a time, organized the Nov. 19 event in an effort to reach out to displaced New Orleanians cut off from their regular healthcare providers.

It was necessary, said the fairs principal organizer, GBRCCs Pat Alford, because of the sheer number of people still staying at hotels, which the organization canvassed. Motel 6, for example, still had 126 rooms of evacuees, when the GBRCC first began its planning back in October, according to Alford.

We saw this as an opportunity for neighbors to reach out to neighbors, said Alford. We really felt like we had to do a little bit more.

A few days before the fair, which brought together a long list of health and social service providers, Alford said she couldnt predict what the turnout would be.

But on the morning of the event, there were 28 people waiting for the doors of the Bellemont Great Hall to open. An hour later about 150 people walked the room, visiting the various booths to get flu shots, have blood pressure checked or talk to mental-health counselors. One woman inquired about her mothers diabetes. Another placed her baby in a new stroller given to her at the event.

Pam Floyd, who, along with her son Devon, 16, ending up living with eight other families in a private residence until just recently getting their own apartment. They have not, however, found a new family doctor.

I need a flu shot, (my mother) needs her eyes checked, and he needs a physical for school, she said, sitting with her son at a table and filling out the GBRCCs registration paperwork.

Barbara Butler, 53, said living with so many other evacuees in the same house necessitated, more so than in other years, that she get a flu shot, too. She said she also wanted to cut through the red tape associated with learning the ins and outs of a new citys health- care system.

Its a strain now that our bills are all due, said Butler. But the Lord is good, even if this is going to be a process.

Health Day was good to Callisa Batiste. The mother of two, who is nine months pregnant, had been lugging around her 18-month-old son, Wayman, on her hips. She was visibly relieved to deposit the 29- pound child into a brand new stroller given to her by the Safety Council.

As explained by Batistes mother, Charmain Williams, additional mobility is a welcomed thing, especially in light of where the family has recently been.

We first went to the Superdome, then the Astrodome, then to Plaquemine and now here, said Williams. Were in a house now. Weve got our own place.

Renee Barbier, who gave Batiste her stroller, said those being helped by the health fair were extremely appreciative.

One father was carrying his baby, but had just got his flu shot, said Barbier. He told me that it was good to just get the baby out of his sore arm.

Caption: Color photo of Barbara Carter, left, having her blood pressured checked by Louisiana Technical College student Sharon Denise Lee; B.W. photo of Barbara Butler, left, getting a flu shot from Southeastern School of Nursing student Jill Baxter during the Community Health Day (By Kerry Maloney); B.W. mug of Pat Alford

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C
All hail the queen * renaissance blurs lines between real, acting**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

All hail the queen *** renaissance blurs lines between real, acting

HAMMOND - The villagers were excitedly expecting her. The tiny hamlet had gotten word that Queen Elizabeth would visit them. This was big news. The settlement of Albright was a humble one. Full of peasants and commoners. A visit from Her Majesty was a fairly significant event. Off in the distance, the whine of bagpipes signaled her imminent arrival. And then, there she was. Her shock of red hair and elaborate dress making the figure unmistakably her. With members of her court she proceeded down the dusty hill, regally parading past bowing townspeople, wide-eyed children and a giant Bud Light advertisement banner. (Play record-scratching noise here.) Welcome to the business of renaissance festivals, an industry of period-themed fairs all over the country. Similar in sprit to Civil War-re-enactments, recent renaissance celebrations, like the recent Louisiana Renaissance Festival in Hammond, are popular among patrons and participants who enjoy creating a world that no longer exists, tearing down the temporal barrier, or at least trying to, between history and modernity. Renaissance Magazine, a trade publication that exclusively focuses on the ren fair industry, estimates that there are some 150 such festivals around the country, which admit about 4 million patrons a year. Some come for the requisite turkey leg. Others to purchase medieval-themed merchandise (mostly crafts, jewelry and clothing). But, perhaps the biggest draw is the illusion, maintained by in-costume and in-character volunteers and professional actors who pretend to be living in either the Medieval or Elizabethan eras. Kimberly Stockton, a 31-year-old costume designer from Lavergne, Tenn., is the Queen Elizabeth who strode into the village of Albright this year. She made her entrance at 11 a.m. But her day started hours earlier, at the Robert home of Jamie Haeuser, who is cast director for the Hammond festival when she is not the vice president of operations at Woman's Hospital. This season Haeuser played host to 18 professional renaissance fair actors, like Stockton, who used her house as their base of operation during Albright's five-week 2005 existence. Just after 7 a.m., the Queen of England was doing her makeup and listening to a DVD of the Muppets (Their comedic timing is amazing, Stockton said. You don't find that in modern shows.) She carefully applied some mascara, leaning over a small desk, covered with cosmetics and a book titled Uppity Women of Shakespearean Times. Before her makeup, she worked on her hair, in which she placed rats, which, she explained, were originally add-on buns made from hair purchased from peasants (Stockton's are hosiery stuffed with polyfill). In the hallway outside of the second-floor bedroom, her lady-in-waiting, Lindsay Weiler, a 28-year-old flight attendant from Minneapolis who Stockton had met only two weeks before, was getting into her garb. While, downstairs, two pirates from Dallas joined some other sleepy- looking actors, who sipped coffee and ate minidoughnuts and cheese biscuits while helping each other put on costumes. Stockton attended her first renaissance festival her senior year in high school. What was research for a term paper turned into an expensive addiction and then, over time, into a significant augmentation of her costume- designing career. But the profession isn't without its sacrifices. To work the renaissance circuit is to live out of tents and trailers, gypsylike, often wearing 50-pound costumes on still-hot fall days, the majority of which are spent standing, strictly maintaining character, entertaining the impressed and, sometimes, the intoxicated. Stockton said the work is most gratifying when she sees how children react to the fantasy. At first I was into it because of the costuming, she said. But then seeing the lines of reality blur is amazing, especially when the kids doubt they are in real life it just lights up their faces. She wasn't always a queen. She started out as a princess, which was a lucky break considering she ended up playing a peasant for a number of years before her royal ascension. Stockton is the first professional queen to lord over the Hammond festival. She takes the role seriously (she weight- trained to be able to wear her heavy costume and breath-restricting corset, and is well-studied on many obscure details of Elizabeth and the era that earned her namesake). Perhaps there is no better translation of Stockton's seriousness than her homemade costume. The elaborate dress teems with researched details meant to fortify its authenticity, from the straw boning of the period corset to the heart-shaped headdress that the actual queen reportedly favored. The costume and its various accessories (that overfill the trunk of Stockton's car) cost several thousand dollars, and the outfit's intricacies stand out in opulent contrast to those of many other fair-goers. You'll see a lot of Wal-Mart walking around, the Queen observed, referring to costumes worn by the lesser caste. After eating a cheese and ham biscuit in Haeuser's kitchen, the daughter of Henry the VIII climbed into her 1998 Saturn SL2 and, with her lady-in-waiting riding shotgun, made haste to the nearby village. At the 9 a.m. cast meeting, the professional actors and some volunteers are told by Ken Dixon, another cast director, that ticket sales the day before approached a record for the festival: 2,721. The group of about 30 people cheered, while, in the background, a Viking made a cell phone call. It shocks everybody in the fair industry that the fair circuit is still growing, said Kim Guarnaccia, editor of Renaissance Magazine, which she founded with her husband in 1994. Over the last 10 years the number of festivals has doubled. When we started the magazine, vendors were saying

we had hit the peak, but it hasn't even begun to hit the mainstream's consciousness yet. After the meeting, Stockton and Weiler walked down a dirt road, past the stable where the jousters stayed, past some dumpsters and port- o-johns, to where the Saturn was parked, in front of a makeshift trailer encampment inhabited by many of the traveling vendors. The two were joined by another one of the queen's maidens, Lori Fontenot, who had imbibed rather enthusiastically on mead and grog the night before at a party held in the gypsy camp. I'm groggy today, she punned, before helping the queen, who was sipping Powerade from a chalice, put on the remainder of her costume. The corset is so tight and the outer dress so heavy (it's made of theatrical-weight velvet), Stockton said she had to relearn how to breathe. She also learned how to not go to the bathroom for several hours on end (although Her Most Royal Graciousness has, on dire occasions, used the portable latrines favored by her subjects). At 11 a.m. the royal court gathered down the road from the village. A knight smoked one last cigarette before the bagpiper started playing. Here we go, said the queen, before her delegation began its slow but steady prance to the gates of Albright. God save the Queen! some villagers shouted at her approach. Rise, she graciously instructed. People took pictures with their digital cameras. And a young boy, perhaps 7 years old, put his bow and arrow down at the archery range and ran excitedly through the pine needle-strewn square, before falling on bended knee and removing his musketeer's hat with a flourish. With his face bent humbly earthward, he paid his respects to his queen. In response, she cast upon him a motherly smile, like a piece of candy tossed from the ramparts of a far-away castle. And just for a moment, it was real.

Caption: Color photos of Kimberly Stockton, playing the role of Queen Elizabeth I, interacting with patrons and other cast members as she leads a royal procession through the Louisiana Renaissance Festival in Hammond; Kimberly Stockton styling her hair as Queen Elizabeth I might have worn it; b.w. photo of Lori Fontenot, left, who plays a maid of honor, helping Kimberly Stockton, as Queen Elizabeth I, finish dressing, while Lindsay Weiler, right, portrays a lady in the queen's court (by Liz Condo)

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F
Finding a home * Area gays find Metropolitan to be church they are seeking**

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Finding a home *** Area gays find Metropolitan to be church they are seeking

If a stranger had walked into the Metropolitan Community Church in Baton Rouge, Sunday's service wouldn't seem all that different from the worshipping taking place all over the city.

There was a charismatic preacher. And a choir. There were hugs and greetings and a potluck lunch afterward, with dishes of candied yams and pulled pork and pecan chocolate chip pie baked by the congregants.

But differences are in the details.

The preacher's podium was draped in the rainbow flag, an internationally recognized symbol of gay pride and unity. During the sermon, sitting near the front, two African-American men held each other closely, one resting his head on the chest of the other. And in the rear of the room, a young professional- looking woman draped her arms over the shoulder of her partner.

And the preacher said the word "queer." More than once. And not disparagingly, but rather as a matter of course, conversationally.

It may not be as well known as other churches in the city, but the Metropolitan Community Church, a Christian organization that openly welcomes gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual and heterosexual members to services conducted by its openly gay leader, the Rev. Stephen Moore, has been in Baton Rouge for more than two decades.

Moore, 47, has run the church for 4 1/2 years.

Before that, he ran an MCC in Davenport, Iowa.

The national MCC, based in West Hollywood, Calif., has more than 250 churches worldwide.

More than 40 percent of its 43,000 members are former Catholics. And only about 15 percent of its attendees are heterosexual.

The Baton Rouge congregation has grown to about 75 members, many of whom gathered in June to listen to Moore's "gay-pride service." There he told them about his own religious journey, one that led him away from mainstream churches and to the MCC.

He first led them in song, smiling so hard, it seemed as if he were wincing. Some of the congregants dressed especially for the pride ceremony. One man wore a rainbow- colored feather boa. Another wore rainbow-colored gay-pride beads. People held their hands in the air, sang and swayed.

Moore then told the story of Jonathan and David, who, he relayed to his congregants, were lovers. "David and Jonathan's love for one another was not a one-night stand," he told them. " It's the big coming-out story in the Bible and these were no sissy men; they were warriors."

Moore isn't the least bit shy about interpreting the Scriptures in a homosexual context. Nor is he afraid to get personal over why he turned his back on the churches of his youth.

As a 10-year-old boy growing up in California, Moore said he was told that "God hated me" and that God was going to send me to Hell."

"And I believed it," he told those seated before him, in a whisper filled with sadness.

"There is someone here in Baton Rouge, who is 9, maybe 10 years old, sitting in a congregation that tells them that God hates them, and some of them are taking their own lives," he continued, more emotional, wiping angry tears from his eyes. " I don't want one more person to believe that God doesn't love them."

Eventually, Moore's family left the Church of Christ and became Southern Baptists, a switch he described as a "liberal move." The family then changed churches one more time, becoming United Methodists. But at age 15, struggling with his homosexuality, he still didn't feel as if he fit into his faith. So he just stopped going to church altogether.

Ten years passed until he went back. The AIDS epidemic among gay men was mushrooming. Some preachers were blaming gays for "the plague." It was a confusing world and he was seeking answers. He found himself at one of the Rev. Billy Graham's services. He said to one of Graham's assistants, "I am a gay, healthy man in a monogamous relationship, and I am Christian and I don't know what to do."

Graham, according to Moore, referred him to Exodus International, something Moore described as a "conversion ministry," which tried to make him straight. After a couple of months, he quit. "It was a lot of guilt and shame," he remembered. "I had a sense of complete abandonment by God."

Not long after that a friend referred him to the local MCC.

The outspoken preacher continues to be critical of many mainstream churches in his sermons. Sunday he railed against materialism, and at churches that "support the ministry of God" only through fund-raisers and the accumulation of money.

"I used to do all of that snooty queer stuff," Moore told them, referring to a more-lavish lifestyle of expensive trips, fancy dinners and expensive clothes he once maintained before becoming a preacher. "There was no bigger snoot than mine."

Materialism is a thing of his past, he said, as is his patience for religious organizations that accept gays and lesbians conditionally, tolerating them so long as they are not sexually active adults. He said he knows many gays and lesbians who sit quietly in the pews of most of the mainstream churches in Baton Rouge, afraid to be openly gay to their preachers and those with whom they worship.

Liz Arceneaux, 40, and her partner, Zel Angelle, 54, couldn't get married in the Catholic church. But they were joined in "holy union" in May at the MCC.

Both women had stopped going to the Catholic church in the late 1980s.

"There was a hunger that was not being fed," Angelle said. "I got nothing out of Mass, and I just felt like I had been deprived of knowing Jesus."

After years of not even going to church, Angelle attended a service at an MCC in Lafayette. She said it immediately felt as if she "had come home."

"We are finally learning about Jesus, like never before," said Arceneaux, who agreed with Angelle that Moore's teachings are "eye opening." "He has brought us really close to God."

When asked if gays and lesbians have a place in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, the Rev. John Carville said, "of course."

Moore's question, however, to mainstream churches is this: "When will you accept fully sexual gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual people into your congregations and church leadership?"

Carville explained that, while gays and lesbians are "loved by God and welcomed by the Catholic Church," gays and lesbians, like heterosexuals, are expected to be celibate outside of wedlock.

"For heterosexual Catholics, presumably some are single because they choose to be, and therefore it does not seem an unusual burden that the Catholic church ask them to live lives that are basically celibate," Carville said. "Whereas, according to gays and lesbians, many are gay and lesbian not by choice, but because they were born that way, so they find abstention more burdensome."

The diocese runs a program called DBR Hope, which functions like a "referral network" for gay and lesbian Catholics and their families, according to Warren Dazzio, the diocese's director of marriage and family life. For example, a mother who recently called Dazzio seeking advice on her son's coming out to her was referred to another mother in a similar situation.

Dazzio said the program originally offered a "support group" component, but the group suffered from a lack of membership and stopped meeting.

As for the MCC's membership including a large percentage of former Catholics, like Arceneaux and Angelle, Dazzio said, "I don't know if that surprises me or not.

"The Catholic church still holds to what many people call difficult teachings, and some have difficulty holding to that."

Brock George knows that difficulty well. The 32-year-old Baton Rougean was raised a Catholic and came out of the closet to himself when he was 19. Years later he dated a man who was a member of a fundamentalist faith. The boyfriend ended their relationship, in part because he could not reconcile being gay with his religious beliefs.

"He said, 'We can't be together. God's telling me we are evil'," George recalled. "God was telling him all sorts of things God never would have said."

The experience was crushing and sent George looking for spiritual answers. He found the MCC.

"(Here) God loves me for whom he created," George said. " I never felt uncomfortable in the Catholic church, just didn't agree with their overarching views."

Like the diocese, some other churches in the city said gays and lesbians are welcomed, even when the teachings of the church don't fully support same-sex couplings or a gay lifestyle.

"Absolutely there is a place (for gays and lesbians in the Baptist church)," said Stuart Rothberg, the senior pastor at Istrouma Baptist Church. "And yet, that being said, we do need to make a distinction in the unconditional worth and value of the individual and a lifestyle that is inconsistent with the Scriptures."

The Healing Place Church's Pastor Mike Harmon said his organization does its "best to really wrap our arms around as many people as possible." Including gays.

The church, explained Harmon, addresses "how God feels about homosexuality" in a lecture series called "Hot Potatoes."

"The idea that hell is hotter for homosexuals just is not true," Harmon said. "But there are still standards that the Bible sets, so we have to blend compassion with conviction."

Moore insists compassion is not acceptance and offers the struggle of gays and lesbians for their general acceptance by mainstream churches in civil-rights terms.

"I feel like Rosa Parks waiting for a seat in the front of the bus," Moore said. " God will succeed in making the church a house of prayer for all people."

Caption: Color photos of The Rev. Stephen Moore holding a congregant's hand during a prayer at the Metropolitan Community Church of Baton Rouge; The Rev. Stephen Moore preaching during a lively Sunday at the Metropolitan Church of Baton Rouge; Zel Angelle, left, and Liz Arceneaux; B.W. photo of Karri Martin, left, and Robin Scott (By Liz Condo); B.W. mug of Brock George

Document BATR000020060721e1bc00046

C
"And Then There Were None" * Cast struggles with characters in Baker Little Theatre production**

J.D. VENTURA
1,138 words
9 November 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1
English

"And Then There Were None" *** Cast struggles with characters in Baker Little Theatre production

The latest production from the Baker Little Theatre, Agatha Christies whodunit, And Then There Were None, was an example a small theater company biting off more than it could chew, like the pilot of a Cessna taking a 747 out for a spin.

The plot follows a classic whodunit recipe: a group of people from various backgrounds convene in a house where they are, one by one, murdered. They all have skeletons their respective closets, making them all suspects. And the killer is, course, among them.

Because this sort of storytelling device has been, over time, done far too often, it puts even the retelling clever classics, like Christies, on the defensive with modern audiences.

So, if one is, say, bored to tears with the characterization, one could simply wait impatiently for the predictable process of elimination to propel the production to its (merciful) conclusion.

And such bored indifference can only be avoided if the innocent characters are quirky and interesting enough to serve as effective decoys, which makes the ultimate revelation of the villains identity more surprising, and thus, enjoyable.

In defense of Baker Little Theatre, these characters are not supposed to be complex human beings. They are caricatures, like Thurston and Lovey Howell were rich people on TVs Gilligans Island.

This, however, makes this sort of play perhaps harder to pull off because the script doesnt offer emotionally substantive characters, but rather cartoonish figures whose exhibition of real emotion is meant to confuse rather than to clarify.

But director Cooper Helms cast seemed reluctant to play these roles to more lighthearted extremes. And, with the exception of one or two actors, everyone in the show seemed unable to emotionally relate to characters that are shallow by design.

Lead Brooke Frost was passable as Vera Claythorne. Her lilting, singsong voice sometimes had the curious, dramatic purity of blackand-white film stars. She also delivered believably terrifying offstage screams and graced the stage with her imposing, starlike stature and, later, feisty hysteria.

Those were the passable parts.

But Frosts character lacked exaggeration. The actress various attempts at interesting vapidity felt incomplete, and her stabs at real emotion felt awkwardly sudden, as satisfying as instant coffee.

Matthew LaVergnes butler, Rogers, was clich and boring. The butler always does it, so his was a perfect role to dress up with a variety of signature, suspicion-inducing mannerisms. The actor took a pass.

As opposed to Tara Dixon who hooray! at least thought about how to make her bit role hers, giving Mrs. Rogers, the maid, some personality. (As assistant director, however, Dixon should have shared this ability with others in the cast.)

Matthew Blanchard, who played the eccentric, flamboyant Anthony Marston, almost had the right idea. His character could have been an outlandish bit of comic relief, if only he hadnt exercised unnecessary restraint. It was as if he wanted to turn up the volume on his Marston, but couldnt find the knob. He needed to be set free.

Ronald Coats William Blore was one of those decoy roles that was interpreted too literally and lacked the

emotive flourish necessary to arouse that much-needed distracting suspicion.

Kella Klinker-Simonin did a decent job as Emily Brent, although she has delivered stronger performances. Like her fellow cast members, it seemed Klinker-Simonin, even as a veteran actress, struggled to add flair to a character that is, as said, comic in its simplicity. Like the others, her chance to add humanity to the role came in bits of reflective monologue. And, like the others, this reflections emotional believability was not achieved.

Malcolm Adams at least created his caricature. His General McKenzie was stubborn and blustery, and emotive enough to convey the stress of someone trapped on an island with a homicidal maniac. He accomplished what others should have: he stood out enough to be considered the culprit.

Lindsey Voinche, on the other hand, seemed nearly invisible as Dr. Armstrong. She was a mumbling, monotone phantom in a play that, unfortunately, was not a ghost story.

Phil Chenevert, as Sir Lawrence Wargrave, struggled through his lines and missed an opportunity to dimensionally explore perhaps the plays most intricate character, one that says much about the plays tutorial themes of universal guilt, innocence of the conscious and the rendering of justice. Chenevert would have better served himself, and the audience, if his focus had been remembering who Wargrave is, rather than what he says.

If Helm is to be commended, it is in the casting of Tim Sandifer as Philip Lombard. Although he has only a few plays on the back of his headshot, the Baton Rouge Community College student exuded unquestionable acting talent and deserves a shot at more serious material.

Sandifers Lombard was a character in which the audience could invest, thanks to the young actors convincing portrayal. His comfort on the stage and the natural evolution of his characters tension and mood created the kind of suspense his contemporaries failed to similarly produce.

Helm and Danny Harrington did an excellent job with set design, and Eric Dixons lighting and sound were very solid (the sound effects of seagulls and crashing waves were a nice touch, especially when made louder every time the terrace doors opened). Also, the lightning storm and use of candles for eerie effect were appreciated aesthetic embellishments.

Unfortunately, the actors were not embellishing on roles that called for a directorial understanding of healthy hyperbole.

And Then There Were None is perfectly fine as a lazy-day matinee. And, as always, hands together for even trying.

But lets hope that Helm realizes fewer actors on his tiny stage can only result in more people in his audience.

"And Then There Were None"

WHEN: Performances will be at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and Nov. 18 and 19; matinees will be at 2 p.m. Saturday and Nov. 19.

WHERE: Baker Little Theatre, 3121 Van Buren St., Baker.

TICKETS: Adults, $10; seniors and students are $7 at matinees.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 774-5953, or visit http:// www.bakerlittletheatre.com .

Caption: Color photos of Ronald Coats, left, playing William Blore, and Tim Sandifer is Philip Lombard in Agatha Christie's mystery, "And Then There Were None," the current production at the Baker Little Theatre; Phil Chenevert playing Sir Lawrence Wargrave in Baker Little Theatre's production of "And Then There Were None"; B.W. photo of from left, Matthew Blanchard, Tim Sandifer, Ronald Coats, Phil Chenevert, Lindsey Voinche, Malcolm Adams and Brooke Frost gathering in a scene from "And Then There Were None" (By Kenneth Wilks); B.W. graphic is "And Then There Were None" announcement box

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People
"Arms" rises to top Actors make Shaw's timeless comedy come to life

J.D. VENTURA
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1-C
English

"We've done it," said Director Jane Drake Brody 15 minutes before the preview showing of George Bernard Shaw's "Arms and the Man" got underway Wednesday night at the Reilly Theatre.

Her confidence was in no way unfounded.

Swine Palace has a winner on its hands.

The two intermissions in the playbill made some people in the audience initially fret over the risk of boredom-induced coma. Also entirely unfounded.

This play zipped along like a 2005 Mustang in pre-Katrina traffic, propelled speedily forward by acting that was as crisp as a fall apple.

The story itself is well over 100 years old, but the themes Shaw explores are timeless and more relevant than ever, especially now, as ordinary people struggle to understand natural disaster and war.

On its surface, the work is a situational comedy. A soldier, fleeing an advancing and nearly victorious army, scrambles up a water spout and into the bedroom of a beautiful socialite, who, with the help of her skeptical mother, hide the enemy and help him escape.

Things get funny when the conflict ends and the socialite's fiance and father return from the battlefields and tell of encountering the same soldier in combat, and of hearing how two women (wink, wink) had given him shelter. The mother and daughter duo bite their tongues off as long as they can, which is until the man they saved pays their estate an unannounced visit. The peace treaty brings no peace to the duplicitous characters, who all try unsuccessfully to deny how they really feel about each other.

Don't Google the plot if you haven't seen the play. It's so much more fun without expectation. And don't expect just a comedy. The story is smartly engineered with much food-for-thought. It brilliantly examines concepts of self-identity, sexism and double standards, classicism, hypocrisy and the glorification of war in times of (delusional) nationalism.

And it is clear Brody made her cast understand that the comedic intensity of the story is made stronger by the successful development of the more serious dramatic themes. Simply put: dramatic comedy.

Raina, the socialite, is played by Anna Richardson. At the play's beginning, Richardson's over-articulation was distracting, but that was clearly just a bit of opening-night jitters. When the actress warmed up, it was apparent she would bring much to the role. And she certainly did.

Richardson adeptly showed Raina's internal struggle, perfectly delivering a naive girl's transformation from childish idealism to wise womanhood. Her enraged defiance of what's expected of her character was wholly convincing. She could have, however, been more (subtly) amorous toward her true love interest, the enemy soldier, Bluntschli. A dash more Tabasco and the sauce would have really simmered. Still, bravo.

Raina's mother, Catherine, was played by a polished Nikki Travis. Though she didn't have nearly as much to work with as some other cast members, Travis made people laugh, hard. Her begging Bluntschli to leave and her trying to wake him with a snobby, delicate finger- poking was priceless.

She could have played Catherine a bit older (she seemed more a sister to Raina at times), but her performance, like Richardson's, was just more proof that Brody makes students into stars.

And the three brightest stars on the stage Wednesday night were Kesha Bullard, Reuben Mitchell and Mark Jaynes.

Playing Raina's maid, Louka, Bullard was mesmerizing. Beyond being trite and lauding her for her impeccable cockney accent, she is to be heartily commended for the seriousness she brought to the silliness. Her character's anger and pluckiness made her the admired underdog and the story's moral compass. And, as far as expressions go, Bullard does "hate" like Lance Armstrong does bikes. Mitchell, as the male lead, brought a thoughtful amount of reservation to the role of Blutschli, who perhaps is the most self-aware character. His jaded soldier, schooled in the realities of war, seemed perfectly balanced, at once both worldly and weary.

His longing for Raina was better exploited than hers for him. Still, the underdeveloped sexual and romantic tension between the two characters is partly attributed to Mitchell's otherwise appreciated reserve.

A standing ovation for Jaynes, who played the silly, self- serving Sergius, to whom Raina is engaged.

This man was hilarious. From his hysterical hip-swivel exits to a downright sumptuous bit of improv at the play's conclusion (he managed to right the carpet's curled corner with a pompous prance), the actor was fascinatingly conflicted, so much so, in fact, that it, at times, seemed as if he would split in two. It's not easy playing a bad guy who is a good guy who is a jackass who is, in the end, a frail, vulnerable everyman. But Jaynes makes it look easy.

Although understated, Derek Mudd's character, Nicola, was an interesting and necessary contrast to his love interest, Bullard's Louka. While she refuses to accept a societal identity imposed upon her, he does. Perhaps the saddest line in the play is delivered solidly by Mudd: "You've got to know your place, that's the secret of it."

Ron Reeder, as Raina's father, Petkoff, did a marvelous job, too, although he was the only cast member who didn't attempt a British accent, which confused. His character was the least interesting, however, despite the actor's obvious command of the material.

James Rieser's Russian accent, on the other hand, rocked. Who says you can't do anything with a bit part?

And that's just it. Brody's attention to detail was evident. Ginger Robertson's costumes, divine. Nels Anderson's stage, luscious. And Eun-Jin Cho's scoring and Heather Gilbert and Kacy Helwick's lighting, beyond solid.

Don't complain that New Orleans is inaccessible. Or that there's nothing to do in Baton Rouge.

Catch that Hollywood blockbuster on DVD. Drive right past the cinema in the coming days and make it over to the Reilly.

War may be hell, but this play is a heavenly hit.

'Arms and the Man'

WHEN: 7:30 p.m today and Nov. 8-12 and Nov. 16-19, with 2 p.m. Sunday matinees Nov. 13 and Nov. 20.

WHERE: Reilly Theatre, Tower Drive, LSU campus.

TICKETS: Adults, $25; seniors, $15; students and children, $12.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 578-3527 or visit the Web site at http:// www.swinepalace.org .

Photo: Color photos of Mark Jaynes, center, as Sergius, Anna Richardson, as Raina, and Reuben Mitchell, as Bluntschli, in a scene from "Arms and the Man"; Anna Richardson's Raina in a scene with Bluntschli, played by Reuben Mitchell (By Kenneth Wilkes); B.W. graphic is "Arms and the Man" performance information

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People
Funny business: Local comedy troupe plans marathon show

J.D. Ventura
564 words
2 November 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

It's perhaps fitting that three members of the local comedy troupe Family Dinner were talking about the prescription drug Adderall last week outside of the LSU Student Union.

It's speed, basically, given to hyperactive kids. And they all seem like they've overdosed.

But even an hour spent with this kooky bunch reveals that their rapid-fire humor and seemingly boundless energy doesn't come from the medicine cabinet, but rather from just spending way too much time with each other.

Having that kind of artistic synergy is a good thing, especially when for your 100th show, which will be a fund-raiser for hurricane relief, you plan on performing continuously for 28 hours. Adderall anyone?

The gang of 11 - most of whom are undergrads - have been together for "almost three years." They're well-known to anyone who hangs out at Perks on Perkins Road on Friday nights, when they perform their weekly improv show.

They don't plan on even attempting 28 hours of improv for the big comedy bonanza, however. Some structure, they realize, is required. So each cast member will write an hour's worth of material, and the others will improv around each individual script.

Um, that's only, like, 11 hours?

No, no, they assured, there will be sketch comedy, too. And possibly singing. And a dash of stand-up. And definitely naughty get- a-sitter-for-the-kids humor after midnight.

Still, there are doubts.

"Beyond two hours is a mystery to us," said David Vitrano, who was more than happy to be the group's unelected spokesperson.

(As a result, his friends decided to limit his time to only a half hour and voted him "most likely to die" during the marathon performance.)

Wrenching the spotlight away from Vitrano for a fleeting, fanciful moment, Ryan Sands, who was recently recognized by the authorities for possessing (stolen) beer at an athletics event, randomly said, "Call us a cult sensation."

Attention readers: Family Dinner is a cult sensation.

Of course, there is always the worry that people won't attend, or, worse, that they will attend but won't laugh. With the residue of two major national disasters still dampening spirits, goofiness is a bit of a gamble. Still, the troupe thinks the time is right.

"Instead of crying about it and being upset, people want to laugh," said Mike Tauzin. "They need some 'funny' right now."

"It reminds me of Pearl Harbor," said Vitrano in a wise and knowing tone.

Which made no sense, but was funny anyway.

A hopeful sign.

The 3rd Longest Improv Show of All Time

Featuring The Family Dinner comedy troupe

WHEN: Noon, Friday to 4 p.m., Saturday (28 hours).

WHERE: LSU Union Colonnade, LSU Student Union, LSU campus.

TICKETS: At the door only. Donations are $5 for one entry, or $15 for unlimited readmission bracelet. All donations go to the Hurricane Katrina/Rita Student Relief Funds.

INFORMATION: Contact (225) 578-5118 or visit http:// www.thefamilydinner.com .

Photo: Color photo of the Family Dinner comedy troupe, including, back row from left, James Brown, Mike Tauzin, Laura Wilkinson, Ryan Sands, Steve Mayeux and Mike Honore' and David Vitrano, front and center (By Kerry Maloney); B.W. graphic is The 3rd Longest Improv Show of All Time show information

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People
Healy pitches lesser-known war on drugs

J.D. VENTURA
1,062 words
31 October 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

Just say no.

It was Nancy Reagan's plea to America's youth to pass up illegal drugs.

But what about the legal stuff?

David Healy is saying "no" to some of them, too.

The British psychiatrist and author has been crusading against big pharmaceutical companies for years, contending that their aggressive commercialization of prescription drugs, particularly anti-depressants, continues to place corporate profitability before sound medical science.

Last week Healy, whose 2004 book, "Let Them Eat Prozac: The Unhealthy Relationship Between the Pharmaceutical Industry and Depression," brought his message to an LSU lecture hall full of students and faculty.

Twenty-five years ago patients would complain they had a case of "nerves," he told the audience. The description of their symptoms was not unlike those given by patients today claiming to suffer from depression or general anxiety disorder or even post-traumatic stress.

The psychiatric community, namely the American Psychiatric Association, published the third version of its diagnostic manual on mental disorders, or DSM III, in 1980. It was then, Healy contended, that the over-labeling of such disorders began. "Panic disorder," for example, "didn't exist before the DSM III."And it didn't take long for the pharmaceutical industry to recognize these newly defined illnesses as marketing opportunities, asserted Healy.

Around the same time, television ads for some prescription drugs began to air.

An odd coincidence: the day after Healy's lecture, LSU's student newspaper pointed out that Michael Ruffner, the university's vice chancellor for communications and university relations, played a role in the commercialization of prescription pharmaceuticals. As a marketing executive for ABC in 1983, Ruffner realized that the advertising of prescription drugs was a perfectly legal, yet untapped, market. So he worked to form a coalition with the other two major networks, NBC and CBS, which then "negotiated" with the FDA to allow such commercials to air.

According to Healy, such developments allowed pharma-ceutical companies, now armed with a list of new diagnosises, to not only develop new drugs around "market niches," but to then mass market the drugs to consumers. It wasn't long before patients diagnosed themselves and believed that a certain marketed drug was the cure to what ailed them.

And the news media followed suit, responding in part to the drug companies' public relations efforts, by reporting on newly recognized disorders and the drugs that purported to treat them, added Healy.

"(Through marketing) you're being moved closer to the pills that solve the problems you've got," said Healy, who showed the audience how drug ads have changed over the years.

Depression, for example, was at one time regarded as a condition of the elderly. Print ads showed grumpy seniors. But, over time, those suffering from depression were portrayed as younger, otherwise healthy people.

And when the pharmaceutical industry worried that anti-anxiety drugs were habit-forming, they changed direction, emphasizing the promotion of anti-depression pills instead, charged Healy.

"They converted anxious people to depressed people," said Healy. "Patients switched from Valium to Prozac."Healy also provided the audience with a lengthy description of how he believes the pharmaceutical industry skews published scientific research in their favor, which sometimes results in premature FDA approval, as evidenced by the recalls of Vioxx and Hormone Replacement Therapy, or HRT.

"When people hear 'FDA' they think 'FBI,'" said Healy in a later phone interview. "They think, like the FBI, the agency has huge resources, but they are a very small group."LSU's Ruffner said that when televised drug advertising began marketing executives were "unapologetic" in that they were opening up a "category to make money.""It was that simple," said Ruffner.

But, he explained, in the pre-Internet days of the '80s, he and other ad execs also felt they were providing "a service," making consumers aware of cheaper generic drugs and of potentially dangerous side effects.

"My observations over the last few years is there is less (FDA) oversight than there used to be," said Ruffner, who did not attend Healy's lecture or have anything to do with his invitation to speak at LSU. "When we first launched the ads there seemed to be a fair amount of oversight, but that seems to have waivered ..."So, in the absence of a more stringent FDA, it is left to physicians' associations to ensure that large pharmaceutical companies don't shortcut solid scientific research on the way to better bottom lines, and Healy said such groups have "dropped the ball" on that mission.

"Very few clinical trials on pills aren't run by 'big pharma,'" said Healy. "Which wouldn't be bad if we had access to their data, and if they didn't overestimate the good things these pills have done."Alan Baumeister, chairman of LSU's Department of Psychology, invited Healy, and described him as "a brave soul" and a "maverick.""It is important to have him here because there is a scandal going on of epic proportion," Baumeister said, in reference to the influence big pharma-ceutical companies now have on published scientific research. "... We brought him here to shine the light of day on the corruption of evidence-based medicine by the profit motive, hopefully making us better prescribers."Baumeister is also concerned that a new law allowing psychologists in Louisiana to prescribe certain anti-depressants does not ensure that those professionals receive adequate clinical training in psychopharmacology first. He has also taken issue with the fact that students on their way to getting their doctorate degrees cannot enroll in the coursework that leads to such licensure until after they receive their Ph.D.s.

Baumeister said he withdrew a proposal last year to create a master's program at LSU which would specifically train aspiring psychologists in psychopharma-cology as a result of push-back from the Lousiana State Board of Examiners of Psychologists.

Healy said psychologists with prescription pads will face the same problems physicians now face.

"You really cannot believe even the evidence that comes out in the New England Journal of Medicine," said Healy. "(Psychologists) are going to be caught up in the same box, looking for evidence that hasn't fallen into the clutches of the pharmaceutical companies."

Photo: Color mug of David Healy; B.W. mug of Alan Baumeister

Document BATR000020051031e1av000d1

People
Making a scene '80s night at Spanish Moon becomes a cult classic

J.D. VENTURA
1,811 words
23 October 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

This is a fable about Baton Rouge.

It has all the makings of a good one, too. There is a queen. A king. And some wise scribes who knew enough to preserve the story forever on parchment paper (OK, high quality digital video).

But first, the queen ...

Drag bars. The "leather" scene. A dash of the S&M culture. Dance clubs. Eric Bullock had sampled gay Atlanta for years. It was a buffet of eclectic fun, and he had grabbed a tray and a bib.

But '80s night at the Masquerade club was his favorite.

There was something about it. It was dark and a little seedy, but it was his, and he could be himself. He lived for the retro music and the carnival atmosphere.

He and some friends would dress up in outlandish outfits, costumes that they wore to another place and time, when the Brat Pack was hip and Madonna wasn't British or thin.

Every week, it was all glitz and pomposity. An homage to the passage of better times.

And then it was gone.

That's because Eric Bullock came home to Baton Rouge, a return to the darkened countryside, the big-city lights of his shiny kingdom now distant and dimmed.

But then some planets lined up, and he walked into the Spanish Moon nightclub one Thursday, where a well-known local DJ, Chris "Bird" Culotta, was busy recreating the 1980s.

Down on Highland Road a fable suddenly began to unfold.

The queen, you see, had met the king ...

Culotta had returned home to Baton Rouge, too. Like Bullock he had spent several years in seemingly shinier places. When college in Hammond didn't work out ("I only went to classes I liked."), the self-described "Hans Solo without a Wookie" decided nothing much ever happened in this corner of the universe. And so he traveled to a galaxy far, far away from Louisiana: southern California.

Beach culture suited him. People were "looser" and more free. He wore out skateboards and credit cards and surfed friends couches until, in the twilight of his mid-20s, his kingdom collapsed. With his nerves frayed - he casually uses the word "breakdown" - he made the call nobody wants to make: asking mom and dad if the welcome mat was still on the porch.

Of course it was, but the Drakkar Noir-wearing king who had once basked in fun times and sunshine had been in a sense banished, back to the boring hamlet that bore him.

He took a less-than-majestic job at a bookstore. It felt like failure.

But five years ago, shortly after his reluctant return to Baton Rouge, Culotta was asked by a friend to get the party started at Spanish Moon. Be the DJ, just for one night. He brought 15 CDs and rocked out - with about five patrons.

Three years ago Bullock - who won't say he's in his mid-30s but won't deny it either - walked into the same

bar and knew he had found a new home. It had been two years since Culotta's debut and his '80s night had become one of the hottest word-of-mouth tickets in town.

It wasn't long before the king of '80s night would crown the queen, bestowing upon Bullock his now legendary title: Mr. Fabulous.

And a year ago, the scribes, Brady and Kyle Crane, a couple of aspiring filmmakers in their 20s, got the idea to make a documentary about what was happening at Spanish Moon, where the union of Culotta and Bullock had further propelled the popular '80s night into a positively cultish experience, known as Star 80, a weekly event perhaps unrivaled in Baton Rouge nightlife.

Their film, "Just What I Needed," debuts at the Manship Theater on Oct. 29.

"When the owners and the doormen started talking about 'the scene,' we knew we had a movie," said Brady, who hung out at Star 80 for a year before he and his brother decided to film it. "We knew we had something meaningful."

Glitter and glam

Before there's "meaning," however, there's makeup. At least there is in Bullock's pre-Star 80 routine.

Two weeks ago he was helping his partner in crime, Alvin Temple (aka "Glam"), create a "faux hawk" (fake Mohawk) by globbing Dippity Doo Stretch Putty into his hair.

The ritual of readying for the Thursday '80s experience is a complex one for Bullock, a man who can adeptly explain the difference between sequins and glitter and finds artistic inspiration in the obsessive replaying of British diva Kylie Minogue's live concert, which is, not surprisingly, awash with pretty costumes.

Bullock and Temple flung open makeup cases the size of toolboxes. Temple's kitchen table was soon strewn with eyelash adhesive, spirit gum (it goes on the face or else how else would the glitter stick?), eye pencils and various cosmetics, some of which Mr. Fabulous has found work best to cover up male stubble.

Bullock first painted a mask of red makeup on Temple's face. Temple, in turn, sprayed his friend with colored hairspray.

"I just wanted gold," Bullock sighed, his hair the color of a crown and his face glimmering with flecks of golden glitter. "But I look like C3P0!"

A call came in on Bullock's cell phone. A friend was going to Star 80 as Guns and Roses guitarist Slash. This didn't sound at all crazy, given that, like Bullock and Temple, many people now dress up for the event. Arriving as anyone but yourself is part of the mystique Bullock's outrageousness inadvertently created. His friend, he explained, had become a dress-up addict.

"He's a straight boy," said Bullock. "But it's like a disease for him now."

The afflicted should know.

I'm too sexy for ...

Bullock makes a new costume every week for Star 80. From scratch. By hand. His Vegas-style ensembles and gravitational stage presence (Star 80 regulars, like a royal court, eventually graduate to higher ground, aka the club's stage) are what led Culotta to dub him "Mr. Fabulous."

But Culotta's crazy musings on the microphone (recently: "Happy Birthday to everyone having a birthday tonight! Spank 'em. Spank 'em till it's red!") and irreverent track selections made him an entertainment commodity even before Mr. Fabulous' campy, contagious invasion.

"He is the brightest light in this galaxy," said Kyle Crane, explaining that making Culotta a central character in the documentary was about as obvious as focusing on Bullock. The film, which was shot over four Thursdays, also explores the experiences of a handful of other equally fanatic retro-philes.

"We had dinner with the two of them, and we explained it wasn't our intention to make fun of Eric, which Chris was worried about," Kyle Crane said.

One quickly gets the sense Bullock couldn't care less.

"You look like a gay super hero," an admiring stranger said to him recently, as he exited his car in the packed parking lot across from Spanish Moon.

"I bring glamour where there is none!" he proclaimed, before considering his other super powers. "Oh, and I haven't paid a cover in years."

Charging Mr. Fabulous a cover would be like selling Cher a ticket to her own concert. Like Culotta, Bullock is one reason why people come to the event. Everyone either knows him or claims they do. On the rare occasions he is not in attendance, people ask the doormen when he's arriving. And his entrances are marked with screaming fans taking camera-phone pictures of him, a seasoned red carpet starlet braving the paparazzi yet again.

All anyone wants to know is what Mr. Fabulous will wear this week? Invariably, his luminescent couture would leave even Joan Rivers speechless.

Any given Thursday

The club is a shoulder-to-sweaty-shoulder experience. The crowded dance floor is more like an audience, everyone's faces fixated on the stage, which is populated by Mr. Fabulous' royal subjects, who don't dance as much as perform, and, of course, Bullock and Temple.

As Thursday becomes Friday morning, Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" is sung along to by people who weren't alive when it was first released. The music has everyone dancing: college jocks, hippie chicks, corporate types, suburbanites, blacks, whites, gays, straights.

"Send Me An Angel" by Real Life has everyone taking Mr. Fabulous' lead, miming parts of the song like some form of musical charades.

Before he arrived at the club, Mr. Fabulous explained, "I like to find a frat boy or a Christian or a Mormon and see that (shocked) reaction, and then my mission is accomplished for the day."

By the time "Take On Me" blasted out of the speakers, which were so loud the bass felt like puffs of air, people were cheering the stage dancers like rock stars at a concert.

The Crane brothers were seen mingling in the crowd, existing inside a world they have spent the last year examining with the eyes of social scientists. They were still editing the film two weeks before its downtown premiere, advertised on a giant banner above their heads.

And above the banner, on the second floor, danced birthday boy Craig Honigman, who was born in 1984, when Prince's "When Doves Cry" was No. 1 and Cyndi Lauper had three hits on the Billboard chart. Looking down on the revelry below, he was moved to assign the scene some words.

"It's not necessarily the music itself, it's all the happy-go- lucky people," he yelled over the Violent Femmes "Blister in the Sun." "This is Americana"

No shock, Mr. Fabulous, just another star-struck fan. Perhaps a "mission accomplished" nonetheless.

"Just What I Needed" A Documentary

WHEN: 8 p.m., Saturday.

WHERE: Manship Theatre in the Shaw Center for the Arts, 100 Lafayette St.

TICKETS: $7.

INFORMATION: One-time only performance. Tickets can be purchased at http://ticket.manshiptheatre.org or by calling the box office at (866) 451-2787.

Photo: Color photos of Eric Bullock transforming into "Mr. Fabulous" before heading off to Star 80 at Spanish Moon; Stephen Thibodeaux, center, doing "the running man" dance as the crowd goes nuts at Star 80; Eric Bullock, left, and Alvin Temple, right, greet Chris Culotta, center; Filmmaker Brady Crane hanging out at Star 80 night with hsi brother Jamie Crane, left, and friend Jace Tadie, right; B.W. photos of Kyle Crane leaning in to make an editing suggestion to his younger brother, Brady; DJ Bird playing '80s music at the Star 80 night at Spanish Moon (By Kerry Maloney); B.W. graphic is "Just What I Needed" A Documentary info box

Document BATR000020051024e1an00080

People
Come together Competing radio stations join forces in wake of Katrina

J.D. VENTURA
1,135 words
21 October 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

As much as Katrina wreaked havoc on the ground, she did a number on the airwaves, too.

Radio and television stations throughout the New Orleans area were left scrambling, with their satellite dishes overturned and transmission towers felled. Some had disaster plans in place. But virtually nobody in the industry was completely prepared for the storm's severity.

Clear Channel Radio, the company which operates a chain of stations all over the country, owns seven in New Orleans and six in Baton Rouge. That Sunday morning, as Katrina roared through the Gulf, Dick Lewis, the company's Baton Rouge-based regional vice president, made the unprecedented call: all operations would retreat to Baton Rouge.

When the hurricane made landfall, all three of the company's backup systems failed. Clear Channel's transmitters stopped broadcasting. And Lewis took an unusual phone call.

A vice president at Clear Channel's competitor, Entercom, was on the line. Their studios were flooding, he explained. And Entercom staff members were stranded at the facility. Could Lewis somehow help?

"In times of such unprecedented peril, all competitiveness goes away," said Lewis.

Clear Channel had chartered a helicopter, intending to fly engineers to downed transmitters surrounded by floodwaters. But first Lewis ordered the copter to Entercom's studio to literally rescue the competition.

It was a gesture that resulted in a unique alliance between the two companies. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, each had something to offer the other. Clear Channel had studio space in Baton Rouge. Entercom had working transmitters down in New Orleans.

And so, United Radio Broadcasters was formed.

Disc jockeys, engineers and administrative staff from both companies headed for Baton Rouge. Within hours after the storm made landfall, all Baton Rouge and New Orleans Clear Channel stations, as well as Entercom's six frequencies, were broadcasting the exact same signal, which, in the immediate days after the storm, meant round- the-clock disaster coverage on 19 positions on the radio dial.

To listeners - many without power, and therefore without television - the sudden creation of United Radio Broadcasters was seamless and seemingly planned. But, behind the scenes, things were a bit more chaotic than that.

Clear Channel's Hilton Avenue offices and studios were already full to capacity with its Baton Rouge stations. The sudden influx of New Orleans staffers caused not only logistical issues in terms of who would go on the air when, but where would all the displaced employees stay in a city with no available hotel rooms or apartments.

Some disc jockey's slept on the conference room floor before the company brought in eight trailers, subsequently dubbed "Camp United."

For many of New Orleans' most recognizable on-air personalities, being the calm, comforting, familiar voice to the New Orleans evacuees became a mission. Pulling it off wasn't easy, especially when their own lives were, like most of their faithful listeners, in complete turmoil.

Some of them struggled to find relatives and enroll their children in schools. Others shared living quarters with co-workers, dormitory-style. And all adjusted to working side-by-side with their direct competitors. The sacrifices, they all agreed, were secondary to staying on the air and providing their listeners with as much information as possible.

"When you sign up for this job, you understand it comes with certain responsibilities," said A.J. Appleberry, disc jockey and program director for the New Orleans urban adult station, WYLD FM. "We're all native New Orleanians, so we shared a great concern over what was happening to the city."

They also shared some unusual working conditions. Because the Baton Rouge facilities normally house about 60 staffers (the new United Radio Broadcasters operations put more than 300 people under the same roof), people were partnered in arguably peculiar ways. For example, "Kat," the disc jockey from rock station WRNO (99.5) found herself sharing a cube with Loretta Petit, an on-air personality from WYLD AM ("Wyld For Jesus").

"I don't know who put the rock chick and the preacher together," said "Kat," who doesn't go by any last name. "...But it actually made good radio, especially when they had the hip hop chick sitting near some old news guy."

Diane Newman, an operations director at Entercom, agreed. She said she was particularly struck by the collaborative spirit exhibited by such different professionals suddenly forced to work alongside each other. And she wasn't at all surprised at how smoothly everything went.

"The need in the community was so huge, that the call to action was immediate," said Newman. "Two responsible, credible and compassionate companies came together and really met that need."

The 24/7 live programming, which was largely commercial free, posed a professional challenge for some disc jockeys who were more accustomed to playing music, than narrating a natural disaster.

"We had to step out of our normal roles and become talk show hosts," said Ron Brooks, the program director for country station WNOE, which is one of four New Orleans stations that have returned to their normal formats, but continue to broadcast remotely from Baton Rouge.

Although exiled to Baton Rouge, Appleberry said it was clear early on that the role of radio would be a fundamental ones for the thousands affected by the disaster. After fleeing New Orleans, he drove up to a Baton Rouge gas station in the radio station's van, covered in the logos familiar to Crescent City residents.

Exiting the store, he found a note on the windshield, left by a displaced fan who expressed gratitude over the station's resilience and relocation to the capital city. The listener signed the note and included his phone number.

"We're going to call him," said Appleberry. "When we get back."

Photo: Color photos of Angela Watson, or Uptown Angela, going on the air for Q93, one of Clear Channel's New Orleans stations that is currently broadcasting from Baton Rouge; Clear Channel's regional vice president Dick Lewis; B.W. photo of Clear Channel New Orleans call screener Scott Spinnato, left, and Entercom New Orleans board operator Jeff Chappius working together in a Baton Rouge studio, where the two companies have been sharing space since Hurricane Katrina struck (by LIZ CONDO); Color graphics are station Logos including WYNK 101.5; B97; 1210 AM The Score; Magic 101.9; The Big 870 WWL AM; AM 1380 Progressive Talk; Hallelujah 104.1; Q93 FM; WNOE 101.1; WFMF 102.5; 1150 WJBO Newsradio; 96.1 The River; KOOL 105.3; AM 1350 Progressive Talk; Bayou 95.7; WYLD FM 98; WYLD AM 940; 99.5 WRNO; Sports Radio 1280; B.W. graphic is The beginnings of unity info box

Document BATR000020051021e1al0003c

People
Bodies and souls Baton Rouge minister opens church doors for more than 30 New Orleans evacuees

J.D. VENTURA
2,127 words
2 October 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

They drove up to the church in a caravan of stolen cars.

The evacuees from New Orleans washed up like driftwood, after Katrina erased everything, like an Etch-A-Sketch shaken until the picture fades and disappears. At the end of 69th Street in Scotlandville, with gas and morale low, they emerged from their vehicles, carrying children and a few bags.

Most of them were survivors long before millions of gallons of dirty water set them adrift in a commandeered boat. They had made the tough streets of Uptown New Orleans theirs. They had that.

Now they had nothing.

Except for Bishop Frank Washington's kindness.

The Baton Rouge preacher wasn't one to stop and consider what should or shouldn't be done. Considerations of right and wrong were as instinctual as knowing good from evil. He would take them in. He flung the doors of the Banks Community Outreach Ministry open and told his Baptist congregation of 75 it's what had to be done.

In a sense, Washington had learned the streets, too. He came here from New Orleans in the '70s with a reference letter that said he was good at driving a bus. A day after he arrived, "not knowing his way to the corner," he was bringing the city's poor where they needed to go. The streets of Baton Rouge became his. He had that.

Before he was a man of God, he was a man of the world. "I did ordinary sinful things," he said, slouching slightly in his chair, a man of 70 who spends all Sunday in a shirt and tie. But all that changed after he killed a rabbit and had a heart attack.

At 52, after collapsing in the woods, his heart beating as hard as the hare his dogs had just chased down, the hunter became the hunted. Fate of some sort had taken aim, and he went under the knife. A triple bypass. Through it there was a feeling of overwhelming serenity and coolness. God didn't speak to him. But the man changed.

"Everything I used to do, I then detested seeing other people do," he recalled. "I didn't want cigarettes anymore, and the taste of alcohol just got away from me."

A neighborhood was getting away from him, too. It was in need of reclamation. Many who are now gathered in the little church Washington started nearly two decades ago probably don't know it became a foothold of righteousness during the late '80s and throughout the '90s, when Washington tried to rid the community of "crack houses"

"There is a house of Satan over there," he remembered saying. "So I am going to make this a house of God."

And so a single-story shotgun house was converted into a church. The drug dens didn't convert as easily, but a few disappeared. Back then victory was measured in subtle signs that a community remained.

It's a community that is still there today. Made up of people like Bythella Wesley, who lives across the street from the church. On the morning Rita's raindrops sped sideways like bullets, Wesley, toting bags of groceries, got up and drove to a relative's house, where there was still electricity.

As the storm made the 30 or so evacuees hunker down again, in walked a soaking-wet Wesley with a big pot of grits, trays of smoked sausages and biscuits, jelly and plenty of orange juice.

"I promised those people I was gonna make breakfast," said Wesley, who stood talking to a couple of evacuees on the church steps recently. "It was a relief to make them a hot meal after the storm...after a storm like that."

Wesley didn't know any of them. She had never met Sherri Martin before, or the 23-year-old woman's two children, Rickshineda, 7, and Shawn, 1. The kind woman across the street may not have heard that the ceiling of Martin's New Orleans apartment came crashing in around her children's heads, "like an earthquake."

After the storm, Martin and others from the neighborhood cleaned up their yards and cooked out. It was a beautiful day, fresh and cool, until the water came, like a snake winding through a field of flowers. The paradise of home was quickly lost.

Neighbors from Daneel, Dryers and Cadillac streets walked through the water and waited for buses they had heard would rescue them at the corner of Napoleon and St. Charles. But as night fell and the waters rose, it was clear they were alone.

Dean Lundy, Martin's best friend, left his elderly mother behind. She had checked into a hotel that eventually forced its occupants to the Superdome. The 67-year-old woman called her 29-year-old son, first from there, then from the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, where she spent the night sleeping outside under a stairwell. "I can't walk any further," she pleaded with her son. "I want to lie down here and die." "Don't you do it, mama," he said to her.

"Don't you do it."

After hot wiring some SUVs and a van, the group fled their sinking city. Lundy had his two adopted sons with him. Martin brought her mother, Sherylynn. And it was Sherylynn - whose mother had dated Frank Washington in the '50s - who delivered them to the Baton Rouge bishop.

Although they thanked her profusely for the breakfast, Wesley probably didn't know much about Melford Dilbert and Betty Suazo, either.

Eighteen years ago the now-retired merchant marine was asking friends, "Who's that pretty 'lil thing?" It's a story that still makes Suazo blush. The couple made a home of the modest blue house on Daneel Street, where they raised their daughter, Melanie.

Yes, there were drugs in the neighborhood, and violence. But there were decent folks, too, who looked out for their neighbors. Like anywhere, the good came with some bad.

"At one time there was 30 guys selling dope on our block, but I didn't do nothing, or say nothing," said Dilbert. "You had to go easy with them, or they'd shoot you right there. Bam, bam, bam."

A home-cooked breakfast was a welcome break in a new existence anchored in inane routines. At night people sleep in the pews, with most inside the church by the 11 p.m. curfew set by Washington. By day there is "The Price Is Right" on the small television, its rabbit ears pulling in a snowy signal.

There is also the occasional trip to various relief agencies in search of clothing and monetary benefits. Some have managed to get Red Cross vouchers. Most everyone is still awaiting help of any sort from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Almost nobody has a line on housing.

A few of the teenagers and younger kids are back in school. But a handful of older guys spend impatient days waiting for word about what's next.

Tucked away in a residential neighborhood, Washington's ministry is near almost nothing. There are only two points of interest within walking distance: a house across the street that's a hang-out for some of the neighborhood's 20-somethings, and P&S Grocery.

Last week, after living in the church for 18 days, Bucky Brown and Gregory "Slim" Gould went into the market, a trailer upon which is painted the declaration, "We 'except' LA. Purchase Cards." Inside customers can buy chips called Rap Snacks or a salt meat sandwich for $2.89. A sign near the register announces that profanity will not be tolerated. The owner doesn't tolerate a lack of consumer confidence, either.

"Hold up, hold up!" she yelled, as the evacuees and several neighborhood teenagers walked into the store at the same time. She then asked every patron what they intended on buying. Those with no purchase plans were sent packing.

Brown and Gould wound up outside, hanging out under the house's carport. Rap music thumped from within. Ricky Wall and three other men were rolling dice and sucking on crabs they had bought for $15 a bag down on Scenic Highway. "Black folks," Wall said with a shoulder shrug when asked how his group met the evacuees.

The guys from the shelter, standing in front of a beat-up '70s- era Ford 100 truck, its front tires gone, shared a joint and drank 40-ounce beers wrapped in plastic grocery bags. Another evacuee joined them, wearing a T-shirt which read, "I got out of bed and dressed. What more do you want?"

As soon as he rounded the corner, Josh Reed started talking. The scrawny 18-year-old gestured with one hand, while the other kept his baggy pants from simply slipping past his exposed boxer shorts. He said he was from the Third Ward in New Orleans. From the projects, he insisted. It sounded like a brag.

The crew from the Crescent City ignored him with catlike indifference.

But Reed's boyish bravado around the other guys melted away when, later, he admitted he cried himself to sleep some nights in the shelter. He worried about his mother, her whereabouts still unknown. He wondered aloud what the future held for him. He couldn't imagine a life in Baton Rouge.

"They are children just trying to find their way through life," Washington would explain later. "They must be taught righteousness."

Washington admitted he is a teacher with only a few students. None of the evacuees have attended his services, now being held at another church. He has warned some of the young people staying at the shelter to avoid the house across the street. "We are all God's creatures," he said. "But there are a lot of devils out here."

The preacher bristles at the conclusions people make about the New Orleans evacuees. Just because they are from rough streets doesn't make them "wild savages."

Every man is a sinner, but every man can be born again. That's what he would tell them if they were sitting in his pews on Sunday morning, rather than sleeping in them every night.

And he would warn them of false prophets, of those who "preach prosperity" rather than "life." Like some rappers who flaunt their luxurious possessions, filling young souls with an insatiable wanting.

On a car ride to another nearby convenience store, some of the guys from the shelter listened to Soulja Slim, a New Orleans artist who was shot to death at the age of 25. They blasted "I'll Pay For It" from the car stereo, the factory speakers unable to handle the bass, distorting lyrics about buying sex:

I'll pay for it/I'll pay for

it/I'll pay for it/I'll pay for it

If I want it/If I want it/If I

want it/If I want it.

As night fell, the evacuees on 69th Street sat on the church steps, much like they did on the porches in their now-destroyed neighborhood. The guys across the street leaned into the windows of cars circling the block, rims shining, stereos thumping.

Reed came by again. Someone pointed out that he wasn't staying in the shelter...that he wasn't even from New Orleans.

Some of the teenage girls staying in the church taunted him. One yelled, "You from Baton Rouge! Look how you talk!"

With an embarrassed grin on his face, he denied it, waving his one free hand dismissively before walking down the street.

"He ain't from New Orleans," said Bucky Brown. "He just wants to be."

Photo: Color photos of fifteen-year-old Farrell Bonds trying to take a catnap by covering his head with a

pillow in the church pews he shares with more than 30 New Orleans evacuees; Sherri Martin, Dean Lundy and Sherri's mom, Sherylynn Martin, from left, sitting on pews at Banks Community Outreach Ministry's church as Gregory "Slim" Gould stands far right (By Bill Feig); Melford Dilbert, foreground, and Betty Suazo, right, joining their neighbors who are fleeing by boat from their flooded New Orleans neighborhood (PP); Bishop Frank Washington; B.W. photos of New Orleans evacuee Michelle Domingue getting to know Brandon Allen, a resident of the Scotlandville neighborhood surrounding the Banks Community Outreach Ministry (By Paula Ouder); Melford Dilbert and Betty Suazo's house; Curl Spain taking pictures of his flooded New Orleans neighborhood right after the levees broke (PP); B.W. graphic is a listing of Missing people

Document BATR000020051003e1a200035

People
Much ado about.... Talented cast carries uneventful "Tempest"

J.D. VENTURA
1,143 words
30 September 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

Shakespeare is like eating with chopsticks. There's an unspoken peer pressure to use those wooden tweezers when dining with more cultured friends, but, man, isn't the modern fork a superior instrument?

And if one who is only lukewarm on Shakespeare's bigger blockbusters (think "Hamlet" or "Romeo and Juliet") had a fork during LSU Theatre's latest production of "The Tempest," would thou not have been tempted to runneth through thou's throbbing head?

Now hold up. Before everyone loses their minds about this reviewer's impunity at not liking Shakespeare, one of literature's deities, it must be disclaimed that like, say, Scrabble, he's just not everyone's idea of an entertaining evening.

But student theater is about learning. And Shakespeare is an accepted right of passage for aspiring thespians. So a perhaps ignorant bias has been laid bare, and this review shall thus commence with a clear conscience.

Very important fact: LSU assembled an amazing cast of young actors for this production. Talent galore. Details to follow.

But first, the plot, delivered in a relatively painless run-on sentence: A duke, exiled to an island with his daughter and some magic books, becomes a sorcerer and uses his powers to seek revenge on those who exiled him.

And here's the thing, folks, and apologies to Mr. Shakespeare, but "The Tempest" lacks the cleverness and diabolical twists for which the writer is most revered. Unlike "Macbeth," where you see the characters evolve, where you witness murder and betrayal, and are shown the consequences those characters face, "The Tempest" is just "consequences."

The lead character, Prospero, who is the exiled Italian duke, spends an awful lot of time delivering angry soliloquies about how he was wronged and how he is going to enact revenge on his detractors, who just happen to sail by this island on a ship that he, through his sorcery, wrecks. And then, at some point, there is the requisite Shakespearean love affair and redemptive epiphany.

In Shakespeare's more superstitious day, such tales of wizardry may have had more impact on the theater-goer, in part because many people didn't fully discount that magic actually existed. But in the age of wireless Internet and Hollywood's digitally enhanced "Spiderman," Prospero's powers seem kind of tired and unimpressive.

What actually happens in "The Tempest"? Not a lot. Thankfully for LSU, the cast more than makes up for Shakespeare's "Seinfeld" (a television show admittedly about nothing).

Shawn Halliday, as Prospero, did not steal this one, but showed, again, that he is a dynamic actor who is not afraid to tenderize even the toughest meat. He took a character that could easily be played as a boring, brooding blowhard and gave him an appropriate level of emotional depth, particularly when Prospero slowly softens over his daughter's love affair with Ferdinand.

And Daniel Leblanc, who played the young prince that falls in love with Prospero's daughter, Miranda, was charming enough. His youthful ebullience and handsomeness made sense, and although in some ways he was the stereotypical Prince Charming, he managed to give the role some signature.

Rebecca Buller, who played Miranda, is in Leblanc's league. No major mistakes, but she assuredly struggled to infuse originality in a character that, for all intents and purposes, is a carbon copy of Cinderella. Toward that endeavor, however, she impressed.

It seems to always be this way, but the show stealers had the smaller parts.

This play is absolutely worth seeing just to witness Gordon Walker's performance as the drunken sot Stephano. "Hysterical" doesn't do justice to his antics. Walker was masterful in not only his movements but in the sheer naturalness and humanity he brought to the role. His laughter was real, his reactions believable. And his snort was just about the most delicious bit of improv this reviewer has seen in a long time.

A silver medal goes to sidekick Jonathan Butts, who played Trinculo. He and Walker are to be commended for creating two characters who were the perfect comedic pairing. It's a cliche compliment, but Butts lit up a stage already flaming from Walker's wackiness.

Polly Boersig, the costume designer, should get a standing ovation, by the way. They were beautiful and the attention to detail was admirable, right down to the jewelry. But one minor observation: If these people were involved in a shipwreck, why are their costumes so perfectly pressed?

Playing "a spirit" is not an easy thing to do. But applause to Natalie Donner. She was bewitching as the nymph Ariel, and again, kudos to Boersig for Donner's costume, which was enchanting and creative.

Prospero's slave, Caliban, was played by Muhammad A. Ayers, whose performance was perhaps second only to Walker's. Ayers, as the tortured servant, exhibited the full spectrum of emotion, and was one of the few characters who had to pull off intense drama and comedy all in the same role. And anyone who can make college girls in the audience squeal and say "Eww gross!" by literally licking his master's boots is definitely giving it his all.

Honorable mention to Justin Henry. His command of sarcasm as the cynical snake, Sebastian, made him that convincing bad guy you'd like to punch in the head. He was a smartass extraordinaire.

Nick DuPre and Robert E. Lee (Is that your real name?) were also very solid in their bit parts, as were the four actresses who played Ariel's "companions."

All told, LSU did a bang-up job this time around. There were some missteps with production (i.e. showing a distracting movie during an unspeakably painful musical number or an inaudible off-stage soundtrack of the shipwreck), but the set design was impressive and, as already mentioned, extremely strong acting abounded.

Baton Rouge should be proud to have a theater company in town that can take Shakespeare to this level.

Even if the play they chose to do wasn't one of William's best, it was better than a night of Scrabble, and more sophisticated than eating sushi with a fork.

'The Tempest'

WHEN: Performances are at 7:30 p.m. today and Sunday through Wednesday, with a matinee at 2 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: Reilly Theatre, LSU.

TICKETS: Tickets are $15.50 for adults, $13.50 for LSU faculty, staff and seniors, and $8.50 for students and children.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 578-3527 or go to the Web site at http:// www.theatre.lsu.edu .

Photo: Color photos of Prospero, played by Shawn Halliday, left, and his daughter, Miranda, played by Rebecca Buller, in LSU's production of William Shakespeare's "The Tempest"; Ariel, played by Desiree Bacala, in "The Tempest" (by Travis Spradling)

Document BATR000020050930e19u00085

People
Washateria's new cycle "Cyclone" offers Internet access for those waiting on their loads of laundry

J.D. VENTURA
1,053 words
28 September 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

Damon Levy can be forgiven for the name he gave his new business: Cyclone Laundry and Internet Cafe.

As unpalatable as the commercialization of meteorological phenomenon is these days (think "Tsunami"), Levy's business has undoubtedly won the hearts and minds of the climatologically affected. After Katrina, doing laundry while accessing the Internet was an unforeseen godsend for LSU-area evacuees.

But it was probably a smart idea even before the disaster.

That's because Levy's "Cyclone" concept addresses an almost irrefutable fact: doing laundry is about as much fun as scrubbing bathroom tile. And, of course, the worst part about it is the waiting.

When laundry is done at home, it's something happening in the background, while other things are accomplished. But, historically, washing clothes at a "laundromat" is the feature attraction. And it's a B movie at best.

Enter Levy. The 31-year-old with an MBA, who traded in a high- flying career in mergers and acquisitions for a resume awash with wash and fold, "put everything on the line" when he opened his wired washateria nine weeks ago. The store, which has seven Internet terminals and WiFi, along with 32 washers and 32 dryers, was not, however, born from an uneducated risk.

Levy, a Tulane grad, did a lot of research in deciding what kind of business he wanted to open. He went to a business broker, who presented him with various franchise concepts. There was the HVAC idea. And the "railroad service company." And he even came darn close to opening a Popeye's. But in the end, after two years of research which included an infiltration into the assumingly bizarro world of laundry conventions, cleaning clothes won out over frying chicken.

Friends thought his brain had gone on permanent spin cycle. Levy, however, pushed ahead and built the East Boyd Drive store in a month. He had gone door-to-door in the LSU area in an attempt to assess his idea's market potential. But even he had some initial doubts.

"I lay in bed at night thinking, 'If this doesn't work, I'm busted,'" said Levy, wearing his "Cyclone" golf shirt, surrounded by bags of folded laundry.

He had faith, however. He had first seen Internet cafes while traveling around Europe. He hoped the concept would be a hit in the university setting. He set out on a mission to make doing laundry "more tolerable."

He isn't alone. Laundromat owners all over the country are tweaking the concept to make it more appealing to discerning consumers whose expectations of the service industry have increased over the last decade. Brian Wallace, president and CEO of the Coin Laundry Association, said that of the 35,000 "retail self-service" laundry facilities his organization represents, roughly 25 percent are thinking of new ways to bring new customers, um, into the fold.

Internet access is just one of many offerings. Some laundromats have bars, tanning beds, large-screen televisions, DVD rentals or one-hour film developing, while others, like Levy's, have modified their furniture, giving students study space, much like Starbucks and other coffee shop chains have.

"(The industry) is becoming populated with entrepreneurs who are bringing all of these options to the business," said Wallace. "They are asking, 'How can we make the downtime more palatable and give customers something to do instead of just watching their socks tumble?'"

Getting rid of quarters was another innovative move Levy felt important. Instead of lugging piles of change around, Cyclone customers put funds onto a rechargeable debitlike card, which they then use in not only the washers and dryers, but at the Internet kiosks, too.

The new money system is not only convenient for customers, but it makes a lot of business sense for the owner, according to Joe Cole, the sales manager from Florida-based Coin Laundry Equipment Co., the distributor Levy used to set up his business.

"(Owners) are able to change their pricing in penny increments," said Cole, who added that even consumers with their own home-based laundry equipment like the convenience of doing large volumes of wash at commercial outlets. "(Coin-based stores) have to go up by 25 cents every time they want to increase prices."

Janice Levy, Damon's mom and one of the three Cyclone employees, walked around the store recently educating people on how to use the card readers. She admitted that while her son never did the laundry as a kid, he was nonetheless a "neat freak," which, she figured, is perhaps a helpful credential given his new career.

The store is immaculate. And it's been busy. Damon admitted he has clocked more than a few 16-hour days in the post-Hurricane environment.

Before Rita hit, there were still Katrina evacuees doing their laundry at Cyclone, which, immediately after the storm, became a sort of command central for many displaced people who suddenly didn't have Internet access or their laptops.

Sisters Sara and Alain Smith represent Levy's target market, and unintentional Katrina-related customer base. Sara is an LSU senior who lives in a studio apartment with no laundry facilities. Alain is a teacher from New Orleans who evacuated and is unsure if she has a job to go back to (The school she works for was severely flooded.). Sara likes the study areas. Her sister has appreciated the Internet access.

"There's a reason to stay," said Alain. "It's now OK to hang out at the laundromat."

Another reason? The bathrooms are spotless, both women agreed.

Thanks, of course, to a neat freak with a single dream: to see the day when downloading and frontloading happen simultaneously. Down at the Cyclone, mission accomplished.

Photo: Color photos of Alaine Smith, a school teacher from New Orleans, folding her laundry while her sister, Sara, left, takes a break from her algebra homework at the new Cyclone Laundry and Internet Cafe; Alaine Smith and her sister Sara using the wireless internet at the Cyclone Laundry and Internet Cafe; B.W photo of Damon Levy, owner of the Cyclone Laundry and Internet Cafe', standing near the washers and dryers (by Patrick Dennis)

Document BATR000020050928e19s0002c

People
Crowded houses Families provide shelter to relatives fleeing storm

J.D. VENTURA
1,535 words
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1-H
English

Years ago when Bertha and Frank Bowman bought a sprawling house in Baker, they never thought they'd run out of room.

But Katrina changed all that.

Now the Bowmans have more than 50 of their relatives, and those relatives' friends, all evacuees from New Orleans, staying with them.

It's a big house, but it's crowded.

And the Bowmans are hardly alone. In the Baton Rouge area it's difficult to find someone who doesn't have an evacuee staying with them. In coffee shops and online chat rooms, the question "Are you an evacuee?" is becoming as commonplace as "What do you do for work?" It's obvious but somehow worth stating: the people staying in the River Center and the Cajun Dome represent just a fraction of the New Orleans diaspora.

And as the Crescent City's future remains optimistic but uncertain, many homebound evacuees continue to test the hospitality of family, friends and total strangers. Everyone wonders what's next. And everyone is terrified of the first post-Katrina water and electric bills.

The Bowmans are making the best of it. Bertha, 67, has so many people in her house, her exact relationship with everyone isn't immediately clear. That's OK. Everyone just calls her "Aunt Berth." That works for her.

Her niece, Gloria Brissette, grabbed a piece of paper and tried to figure out just how many immediate families are staying in the five-bedroom dwelling. She used a ledger filled with everyone's names and Social Security numbers. The guess came in at 19. Which, people were quick to point out, was a reduced number now that some had left.

Dinnertime a couple of Fridays ago felt like Thanksgiving. More than 15 kids and teens crowded into the living room to watch videos on BET. Some of the girls sang to 'Lil Bow Wow's new track, while the smaller children ran from room to room, giggling and asking the grown-ups when dinner would be served.

The smell of ham, simmering in a big pot of butter beans and rice, hung in the air, making it steamy and nearly edible.

"This is headquarters," said Rose Pickett, Bowman's sister, a retired city of New Orleans employee, who fled the Ninth Ward the day before Katrina made landfall. "This is where we have family reunions and birthday parties, so it wasn't a surprise we all ended up here."

She left behind her 16-year-old cat and her two ferrets, thinking she'd return in a couple of days. Days turned into weeks and hopes for their survival faded.

"I've learned not to worry about the things I lost, because you can't get 'em back," said Pickett, who's 64. "My mother told me not to worship material things because that would make you nervous and sick."

There's enough, after all, to be nervous about. Those staying with the Bowmans are worried about how to access all of the different catastrophe benefits, and where everyone will wind up. Some of the family is headed off to Texas, while only four of the families plan on going back to New Orleans.

After days of trying to get through to the Red Cross' 1-800 number, some of the families woke up at 4 a.m. and drove in a caravan to the Red Cross center in Natchez, Miss., seeking benefits. They were all given checks, but the drive wore on already frazzled nerves.

Why, they wanted to know, couldn't they apply for such assistance in Baton Rouge, like those staying at the River Center have done?

Bob Howard, a public information officer for the Red Cross, admitted that the 800 number has been "overtaxed" with calls. And because Louisiana still has 40,000 people staying in shelters (as opposed to only 4,000 in Mississippi and 400 in Alabama), helping those evacuees staying in the homes of family and friends has been a secondary effort.

"Mississippi is in a later phase of the relief operation," said Howard, who doesn't recommend Louisianans drive out of state to access Red Cross benefits, but rather continue to try the 800 number. "Some places are on Day 15, and some places are still on Day 1."

Howard emphasized there is no application deadline on benefits and evacuees should try to be patient.

The Plaegers of Baton Rouge know a thing or two about patience. Normally a household of three, mother Deborah, father George and daughter Whitney, have seen their household size mushroom to more than 20 people immediately following Katrina.

Even the foyer of their large four-bedroom home in University Club Plantation is full of air mattresses. They joke that each family has its own "wing," which they emerge from each morning, converging in the kitchen for breakfast.

Recently that consisted of stacks of French toast and microwaved bacon, washed down with flavored coffee. Unlike many in the Bowman clan who lost their homes to massive flooding, several families now in the Plaeger house (which the family has taken to calling "Survivor: Baton Rouge") are from homes in the Metairie area, where water damage was not as catastrophic. Still, going back is fraught with questions.

Coleen and Robert Baer (Coleen is George Plaeger's sister), and their son, Ben, were in some sense lucky that the Plaegers had moved from Metairie to Baton Rouge last year. At least the family could retreat to a safe haven as Katrina roared ashore.

"You would love to have more beds," said George Plaeger, a chemical engineer. "You just don't build your house based on living with 25 people."

The Baers are making the best of it. The plethora of pets has helped. The interaction of five cats, three dogs, a bird and a fish has provided moments of levity. Although both families joked that Thanksgiving has been canceled for the next couple of years.

The hope is to return to Metairie, but the family has decided to wait until the community's recovery is further along.

"I am hoping the city takes the opportunity to rebuild and fix some of the problems they had," said Coleen. "It could be a turning point, but right now there is just so much uncertainty."

Deborah has managed to see the good in it all. The storm, she contended, made a tight-knit family even tighter.

"(Since Katrina) there has been so much love and laughter in this house," Deborah said. "I have found my Norman Rockwell world."

Things, of course, aren't picture perfect for many. Kim Pease, a public information officer at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, conceded that evacuees staying in private homes are in a "better situation" than those sleeping on cots in shelters. But even homebound evacuees should be vigilant about applying now for the benefits to which they are entitled, including loans from the Small Business Administration.

"Regardless if you want a loan or not, fill out and return the application to FEMA" said Pease. "That is the gateway to grant funds that come later. If (evacuees) put that packet on the top of the refrigerator and don't return it, the assistance stops there."

Some things, however, are irreplaceable. As her extended family literally lined up for ham and beans in the kitchen, Rose Pickett showed a guest a photograph of a porcelain doll, wearing a wedding dress Pickett had made by hand.

The dress's pattern was a gift from her daughter, who, Pickett explained, was killed in an incident of domestic violence. The little bride had become a means of remembrance.

"We can't bring everyone back to exactly where they were before the hurricane," said Pease. "But FEMA is going to be here as long as it takes."

Both the Bowmans and the Plaegers agreed that the road to recovery has been easier surrounded and supported by family. Still, on sleeper sofas, air mattresses and cots all over Baton Rouge, sleep is interrupted by thoughts of the homes left behind.

Pickett caressed the framed photograph of her doll and, amidst the cacophony of a crowded house, softly said, "I just hope she is in one piece."

Photo: Color photos of Tiffany Goirl, and sister, Tariel Stewart, along with their mother, Barbara Stewart, from left, looking over family photos taken of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit; Kesha Bickham, left, helping Alicia Nicks with her homework in the Bowman's crowded living room in Baker; Gloria Brissette keeping careful track of everyone staying in the house, logging legal names and Social Security numbers, used to apply for various aid packages (By Kerry Maloney); Courtney Plaeger, from left, talking with her grandmother, Melba Felder, while her cousin, Andrew Baer and his mom, Coleen, fix breakfast (By Liz Condo); B.W. photos of Jonathan Johnson, left, and Christopher Banks watching music videos after school two Wednesdays ago; Tiffany Goirl and her 4-month-old daughter, Ja'Layah, taking a quick couch nap (By Kerry Maloney); Patrick Beler petting Daisy, at his aunt and uncle's Baton Rouge home (By Liz Condo)

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People
Virginia EMS crew gets unusual tour of N.O.

J.D. Ventura
1,398 words
18 September 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

The map was a mess.

The operations center gave the EMS crew from Virginia its assignment last Sunday at the crack of dawn.

Wisecracks about the map soon followed.

It was a blurry photocopy of a photocopy of a street map of New Orleans. On it, large "Xs" had been drawn over entire sections of the city, by which were written the words, "Under water."

A yellow Hi-Liter was used to trace the proposed path to downtown. Because I-10 was still impassable at points, entry had to be made via the Causeway in Metairie.

The day's mission was even more ambiguous than the recommended route. Basically, just go to New Orleans and stand by.

Kevin Dillard rode with Dawn Sklepovich, both workers from Lifecare Medical Transport, based in Fredericksburg, Va.

The two hoped the run would be more purposeful than the days that preceded it, some of which were marked by prolonged periods of idleness and a feeling that the command center had little command of the team's whereabouts or usefulness.

When, halfway to New Orleans, Dillard was paged to report to headquarters to receive the assignment he already just received, expectations were immediately lowered.

It wasn't the first national disaster to which the company had responded. They were at the Pentagon after 9-11, too. A fact Dillard, who kept everyone laughing with the playful pestering employed by teasing big brothers everywhere, occasionally mentioned but never glorified.

"It was chaos, too, just more organized," he quipped.

The ambulance headed east, past the service station off the Interstate where row after row of empty buses still sat, past the checkpoint at Exit 209 where a state trooper waved them through, past the subdivisions of Metairie, where children's swing sets were almost indistinguishable in back yards decorated with debris.

At around Audubon Park, it sank in that the city had been invaded by the military. There were Army tents where people once walked their dogs. Green vehicles of every shape and size, some equipped with machine guns, roared up neighborhood streets, newly leaf- strewn from not only Katrina, by fall's imminent arrival. Camouflaged uniforms, hung from a clothesline, fluttered in the wind.

Dillard stopped at one police precinct to say "hello" to New Orleans Police Department officers he had met on a previous run.

Sklepovich had someone take her picture in front of a boarded-up Starbucks.

Then they were off to another precinct, this one closer to downtown, set up in the parking lot of a looted Wal-Mart. NOPD officers had been sleeping in tents on the asphalt, now the only home for some.

Asking why they aren't bunking inside the store soon became the stupidest question ever.

Dillard had to see it. His disarming nature and EMS credentials functioned like top secret clearance for some reason, because the man seemed to go wherever he pleased.

The ransacked store proved no exception.

Some people immediately turned back upon entering it, gagging, and asking for the Vicks VapoRub to put under their noses.

It turns out the entire meat department of a major grocery store smells pretty bad when all of its contents - hundreds of packages of pork chops and hamburger meat, chicken and fish, steaks and livers - have rotted in the 100-degree heat, creating a Disneyland for maggots, flies and untold legions of bacteria.

As far as the pillaging goes, the food aisles fared far better than the consumer electronics or toy departments. People had pulled televisions off the wall, exposing coaxial cable and security tethers. The iPod case was smashed and empty. There was not a single bicycle hanging from the racks. Trampled, dirty stuffed animals looked dead despite their inanimateness.

Some bored-looking soldiers played golf in the sporting goods aisle. Three others, all Puerto Ricans from the Airborne Division, took a leisurely stroll through the destruction.

The sign which read "The Pharmacy Will Be Closed Labor Day Weekend" seemed like a silly understatement.

At the Ernest L. Morial Convention Center, Dillard and Sklepovich checked in with yet another Lifecare truck. They were in a holding pattern, too, the driver explained, awaiting possible instructions to assist with body recovery.

A group of soldiers, all toting M-16s, stood on South Peters Street, not far from the Howlin' Wolf nightclub.

Pigeons strutted undisturbed down empty sidewalks.

Had the World War II-era statue of Molly Marine, at the corner of Canal Street and Elke Place, caught a glimpse of Katrina's approach through her binoculars?

Dillard pulled the ambulance over on Canal Street where news truck satellite dishes now replace felled palm trees.

Sailors and soldiers, most who had never been to the city before, riding in cars and on foot, snapped pictures of the sights. New Orleans, apparently, had not lost her tourists.

A public garbage can preached, "Trash your city, trash yourself."

Relief workers and cleaning crews lined up for tetanus and hepatitis shots near the World Trade Center, as a slight breeze blew off the river.

Some crew members from the USS Iowa Jima - their names sewn into their uniforms Henry, Becker, Scales, Rockwell - were cooking hamburgers for anyone, and the wind smelled like a backyard barbecue, perhaps reminding the tired and traumatized of happier days.

Other sailors opened giant cans of Bartlett pears, as a palate of pinto beans was unloaded.

People sat at round tables under tents, emblazoned with the Budweiser logo, and the words "Hurricane Katrina Relief." Even disaster has a corporate sponsor.

Another sailor, with the last name Mangual, was given the task of handing out buns for the less-popular sausage links. When someone finally asked him for one, he thanked them for putting him to use.

It was a small gesture that underscored a growing frustration. There seems to be quite a few relief workers, including Dillard and Sklepovich, who sometimes find themselves without a lot to do. Like the days following 9-11, when it became clear there were no survivors for the quickly assembled army of rescue workers to save, the transitional period between search and rescue and rebuilding has put some lifesavers in limbo.

Example: the carload of NOPD officers, sitting on lawn chairs, one smoking a cigar, one on a cell phone, the others using a television plugged into the cruiser's power supply to watch the Saints game, or, later, to play video games.

They blamed their boredom on "a takeover" by the "white shirts," a term used to describe officers in the

management ranks.

Dillard and Sklepovich decided to take a walk. A foray onto Bourbon Street proved too smelly. Wretchedly so.

Before turning back, Sklepovich picked up the receiver of a pay phone, and got a dial tone. Not far from there, the sign outside the bar, Hurricane City, advertised to no one.

A note in the window of a still-closed shop promised patrons that the owner would return by 10 a.m.

An air quality monitor was chained to a street sign.

As they headed back to the Riverwalk, at the end of Canal Street, they saw the arrival of the cruise ship Ecstasy. And then, later, President Bush's landing in Marine One, which touched down on the Iowa Jima's flight deck just yards from the ambulance crew's vantage point on the pier.

It was the day's irrefutable highlight.

Second only to when Dillard used his powers of persuasion to gain access to a super high-tech military communications truck used to coordinate much of the recovery mission's radio traffic.

Before leaving downtown, word came over the radio from the other crew, the one stationed at the convention hall, that they were being dispatched to Memorial Medical Center, where, it would come to light later, 40 bodies were uncovered.

As the sun set, the Lifecare crew drove through Metairie headed for I-10. In the growing dimness, the signs on the Quality Hotel, the Denny's and the Day's Inn flickered on. Light, encircling a now- silent city, besieged by water, darkness and uncertainty.

Photo: Color photo of, from left, EMS workers Kevin Dillard, Jason Gonzales, Darrel Johnson, Dawn Sklepovich and Will Hurlburt settling in for the evening at a shelter for relief workers in Baton Rouge (By Liz Condo)

Document BATR000020050919e19i000cr

People
"Come Blow Your Horn" offers welcome laughs

J.D. VENTURA
1,022 words
14 September 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

A welcome diversion.

Baker Little Theatre's latest production, "Come Blow Your Horn," is an interesting enough three-act comedy that, after all of Katrina's blowing, offers a few well-earned laughs, in a time when things aren't so funny.

This is the kind of production that Baker seems to do best. Neil Simon's sitcom-esque simplicity suits them well. An easy to understand plot, a few characters, a set design consisting of just one room. Such theatrical minimalism clearly unclutters the director's to-do list, allowing him to spend more time with his actors.

The payoff was evident at Saturday's matinee.

As is the case with most of Simon's plays, "Come Blow Your Horn" takes place in New York City. It's the '60s, and Alan Baker is a womanizing bachelor who suddenly finds himself rooming with his nerdy, virgin baby brother, Buddy.

Alan, played by Johnny Worsham, is conflicted about whether to remain a Casanova, or to settle for just one girl, Connie, played by Jannean McKinney. Buddy (Ronald Coats) is the dork whose emulation of his brother's lifestyle transforms him into a carbon copy of his older sibling.

Seeing his own faults reflected in his younger brother's newly adopted freewheeling ways provides the necessary conflict, with a seemingly limitless series of zany miscommunications and improbable situations thrown into the mix.

Director Donald Trahan manages to keep the tempo of the production steady and somehow conveyed to his cast not to beg for the laughs with exaggeration, but rather emote sparingly, which at times added an important sense of realism.

The trouble, however, with doing a Simon play is that it's a lot harder than it looks. An LSU theater professor, who took in the same matinee, explained it this way: because the plotlines of situational comedies are essentially unbelievable, creating dimensional characters becomes even more of a challenge. So those community theater directors who think such plays are easy to pull off, often find out the hard way they're not.

Trahan didn't avoid this sand trap completely.

At times his cast was playing theatrical badminton, lobbing lines at each other like this: pause, pretend to listen, say line, pause, pretend to listen, say line.

However, there were sporadic departures from this dialogue disease.

Johnny Worsham has improved greatly since his Baker debut in "It Was a Dark and Stormy Night." It was obvious he had given thought to how his character felt about the other characters. So, he was appropriately fraternal with his brother, and more emotional with his love interest, and lovingly annoyed with his mother.

And he put in the work with reactive facial expressions to the point where his countenance didn't look robotic. Shades of facial emotion, rather than the extremes, were refreshing to finally see from one of Baker's thespians.

Ronald Coats needs to not try so hard. His energy and obvious passion deserve applause, but channeling that energy effectively is something at which Trahan failed. Coats' expressions were as cliche as online emoticons: happy, sad, concerned.

He was, however, particularly good at Jerry Lewis-nuttiness. It was easy to compare him to Sean Hayes, who plays Jack on TV's "Will and Grace." Coats may have a future in comedic acting, but he needs to first

learn how to make his characters seem more human, rather than just mere court jesters.

Jannean McKinney, who played Worsham's more serious love interest, was a bit vanilla, but she, too, has made some obvious improvements in her acting. Her character's perkiness and the lilting sing-song delivery of her lines made for a convincing sexy good-girl (like Elizabeth Montgomery on "Bewitched").

And, man, there's something about Brooke Arceneaux.

It's her first Baker performance and she was right-on as the casting-couch siren who makes Coats' character implode under the weight of his immature libido. It sounds trite, but Arceneaux is flat-out gorgeous (a Nicole Kidman look-alike), and her beauty, paired with decent acting, translated into a stage presence that glowed. If her acting improves, fetching leading lady roles will hardly be a problem.

It was also easy to appreciate the respective performances of Dave Besse and Kathy Wilson. As the Baker boys' parents, the two understood their roles in the comedy, and didn't underachieve or overreact. Stage note for Wilson, though: while solid, she should either fully embrace the New York Jewish mother shtick, or abandon it for a Southern equivalent.

Which begs the question. On these sorts of plays, why does Baker shy away from adaptation? Regionalizing the material could be a lot of fun.

Is this play worth $10? Heck, with all of the absolute garbage in the cinema these days, and with movie popcorn and soda requiring bank financing, there's something to be said about a small community theater whose cast is giving its all, and where the vending machine sodas cost 60 cents.

And at intermission, if you ask, they'll even put your unfinished pop in the fridge, and hand it to you before you leave.

That's the "community" part of this kind of theater that sometimes is underappreciated.

But not this time.

"Come Blow Your Horn"

WHEN: The play runs at 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday through Sept. 24, with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturdays.

WHERE: Baker Little Theatre, 3121 Van Buren St., Baker.

TICKETS: Tickets are $10, $7 for students and seniors on Saturday matinees only.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 774-5953 or visit the Web site at http:// www.bakerlittletheatre.com .

Photo: Color photo of Dave Besse, right, as Harry Baker, and Alan, played by Johnny Worsham, in ascene from "Come Blow Your Horn"; B.W. photos of The Baker brothers, played by Johnny Worsham, left, and Ronald Coats, exchanging heated words in the final act of "Come Blowy Your Horn," at the Baker Little Theatre; Brooke Arceneaux kissing Ronald Coats (By Kenneth Wilks); B.W. graphic is "Come Blow Your Horn" announcement box

Document BATR000020050915e19e0002u

People
Relief workers get some relief Camp Champion provides shelter, food, massages and counseling

J.D. VENTURA
1,258 words
11 September 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

A passage from the Bible quotes God as saying: "And I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the people of the earth."

Daniel Fagan cannot stop thinking about that these days.

The 41-year-old state trooper with the Georgia State Patrol is one of 225 law enforcement and relief workers from all over the country staying at the Bethany World Prayer Center's Center of Hope facility off of Siegen Lane. It's there, beneath the church's massive spotlighted crosses, that relief is being provided to the rescue workers in the form of shelter, showers, food, massages and counseling.

And for good reason.

Fagan, who was deputized a week ago to enforce the law in Louisiana, admitted a decade on the force back home, and tours of duty in Desert Storm and Desert Shield still left him unprepared to witness Katrina's aftermath.

"This is something I can't even describe," he said, after spending a second day patrolling Slidell and New Orleans. "Just to see those people..."

The people. They're why he volunteered to come to Louisiana. He asked his wife if he should volunteer, even after he already had. It was just something he had to do.

On the long ride to Louisiana, he kept thinking about the reports he had heard of people shooting at rescue workers. How, he wondered, are you supposed to help someone who is shooting at you?

At the very least, his apprehension over where he would be staying dissolved when he saw the building he would call home for two weeks. The church has named the operation Camp Champion. Tonja Myles, one of the church administrators running the center, said the place is like the "Windsor Court, BR-style."

Relief workers come back from the field every day to find a mint on their pillows and their sheets washed and beds made. Catered food, either donated from area restaurants or prepared by volunteer chefs, fills the cafeteria with home-cooked aromas. Toiletries and an endless assortment of personal hygiene products are provided.

Cots and beds made out of chairs fill every office and half of the center's warehouse. (The other half is being used to store supplies bound for shelters all around the region.)

Creature comforts temper the trauma rescue workers are dealing with, but the devastation is still hard to process.

Fagan was horrified at the destruction in Slidell, which he patrolled with a ranger from the Georgia Department of National Resources. Trees had been chain-sawed and just pushed to the side of empty roads winding through a veritable ghost town.

Those few hurricane victims that stayed looked like they had seen ghosts.

Like a 58-year-old woman named Evelyn, who told Fagan she rode out the storm, staying at home while her 86-year-old mother remained in a two-story apartment building behind Evelyn's one-story house. The Slidell resident told the trooper that, the night of the storm, the 2 inches of water encircling her ankles went to her chest in only 15 minutes. As she swam to her mother's building, she was certain death had arrived.

When Evelyn came over to say "hello" to Fagan and his partner, she held his partner's hand tightly, the

whole time they were there. The image of that tightly grasping hand has already begun to haunt the strong, well-built Fagan.

The woman was determined to stay, and asked only for the patrolmen to check back in on her and her mother later in the day.

Those running Camp Champion know many of their "guests" will experience life-changing moments while carrying out their duties. "To me, if this does not change the heart of a person, and a population, then they've missed the point," said Roger Bower, the director of The Center of Hope.

It's often seemingly trivial details that affect the heart.

Robin Coil, a 45-year-old probation officer from Georgia staying at Camp Champion, became emotional when a child waved at him and his partner from the roadside, as if they were soldiers liberating them from Katrina's occupation.

At times, relief efforts do feel like dangerous military operations. Dawn Sklepovich is bunking off Siegen Lane, too, along with nine other EMS workers, all employees of Lifecare Medical Transports based in Fredericksburg, Va.

After a 22-hour drive to Baton Rouge, the EMS crew was dispatched after dark to pitch-black Jefferson Parish. Without escort and navigating unfamiliar debris-strewn roads, devoid of street signs and traffic signals, Sklepovich and her teams transported eight patients from West Jefferson Medical Hospital to Tiger Stadium.

"We were scared to death," confessed Sklepovich. "Even at night, you can see unbelievable damage."

As Sklepovich and her co-workers sat on the edge of their cots Tuesday just after 9 p.m., Chad Taylor, John Murphy and Dave Sims talked and played cards in the cafeteria. The three men, all officers of Georgia's Department of Natural Resources, were soon joined by C.E. Parker, a young trooper with the Georgia State Patrol.

Murphy, who had been into New Orleans that day, said they came across an elderly housing complex where some residents sat out on balconies just staring out at the floodwaters. Not one of the eight seniors would leave.

"It's just so bad, you get used to it," said Parker, who was struck by how intact most of the structures in the city are. "If the water hadn't come, we wouldn't even be here."

Fagan, who said the sight of the destroyed Twin Spans left him awestruck, also met New Orleans residents refusing to leave. One city worker, who said his name was Joe Brown Paulk, wasn't budging. The man, a city employee, didn't want to evacuate, he just wanted to go back to work, and asked Fagan to contact his boss, Charles Adams. The patrolman promised to do his best.

When they left New Orleans, Fagan and his partner kept another promise, and made their way back to Evelyn's house. When they arrived, the woman's brothers, who had come from out-of-state to convince her to leave, said she was finally getting some much- needed sleep. "Just tell her we came back," Fagan's partner insisted.

It was hard not to wonder if Evelyn was finally able to sleep knowing help had finally arrived.

And Fagan also wondered how many of Katrina's victims thought about God's promise to never "destroy the people of the earth" by flood again, as the deadliest storm in American history did exactly that.

Photo: Color photos of Cpl. Daniel Fagan, with the Georgia State Patrol, pausing after finishing a hot meal at Camp Champion on Tueday night; Volunteer licensed massage therapist Lance Schexnaydre, right, and his mother Julie, left, providing "wellness massage" to emergency worker Charles West and other relief workers staying at Bethany World Prayer Center's Camp Champion; EMS workers, from left, Will Hurlburt, Dawn Sklepovich and Kevin Dillard unwinding after a long day transporting bedridden evacuees; B.W. photo of Robin Coil, a probation officer with the Georgia Department of Corrections, living out of his suitcase at Camp Champion (By Liz Condo); B.W. mug of Tonja Myles

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People
Downtown open for business despite rumors

J.D. VENTURA
681 words
9 September 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

Riots. Gangs of "thugs" doling out lawlessness. Shootings.

If you got your news from the rumor mill last week, downtown seemed a pretty inhospitable place.

The rumors caused reaction. Businesses closed early, including the Capital City Press Federal Credit Union, the bank used by many employees of this newspaper.

Government offices sent employees home. A police SWAT team was dispatched.

LSU Chancellor Sean O'Keefe sent an alarming e-mail out to more than 40,000 students that read:

"There have been confirmed reports of civil unrest in the Baton Rouge area this morning. These incidents appear to be confined to specific areas in the downtown Baton Rouge area and specific locations around the community...

"To insure safety, we have instructed that all buildings on campus be locked and we ask that occupants remain indoors ..."

The switchboards at talk radio stations lit up with callers offering more speculation about the supposed unruliness. One commentator described downtown as "a war zone."

But when all was said and done, downtown was pretty quiet. Which is not good news for the bars, nightclubs and restaurants that endured a noticeable slow down.

Much of the decrease in that business could certainly be attributed to an exhausted and traumatized community hardly being in the mood to venture out for dinner and drinks. After the worst natural disaster in our nation's history, even dining out somehow felt frivolous.

But with thousands upon thousands of evacuees now staying in Baton Rouge indefinitely, many crowded into the homes of friends, relatives and total strangers, it is only a matter of time before cabin fever sets in and those stressed-out people venture out to seek relief.

A handful of downtown business owners met at the Red Star bar on Laurel Street Monday night to discuss how to let the community know downtown is open for business, which was growing exponentially even before they arrived.

"The irony is this has to be one of the safest places in this parish," said Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District. "... and we want to introduce all these new people to downtown."

The others in the meeting agreed with him. Owners, managers and staff from Red Star, SoGo Live and Spanish Moon attended the meeting, and unanimously concluded that they would welcome O'Keefe sending out another e-mail giving students the all clear.

That's unlikely.

Michael Ruffner, associate vice president of university marketing and communications at LSU, said O'Keefe's office "stands by the e- mail."

"We followed the lead of the city (of Baton Rouge)," said Ruffner. "...and to suggest that e-mail is responsible for business being off isn't even in the cards."

Ruffner added that the university has fielded more than 1,000 calls from concerned parents about the safety

of their sons and daughters attending school in Baton Rouge. "The message that we are sending them is that it is a safe environment here," he added.

The business owners at Monday night's meeting hope that "here" isn't limited to the LSU campus and the immediate environs. Some had observed that campus area bars, like The Chimes, have been unusually busy since the disaster.

"We have to quickly figure out a way to make this place not seem so scary," said Shane Courrege, co-owner of the Spanish Moon, and the as-yet-to-open Dante's Bistro and Inferno, a restaurant- nightclub combination to replace the shuttered Parrot Beach.

Rhorer explained there is already a free shuttle bus from the LSU campus, which departs from the journalism building, to a stop downtown at the Shaw Center. Although the line stops running at 5 p.m., his office is working with LSU and the city to extend service until 2:30 a.m.

But beyond transportation logistics, the immediate future of downtown nightlife ultimately depends on whether people are ready yet to have fun, particularly when Katrina's cruelty has a city, a state and a nation still licking terrible wounds.

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People
Renaissance after dark Night life prospects appear to be perking up downtown

J.D. VENTURA
2,472 words
9 September 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

Editors note: This article about downtown night life was slated to appear Sept. 4. Because of Hurricane Katrina, its publication was delayed. We are printing it now in hopes that it will give new residents a sense of what the city has to offer, even in times of great tragedy.

Renaissance.

It's a word business development types love using to describe what's happening downtown.

It's a good word. It implies enlightenment. It suggests not just the rebirth of something previously quantified, but an era of newness, an introduction to the unknown. And the unknown is both exciting, and a little scary.

Pick any word to describe it. Call it what you want, something is unfolding downtown, under the moonlight.

By day there are the business deals, signed in lawyers' offices, which bring hotels and arts centers, and chi-chi sushi places.

And by night, there are the people, getting dressed up, putting on perfume and cologne, and heading into town, for a martini, or tapas, for friendship, or flirting.

Is downtown finally a nighttime destination?

Maybe.

9:30 p.m.

At the corner of Main and Lafayette last Saturday, there isn't a car in sight. The traffic signals change anyway: red, green, yellow, red.

Eight teenagers riding BMX bikes, some carrying skateboards, crank by, heading for the river. They perform stunts down there, one explains, before racing after his friends.

Two-wheeled tricks along the Mississippi, and a cold treat inside the newly reopened Thirsty Tiger. At least for interior designer Bruce Foreman. Cradling his pug dog on his stomach and nursing a frosty mug of draft beer, the downtown resident said he was glad to see his neighborhood bar open again, after a year closed for renovations.

There's only a handful of people in the place now, but it's early.

Gone is the collage of dollar bills many of the bar's veterans remember. (Kirk Elgin, the GM, says nobody knows for sure what happened to it; he pleaded "the fifth.") But there is central AC. And a new staircase leading to a fine dining restaurant slated to open soon upstairs. It took 2 1/2 weeks to hammer through the old vault to clear the new passageway.

Five-dollar pitchers of beer will undoubtedly allow some hammering to continue.

When Foreman sold his house on Highland Road four years ago and moved next door to the Thirsty Tiger, his friends suspected mental illness. Now he believes the planned Capital House Hotel and the condominium complex going up adjacent to his home are "going to finish it all."

"There are so many people on the streets now," says Foreman. People like Amy Heitz, 24, who slides into Foreman's bar stool after he leaves, alongside her friend, Spanish Town resident Glynn Cocran, 23.

With her red cell phone on the bar, and a Camel Menthol in her hand, Heitz, also a downtown resident, sipped a Bud Light, before announcing that they would "probably stay until we are good and drunk."

It is, after all, a Thirsty Tiger.

9:41 P.M.

After sushi at Komodo's, friends Hollie Easterling, 27, and Jean Kankilich (who only admits to being in her "late 20s") headed for downtown.

And here they are, walking into the Thirsty Tiger.

They were going to go to upper-scale Lava Room, but Easterling is "having a bad hair day."

"Downtown is the best part of Baton Rouge," says Kankilich "But it needs more people."

9:52 P.M.

"Day after day

I get angry and I will say

That the day is in my sight

When I take a bow and say goodnight."

It's fun guessing which person leaning against the metal bar requested the Violent Femmes. It's a good song for Red Star, a little retro, sort of pouty, a bit rebellious.

The candles in red votive holders compete for visual dominance against the red lamps overhead. Michael Miller's guitar-tuning competes briefly with Gordon Gano's whiny vocals.

Miller is a singer and guitar player with local "blues-rooted punk" band Bones. The band has gigged at the Star before. There are only 10 people here now, but the group's front man is convinced things will get crazier later.

"We play when there's a good crowd," he says.

There is already a good crowd in a booth nearby. Brant Blanchard is turning 25 and he's assembled six old college friends to help him celebrate.

The group first hit Tsunami, on the roof of the Shaw Center. But the bar was crowded, and, says Laney Gascon, 25, it was hard to flag down the busy bartenders.

"It was real tight at the bar," agrees friend Patrick Blake. "Chaotic."

The gang decided to surf out of Tsunami when they discovered "not enough seating" on the rooftop terrace. Someone suggested the overwhelmed bar may have something to do with the fact that the restaurant can no longer serve booze on the roof, thanks to the folks at the LSU Museum.

Red Star, all agree, is a "laid-back" alternative.

Where are y'all going after this? Brant greedily rubs his hands together like a bank robber about to count the loot. "Maybe a gentleman's club?" he asks, his voice rising in anticipation of the shoot down.

The girls talk about how funny it would be, winding up at a girly club with the bemused birthday boy, just as a few more people walk in, turning heads at the bar, their body language asking, "Who's here?"

10:11 P.M.

The only party-goers on Third Street are the cicadas, chirping from places unseen in the dim glow of the street lamps. Some urban planners would say Third has the potential to be ground zero for nightlife. Tonight tumbleweed wouldn't be out of place.

Up the staircase outside of Avoyelles on the River, Kati O'Rear is tending bar with Matt LeCorgne. It's quiet. A couple sips drinks at the polished wooden bar, their legs crossed, knees touching intimately. A few people work on dessert after leisurely meals in the front dining room.

They're still busy during happy hour, assures O'Rear, but with a few new places in town, she assumes folks are checking out their options.

"People aren't afraid to come down here anymore," says LeCorgne, before O'Rear admits that they may close early if more of those people don't find their way here tonight.

10:18 P.M.

Vikki and Vic Hotopp are walking down Third Street. The couple - she, 56, and he, 42 - "can't find anything downtown."

So the Prairieville duo pulled the car over and decided to do some reconnaissance work, sneaker style. Vikki explains she became determined to find the hot spots, so she e-mailed a friend who lives in the Garden District. When that friend didn't know where to hang, Vic and his wife grabbed a map and executed their exploration.

"I got real excited when the Shaw (Center) opened," says Vikki. "But look at this street!"

Cue the tumbleweed.

10:29 P.M.

"Pause. Refresh."

The Coke sign atop what was Parrot Beach commands few onlookers to subjugate to such neon-powered consumerism.

But traffic on the corner of Florida and Third is picking up, noticeably.

Outside of Lava Room, Prince's "Musicology" album beckons from speakers overhead, as doormen open the entrance with a "Welcome to Lava Room."

Furniture that looks like cheap Ikea build-it-yourself stuff during the day, provides some hip glitz now. Candles burning everywhere flicker.

Red curtains part to reveal a nearly empty dining room, in which a giant plasma screen loops psychedelic designs. Renita Harrison is watching it, all cool indifference, dressed to destroy in a sexy something, sipping her Tequila sunrise, slowly, while sitting on a yellow illuminated chair.

"This is it," she says, when asked what the night holds. "Just kind of mellow."

When she wants to really get her groove on, she heads to New Orleans, and feels like BR is "more restrictive" when it comes to nightlife.

Her friends, Deangra Toussaint, 39, and Danielle Lamott, 23, agree. "You can't even go up to Tsunami after 11," says Harrison.

10:46 P.M.

It's a good thing Jim Adams of Leesville has already been to Tsunami tonight. Because the 25-year-old is now soaking wet, after running through the fountains outside the Shaw Center like a child through a backyard sprinkler.

His wife, Misty, dared him to.

The Adamses hit the town with two other couples and rave about the food at Tsunami.

"You can't beat that view!" says Jim.

10:52 P.M.

The kids at the Red Star birthday party were right. The bar at Tsunami is chaotic. But it's organized. And to some, "chaos" means busy. And busy means people. And lots of sexy people on a Saturday night is a good thing.

On the now-controversial outside patio, the vanquished pulse of freshly spun world music is replaced by a sweet social sonorousness. There is an occasional hearty laugh, a playful squeal and the tink clink of glasses - the noises made when people sign a pact, to party.

In the distance, a solid red line, like neon through glass tubing, streams west: taillights of hurricane evacuees. The sight makes several on the roof reflective. Some ponder their own sense of fatalism, only to replace it with imbibed festivity.

Amid the cliquey clusters, some dressed in evening gowns, some in jeans topped with dressy shirts, marketing guy from Seattle, Steve Strom, 26, is hanging out with two pals. Strom has been in BR for four years. Tsunami is a once-a-month must-do when you're a single guy, the first of a few stops on the evening's itinerary.

"Baton Rouge has a lot of great bars under freeways," says Strom, referring to the cluster of pubs on Perkins that would be their next destination. "... And this is a great place for ugly guys to meet fine women."

11:26 P.M.

Paula Mayeux walks out of the Roux House and steps onto the "Tiger Bus," a for-rent double-decker, on which the owners host mobile parties.

She's attending an out-of-control bachelorette party, during which she repeatedly declares, "Drop it like it's hot!"

Few on the bus know what that means exactly, but it's fun to say nonetheless.

A man tried leaving the Roux House with a beer bottle and asks the bouncer who has already intercepted him, "You have a plastic cup?"

Some of the 20 people in line on the sidewalk push past him, fingers feeling the velvet ropes, rifling through purses and wallets to produce cash and credentials.

Some 250 potential friends await them inside. The bar is three deep. People on the dance floor. In the booths. Upstairs. Outside.

The cover band is doing a near-perfect rendition of the Toadies, "Possum Kingdom":

"Make up your mind

Make up your mind

And I'll promise you

I will treat you well

My sweet angel

So help me, Jesus"

Generalization: if there's anyone here in their 30s or 40s, they're outside on the patio, which is enclosed by fencing. As people leave the Shaw Center, it looks like a zoo exhibit, humans in one of their many natural hedonistic habitats.

Inside the cage, there is some monkey business in progress. Cameron Whitten and Dustin Varnel, both 24, were evacuated from a ship in the Gulf, the Dimension Driller II. The two merchant marines were afraid they would be miserably bored, holed up in some "crappy hotel room," in Baton Rouge, a city neither Whitten, who's from Charleston, S.C., nor Varnel, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., native, had ever been to before.

Instead, they're cruising chicks hardcore.

"My impression was that Baton Rouge was a backwater city," says Varnel. "This is cool. Very impressive."

Impressed with the female population?

"Straight to Heaven," they both say at the same time. "Straight to Heaven."

A few steps away Julie Graham is in heaven, too, but for a different reason: "Guys here are trying to meet you, whereas at Fred's they are trying to meet you to tell their friends they met you."

Graham, 25, and her 23-year-old friend, Laura Signorelli, say they've graduated from the college scene, and regard downtown as a more sophisticated experience.

"People are here to hang out," says Signorelli. "The bartenders here aren't pouring Jaeger down your throat."

12:13 A.M.

The bar at the new Capital City Grill in the Shaw Center is closed. As is the restaurant. Remaining options within a walking distance: the casinos, Roux House, Lava Room, SoGo Live (although walking there from downtown is a stretch) and Red Star.

1:18 A.M.

Roux House still rockin'.

1:25 A.M.

The birthday party at Red Star for Brant Blanchard is still rolling along. The girls put an end to any delusions of strip clubs the boys were having.

Blanchard is deservedly bleary, in a bar now filled with patrons wearing nerdy glasses, beat-up sneakers, well-worn sandals, tight T- shirts and hair gelled straight back, straight up or in spiky senselessness.

1:35 A.M.

Two Tsunami bartenders round the corner of Third and Laurel, presumably headed for Red Star, where they have been spotted before.

1:45 A.M.

Back at Lava Room, all of the stools at the bar are taken, but it's quiet behind those red curtains. In fact, Pege Hall and her date have it all to themselves.

She's on a first date with a mystery man. He's being secretive and she's being flat-out sexy. The two hold hands and gaze into each other's eyes, their connection sound tracked by smooth R&B.

Neither says anything very quotable. But as last call comes and goes, the obvious sparks between them seem to silently say something about nightlife in downtown Baton Rouge: finally, it may be here.

Photo: Color photos of Beth Marionneaux, left, and Shannon DeJarnette sharing a drink and a laugh on Tsunami's outdoor patio overlooking the Mississippi river; Laney Gascon, Brant Blanchard and Erin Stoltz, from left, finishing the evening at the Red Star to celebrate Blanchard's 25th birthday; B.W. photos of bar-goers crowding the dance floor under the pulsing lights of SoGo Live in downtown Baton Rouge; Friends Melissa Fernandez, Elsa Jeanne Phillips and Kara Flair, from left, enjoying the live music at Roux House (By Liz Condo)

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People
Hell's angels Salvation Army volunteers travel to N.O. to offer aid

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Angels preparing to fly into hell.

That could have been the sign on the door.

Inside the room, in a small building, in a leafy neighborhood, in North Baton Rouge, members of the Salvation Army were preparing to go back in.

Back to where, it would be alleged later, federal relief agencies waited too long to go. Back to the Causeway overpass in Metairie, where Hurricane Katrina's assault on humanity had her victims baking in the sun, like rotting fruit cast from a now-bare tree.

The same 40 volunteers had gotten little sleep the night before. They were busy making 6,000 sandwiches. Emotions swept over the group, like the flood waters that metaphorically brought them together.

One woman took the microphone, and said, her voice trembling, "God has never pushed me to my greatest potential."

People nodded. Their faces said they too felt that push, a cosmic cue to do something good and brave, something courageous rather than complacent. While some Baton Rougeans let hysterical rumors keep them from a peaceful downtown, others somehow heard the cries of help, from 80 miles away.

A minister asked for bowed heads and spoke of kinds of strength: emotional, spiritual, divine. He told them they might be able to "see Jesus" today, perhaps in the faces of the "displaced persons" they would race to help.

If nothing more, they would see suffering.

Then it was time. Like fighter pilots running onto runways to scramble fighters, they loaded up their fleet of canteen trucks with hundreds of boxes of doughnuts, hot coffee, water, ice, bags of snack chips, soda pop. And when supplies reached floor to ceiling, and were secured with Bungee cords and leaning backs, Carl Ungurait, the sergeant in charge of the truck from Dallas/Fort Worth, gave the word: "Let's go!"

Inside, sandwiched between the sandwiches, two Texans, Gene Heathcoat and Robert Schult, mentally prepared for their second day on the side of Interstate 10. Heathcoat, a volunteer with the Southern Baptist Convention, would spend his 44th wedding anniversary without his wife. Schult, with the Salvation Army, would do his best to add levity in the back of the stuffy truck.

What they saw on Wednesday, however, was still there. On their faces. Heavy and permanent, like a sturdy boot stomped into cement. Good-natured joking and excited chatter, the first chapter of many road trips, lasted for about 20 miles.

Then silence descended, filled, undoubtedly, with thoughts of Day 1, when the crowds they fed in New Orleans were vast and desperate. Their fleet distributed 44,000 bottles of water, flowing over the parched, trembling lips that, time and time again, asked, "Where are the buses?" The next day, under the Causeway, they faced only 3,000 people, a number so reduced from the crowd they encountered the day before, Schult described it as "a vacation."

Schult, an ex-Marine, had been through some mudslides and floods before. He had even seen the aftermath of a tornado, and ridden a boat "through the tail end of a typhoon." At 51, he was still a man that longed for adventure, evidenced by industrial-strength rope he stored in the canteen truck, in case, somehow, he found himself in a boat, pulling people from the dark deluge. But mostly he was here to help, and had quit two part-time jobs back in Texas to do so.

Heathcoat, a retiree from the Ford Motor Co., was quieter. He sat on the ice chests filled with soft drinks, wiping the sweat over his bald head, looking concerned and pensive. "I keep thinking every time we come back, they'll be gone," he offered, before glancing out the vehicle's side windows.

The windows were soon portals to a landscape most Louisianians wouldn't recognize fully. A road sign passes: "EW ORLEANS"...its incompleteness an ominous indicator of what lay ahead.

An Army truck was abandoned in the breakdown lane. Then, a mile down the road, the carcass of a dead alligator lay roasting on the asphalt, the storm too much for even a creature of prehistoric durability.

Up ahead, electric signs warned that all roads to New Orleans were closed, sending three cars reversing direction on the median strip.

It was almost 10 a.m. "Stay close to the vehicle when we get there," Schult warned, two miles from the Gramercy exit. "And if we yell 'fire,' get back in the truck fast."

At the junction of I-10 and Interstate 55, the first State Police roadblock turned away all vehicles, except those providing relief or driven by members of the media. Beyond that checkpoint, the nearly empty highway cut through the lifeless landscape, its ridges making a ker-thump, ker-thump, ker-thump beneath the trucks tires, rolling down a road to ruination.

A blur of defoliated trees, their trunks looking orphaned and defeated, conjured up images of Mount St. Helens or Hiroshima.

By 10:30 a.m. the canteen trucks crossed Lake Ponchartrain. Its waters now spread as far as the eye could see, the southwestern shoreline no longer visible from the interstate.

The train tracks that parallel 10 were covered with debris, the fiber optic cabling that lay beneath them twirling in curling jumbles, like ribbon pulled through scissors.

The convoy overtook 12 empty school buses just before the airport exit.

And then there were glimpses of Metairie. A temporary storage center with its roof and one wall torn away, exposing each unit's contents, as if the whole building were placed in an X-ray machine.

The Denny's sign was bent in half, and the usually golden arches of a McDonald's were now nothing but a skeletal, steel "M."

"You may have seen homeless before," Schult warned. "But this is a totally different pain and suffering. This is despair."

When the trucks stopped, Ungurait leapt out and asked everyone on board to sit tight. He needed to check in with the State Police standing watch over the now-visible crowd of evacuees. He needed to make sure an approach was safe.

Soon after, the go-ahead was given and the trucks pulled into position.

If the smell needed a name, it could be called "forgotten." It was complex and putrid, a fetid mixture of rotting food, feces, vomit, urine and hopelessness. Despite it, appetites raged.

And while many people wanted food, many more wanted answers.

Geneva Bleniard was seething. Family in Kenner wanted to come get her. But they were not being allowed in, and the 30-year-old case manager and the seven people with her weren't being taken out.

They, along with thousands of others, had been on the side of the road for three days and nights. Without bug spray, without sunscreen, without shelter and without sanitary facilities. Many had given up using the 12 portable toilets. And for good reason.

But it was information that was the hardest to do without.

"I can't eat, I can't drink, I can't concentrate!" screamed Bleniard, her anger hotter than her swollen, sunburned face. "They stocking us with food means we are going to be here forever."

At noon, Bleniard told a state trooper she was going to start walking down Interstate 10. He put a hand on

her shoulder and apologized to her. He would do the same thing, he told her. They hugged and he wished her luck, before reminding her to bring plenty of water.

Mary Olsen was equally angry. She had been airlifted that morning from the roof of the American Can Co. in New Orleans. When she got off the helicopter in Metairie, she quickly regretted her rescue.

"We are very disappointed in our government, our President and our mayor," she shouted. "I thought I was saved. But this isn't shelter."

Meanwhile, the four Salvation Army canteen trucks were surrounded. People were patient, though. Polite even. "Excuse me's" could be heard when the tired and hungry bumped into each other. Evacuees helped their rescuers unload water and supplies.

Children and adults alike begged like street urchins for ice cubes, popping them immediately into their mouths, eyes closed while relishing the relief.

Some were too tired and hot to even wait in the food lines. They sat on Army-issued lawn chairs, using wilted scraps of filthy cardboard to fan naked babies, fully exposed to the sun's relentless rays. They argued with each other as to why they hadn't been put on buses yet. They pleaded with anyone who would listen to help a mother with pneumonia, a child with asthma, a baby with one lung.

The state troopers were as anxious for the buses as the evacuees. They helped the Salvation Army teams distribute food.

A National Guardsman, not stopping to unload water from a supply truck, growled at a reporter, "Where have you guys been?"

A military transport helicopter discharged more evacuees, then took off, creating dust-devils of garbage around the canteens. Just- unwrapped sandwiches were immediately coated with airborne grime.

Several people began walking down the Interstate, a trek akin to walking through 30-plus miles of desert. One woman, holding only a small bottle of water and still wearing a life jacket, started hiking west, until she was a small orange dot in the distance.

A nurse, evacuated from one of the city's hospitals, was escorted from the crowd beneath the overpass and, with her husband, three children and the family dog in tow, placed in a Salvation Army car bound for Baton Rouge.

No evacuees questioned such preferential treatment.

Later, however, their pets would not be saved.

As Ungurait, Schult and Heathcoat worked furiously inside the truck, a wheelchair-bound, elderly Patricia Sanders took shade behind the vehicle. With blood in her face and tears in her eyes she cried, "You tell them what's happening here, and don't you butter it up."

She hoped for reunification with her daughter, Lynn.

A little after 1 p.m. the State Police ordered the Salvation Army to leave. With the trucks half-full, Ungurait led the convoy away from the throngs. He said the police told them they worried the evacuees were becoming dangerously restless, since they witnessed some pushing and shoving in front of one of the trucks.

"We're leaving," Ungurait yelled, as his team jumped aboard, squishing dropped relish packets on the floor while securing stacks of undistributed Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

The buses did eventually come. Some that night, then a solid stream of them the next day. The Salvation Army team pulled over at least 10 times on the way back to Baton Rouge, to give water and food to those who could wait no longer.

One of the families they assisted on the side of the road had driven their beat-up pickup truck out of the disaster zone, only to have it break down on the side of the interstate. The younger family members seemed in good spirits, but an elderly woman, presumably the family's matriarch, leaned against the truck and sobbed beneath a cloudless, sunny sky.

Even an army of salvation could not save her from the grief.

Photo: Color photos of Salvation Army Sgt. Carl Ungarait of Fort Worth, Texas showing relief that he is able to jump start the Lake Charles church's truck; Gene Heathcoat, foreground, of Grapevine Texas volunteering alongside the Salvation Army's Robert Schult to help feed Hurricane Katrina survivors waiting under the Causeway overpass; New Orleans area residents waiting patiently for the Salvation Army Canteen fleet to sep up; B.W photos of a Louisiana state trooper, weapon drawn, leaning against a Salvation Army truck; An unidentified woman weeping on the side of the road as Salvation Army workers give cold water and food to her family members (by Paula Ouder)

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People
Future uncertain for refugees Families worry about missing missing family members, destruction at home

J.D. VENTURA
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English

By some estimates Baton Rouge has experienced the influx of 100,000 refugees to the area as a result of Hurricane Katrina, the powerful Category 4 storm that dealt the New Orleans area a devastating blow a week ago, displacing hundreds of thousands of people. These are the stories of four families who wound up under the same roof, at the Holiday Inn Select, located off College Drive.

The Whittingtons

When a Baton Rouge resident asked little Bryce Whittington, a 5- year-old hurricane refugee from Destrehan, why he and his family are staying at the Holiday Inn Select, his reply was heartbreaking.

"I think there's gonna be a hurricane," said the boy, playing with his Batman action figure on the hotel room floor with his sister, Erin, 2. "Good thing it didn't get y'all. If it got y'all you wouldn't be alive today."

Bryce may not fully understand that Katrina has already come and gone, but his mother, Stephanie, knows all too well. The storm's approach meant hitting the road, with her two kids, her two dogs and one big bag of clothes. The objective was clear: get somewhere safe, fast.

They landed here.

Stephanie, 38, is an elementary school teacher. Her husband, Brent, 31, is a coach at East Jefferson High School. When the storm hit, he was in New York State, taking his team to the Babe Ruth World Series. It was a bittersweet win.

"We weren't paying any attention to this thing," said Stephanie, with her 8-year-old greyhound, Maddux, at her feet. "At work Friday, it never even crossed our minds."

By that night her husband was calling home asking, "What are your plans?"

Stephanie planned to stick it out.

But by 10:30 p.m. Saturday, what she saw on television scared her into action. Her kids, she explained, were the "determinate factor" that motivated her to jump into the family's Jeep Cherokee and flee.

Like many families, hers scattered. Her brother, mother and aunt wound up in New Iberia. Her sister headed for Memphis, Tenn., the closest hotel room she could find.

Her dad, Ronnie Virgets, a well-known writer for a New Orleans weekly newspaper, Gambit, stayed. In New Orleans. In Mid City.

She is worried.

"He lives near City Park," she said. "He's 64. He has some medical conditions. We begged him to leave. But he wasn't having any of it."

As of Wednesday night, nobody had heard from him.

The hotel room phone rang. It was her husband, in Houston trying to get back to Louisiana.

"OK, well that's good news..."

"Sounds good..."

"We'll be in the lobby when you get here..."

"I love you."

The good news, she explained, is that the family now had a plan. Her husband would arrive at the hotel Thursday night. They would then drive together, as a family, back to their neighborhood, to survey the damage.

"If our house is still standing, and not underwater, then we're blessed," she said, then added. "But I wonder when we'll work and get paid again."

The Morrisons

Where is Audrey Kiefer Hoffman?

More than anything, that is a question her daughter, Adrian Hoffman Morrison and her husband, Keith, want answered.

The 86-year-old Audrey was a resident at the Huntington Place Senior Community Center in Chalmette.

Her children think she is alive. Keith went down to the lobby of the hotel to have a cigarette and, while watching CNN, caught a glimpse of the woman being evacuated by emergency workers. But the image was fleeting and the report did not reveal where she was being taken.

Still, it gave the family much-needed hope.

Even before Katrina destroyed their town, things were bleak.

When Keith became sick three years ago with congestive heart failure, at age 43, the family didn't have health insurance. The medical bills piled up. Self-employed and unable to work, they lost the family business.

Having just resolved many of their money problems, their recent move into a new apartment in Chalmette came to signify a fresh start for them. Until Katrina.

Now home is the ballroom of the hotel. Their pregnant daughter, Annalisa, and her 2-year-old daughter, Madelynn, are with them. The baby's observations keep triggering emotions.

When the family was traveling over the now destroyed Twin Spans in Slidell, they were horrified by how high the waves were. Madelynn was thrilled, announcing that she would very much like to own a wave.

Then when the hotel moved them into the ballroom, the little girl turned to her grandfather and declared, "This is our new house, Papa."

But their home is back in Chalmette, by all estimates under an enormous amount of water.

Before leaving it, Adrian took Keith's grandmother's hope chest and put it in a higher place in the house. When Adrian imagines going back, to "get closure," she envisions finding that old chest.

"If I just saw it, it would do something for me," she said, a tremble in her voice. "It's my hope."

If you have information on Audrey Kiefer Hoffman, call J.D. Ventura at (225) 383-1111, Ext. 0408.

The Watsons

Barbara Watson just bought a new home in New Orleans East two weeks ago.

She loved everything about it. Big bedrooms. Beautiful den and dining room. A fireplace. A bar.

She leaned in and whispered, "It was my dream house."

It's now underwater.

She had been excited to move to her new neighborhood from Gentilly Woods.

"I figured if little squirrels and chipmunks could live there, it was good enough for me," she said.

Like many New Orleans residents, news of the storm's approach was greeted with stoicism. But when the mayor evacuated his own family, Watson, a city employee, had an instinctive need to gather up her family and go.

She took two pictures off the wall: one of her deceased mother, and one of her late brothers.

They managed to get a hotel room for one night. But by Monday they found themselves living in the conference room of the Holiday Inn Select. They've been sleeping on cots and showering in the hotel's gym.

One of her cousins stayed behind. He and his family were rescued by helicopter from their roof.

When the waters recede, Watson will go back. And, she vowed, she will start again.

"There has to be a silver lining to this," she said, before gesturing around the room full of refugees representing several ethnicities. "You look at this melting pot up in here. Isn't it fantastic?"

Maybe just as fantastic as the dinner Watson was preparing in an electric skillet for all the conference room refugees Wednesday night. Red beans and rice, a taste of a home now gone.

The Binders

Diana Binder never imagined that she would be suddenly living in two hotel rooms with 19 family members.

But then again, she never imagined Katrina.

The Binders, who live in Chalmette, started becoming concerned Saturday, Aug. 27, when it became apparent the storm was not turning away from Louisiana.

Diana, 47, awoke Sunday morning to find her husband, Joey, 49, boarding up the house. She went to help him, but he asked her to start packing.

Diana opened up a suitcase and filled it with family photos taken off the walls. (She knew this was important, since her mother lost all of their family photos in Betsy.) She packed a small wedding album, and two metal file draws full of "important papers."

The immediate family connected with extended family, and in two separate cars, they left.

Daughter Melissa, 25, was driving one of the vehicles. The 10- hour journey took its toll. And when there was no longer music on the car radio, but rather just storm-related news, she knew the situation was grave.

"I knew then everything was going to be lost," said Melissa.

The family is praying for the well-being of Joey's elderly parents, who could not be convinced to leave. As the storm rolled in, the couple reported a loss of electricity and water up to the curb on the street.

But Joey's father subsequently called his other son in Atlanta, leaving an eerie message on his voice mail saying he had "an emergency." And then, in a third phone call, reported that he and his wife were ankle deep in water, and that she wanted to get out.

Whether they did is unknown.

As Joey spoke of his parents, he lost composure.

Diana quickly got up and sat by his side on the edge of the hotel bed. Encircling them, their adult children wiped tears from their eyes.

"My mom thought it was all hype," said Joey. "If you cry wolf so many times, then you're not going to leave."

Photo: Color photos of Stephanie Whittington and her two children, Bryce and Erin, taking refuge at the Holiday Inn Select in Baton Rouge (By Kerry Maloney); Keith and Adrian Morrison; Barbara Watson (By J.D. Ventura); Color mug of Diana Binder

Document BATR000020050905e1940007f

People
Inked Tattoo artists have seen it all and drawn it everywhere

J.D. VENTURA
1,409 words
28 August 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

The night before Tanner Ross walked into the Tattoo Clinic on Government Street, he had surfed the Internet for hours. He was searching, searching for the perfect symbol.

In the wee hours of the morning, his mind was made up. The Celtic cross. He didn't know why he liked it so much. In the end it was a simple appreciation for the design's aesthetic. It was just something cool to put on his back. Forever.

So, the next day the 22-year-old from Leesville, who lives in Baton Rouge for school, marched into the shop hell-bent to have the Coke-bottle-sized piece of art put on his back, right between his shoulder blades. His brother, Mason, tagged along. Mason, it had been agreed, would get the same tattoo.

As big a deal as getting your first tattoo can be for people (neither brothers had been "inked" before), it's pretty standard stuff for the artists who make their living at the Tattoo Clinic. They've pretty much seen it all.

There are the boyfriends wanting the names of girlfriends on their arms. And girlfriends wanting their paramour's initials in more secluded places. There are the people who pick their tattoo from the selection of "flash" artwork hanging on the shop's walls. And others who scour the Internet for days, weeks, even months looking for that one image that speaks to them.

And then there are brothers who make a pact to get their first tattoos together. Which is cool, until one splits.

In fairness to Mason, the wait for an available artist was a long one, and he presumably had some place to go. It, of course, had nothing to do with the nervousness that comes over some first timers when they are close to pulling the trigger, close to just saying, "Here we go, man. Here we go." Which is exactly what Tanner ended up saying - but not immediately.

First, after his brother left, Tanner was left alone to contemplate things. He paid for the tattoo, which was, in effect, a psychological upping of his commitment level. He joked with Vivian Deal, who runs the register, that he might use his receipt to take his tattoo back. (Her expression said she had heard that a few times before.) He paced. He took his truck to the Cracker Barrel - directly across the street. This, some in the shop figured, was surely an escape attempt.

The artists at the shop believe ink doesn't take well if the person is nervous. Jeff Tate, who has been working at the Tattoo Clinic since '99, said, "If they don't trust you it shows up in the tatt."

Which is why fellow artist Scott Clanan invited Tanner outside for a smoke. He explained later that he felt he needed to calm the newbie down, to build a rapport with him, before lying him down and pulling out the buzzing needle.

On the sidewalk outside the two smoked. "It's like a deep massage," said Clanan, before mentioning that some people pass out. But that's why we have this talk first, he reassured the young man from Leesville, who took one last chug of his Gatorade and a final drag of his cigarette, before he actually said the aforementioned, "Here we go, man. Here we go."

The image that Tanner wanted had already been converted from a picture on 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper to an inky stencil that is simply laid onto the skin and traced over with permanent ink.

"I'm gonna change this a bit," declared Clanan.

"You're gonna what now?" asked Tanner, his shirt off, lying face down on the tattoo table.

Clanan explained that intricate tattoos, like the one Tanner chose, should be drawn with a couple of things in mind: namely, that skin ages and stretches, so fine details blur if that effect is not anticipated in the original

design and some patterns, like Tanner's Celtic cross, need to be altered should the owner want to color the piece or modify it in the future.

Then the moment arrived. Clanan said, "You don't move, 'cuz if you move you're gonna mess me up - and that wouldn't be good."

"I'll do my best," said Tanner.

"Ever been scratched by a girl before, or a cat?" asked Clanan. "It's gonna sting like a bee."

Fifteen minutes later Tanner declared that "it doesn't feel good, but it doesn't hurt either."

That reaction is way better than what a lot of people do, said Jeanique Borne, another artist in the group. She has had patrons hit her and accuse her of inflicting pain purposefully. The artists have seen people vomit, cry and even urinate themselves - although everyone agreed the latter reaction is rare.

Borne said women seem to endure pain better than men. Tate agreed, theorizing it may have something to do with their biological preparedness to suffer through childbearing. Tina Burkholder, who's 33, has had five kids, who are all represented by their five zodiac signs on the small of her back. It's not her first time in the shop. The day after Tanner got tatted she walked in looking for Tate. He's worked on her before. First, to cover up a tattoo (she had some names removed; don't ask, she warned), then to add a fairy. She liked that one so much, fluttering near her shoulder, she asked Tate to draw her another, intended this time for the center of her back.

As Burkholder lied down in the tattoo bench, Latonia Lee of Zachary gazed longingly at the picture of a long-stem rose in one of the tattoo catalogs on the counter. She has been thinking about getting it for three years, but still hasn't found the courage to do it. When her younger sister surprised her by revealing a panther tattoo, it motivated her to come into the shop and browse. But that's it. Clanan told her it would cost $95 to do the rose, and he could take her immediately.

She immediately said "no."

The 37-year-old, who is a "health-care specialist," admitted it's not the money, it's the pain she is most worried about. "I'm thinking. I'm thinking," she said to her adult son, Andre Armwood, who encouraged her to just do it.

"I'm gonna come back," she declared.

As Lee left the store, another person entered: none other than Mason Ross. Mason shrugged off his jitters from the day before, explaining that he was 60 percent convinced yesterday, but was completely certain today after seeing his brother's tattoo. He, too, would put the same Celtic cross vertically between his shoulder blades.

In minutes Clanan gives Mason the stenciled cut out to hold up to his back, which he does, looking in the mirror and saying, "Yeah!"

At 7:59 p.m. the 26-year-old's skin was changed forever, as the tiny ink-filled needle threaded through his skin, sending the pigment permanently into microscopic cells, known as macrophages, which die and become vessels for the ink.

Next to him, well into her latest tattoo, Burkholder winced and moaned, clenching her fists, watery eyes revealing the pain's severity.

"This is not making me want to do this," said Mason. Everyone laughed, including Burkholder.

"Tattoos are addictive," she told Mason. "You'll get this one, and then you'll want more."

It was hard to tell by his facial expression whether he agreed with her or not. Partly because he was wincing so badly. When someone asked him how he was doing, his reply seemed to sum up the moment.

"My feet are sweating," he answered, as Clanan added another line, good for a lifetime.

Photo: Color photos of Scot Clanan inking over the temporary stencled outline of Mason Ross's Celtic cross; Bryant Ford, left, glancing down to inspect Scott Clanan's latest work, the name of Ford's newly adopted children tattooed into the man's arm; Tina Burkholder cracking a rare smile during the application of her

most recent tattoo; B.W. photo of Scott Clanan giving Mason Ross the same tattoo his brother, Tanner, got the day before (By Liz Condo)

Document BATR000020050829e18s0003u

People
"Q" is reality Baton Rouge hosts gay, lesbian film festival

J.D. VENTURA
857 words
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1-C
English

"Q" stands for "queer."At least it does this Saturday at the Manship Theatre. That's when the doors open for "Q," the city's first gay and lesbian film festival.

Following in the footsteps of the wildly successful Art Melt, planners of the film festival hope that the time is right for Baton Rouge to push the cultural envelope a bit further.

They may be pleasantly surprised. In a recent online poll conducted by the Greater Baton Rouge Business Report, only 35 percent of the 1,599 who participated in the survey said they would be offended by such an event happening here.

Jeremy Johnson, one of the three gay men planning the festival, said he and his co-producers, Carlos Perez and Patrick Abadie, didn't set out to "stir things up." The three friends were looking for a reason for the gay community of the city to come together, something beyond bar and nightclub culture.

So back in April, over coffee at a shop on Siegen Lane, the idea for a film festival was born. The trio had actually gathered to talk about the possibility of a "pride fest" in the city. Or maybe some diversity workshops. But they decided a full-scale gay pride event was too ambitious, and workshops were too academic. A film festival, however, seemed to promise a fun night out and a way to educate the community on gay and lesbian issues, while bringing people together for a unique cultural event.

"We tried to develop an immediate way of forecasting the issues," said Johnson, who added that the content of the films were carefully evaluated. "We wanted to include something for everyone."

They ultimately decided on seven films: "Paragraph 175," "Stonewall," "Masha Mom," "Sexy," "The Ski Trip," "Adam and Steve" and "The Rape of Ganymede."

"Paragraph 175," a documentary that examines gay Holocaust survivors, and "Adam and Steve," an award-winning independent feature, are two of the event's major highlights. "Paragraph 175" coincides with the West Baton Rouge Museum's "Schindler" exhibit. And "Adam and Steve" stars indie film star Parker Posey.

"Even though some of the content is light and humorous, (the festival) will present a broad range of what it means to identify as queer," said Abadie.

Over the past two decades, gay and lesbian film festivals have been popping up in cities all over the United States, in unexpected places like Spokane, Wash.; Durham, N.C.; and Memphis, Tenn., to name just a few.

Chuck Lundeen chairs the board of directors for Rochester New York's gay and lesbian film festival, which is in its 13th year. Lundeen said their event had humble beginnings, too. At first the local gay and lesbian alliance had a "movie session" as part as a weekend diversity conference. The event was consistently packed, which led organizers to create the film festival there.

"We are really a very important part of the cultural landscape here now," said Lundeen. "It's become more than just a film festival."

Lundeen said 10 years ago the Rochester festival's budget was $34,000. It's now $120,000 a year. The event hosts 9,000 attendees over 10 days, and offers more than 40 different films.

In Memphis, organizers of Outflix, that city's gay and lesbian film festival held this month, are expecting to sell out every night. Will Batts, the event's director, said the event is in its eighth year, and there has been very little backlash.

"One of our goals this year was to talk about current events," said Batts. "Which is why we chose 'Fish Can't

Fly.'"

That particular film, Batts explained, is about the dehomosexualization movement, which happens to be topical in Memphis right now. A Memphis teen made national news recently when his parents checked him into a therapy program that claims to turn gays straight. The teen's Internet blogs of the conversion attempts have repeatedly captured headlines and fueled debate.

"It's on everybody's lips in this city," added Batts.

As to why they decided to host such a festival now, the Baton Rouge planners agreed it was largely determined by having a venue in town - the Shaw Center - conducive to such an event.

"It was pivotal," said Abadie. "And at one point Baton Rouge will have to move into the '90s."

Johnson said they were "thrilled" to secure 26 corporate sponsors, including Chase bank, the Human Rights Campaign and the retail chain Wish. Although he would not disclose how much each donated to the event, funding was enough to allow entrance to the film festival to be free.

"We think it will be a very positive evening, (one in which) straight people will attend and realize the scope of our community," said Johnson.

Photo: Color photos of Carlos Perez, Jeremy Johnson and Patrick Abadie, from left, sitting in the Manship Theatre (by Richard Alan Hannon); Masha, holding her baby; Craig Chester and Malcolm Gets starring in "Adam and Steve" (PP) ; B.W. graphic is Shedule of Films

Document BATR000020050815e18f00071

People
"Q" is reality Schedule of films

J.D Ventura
354 words
15 August 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

"The Rape of Ganymede," 11:45 p.m., Friday, L Bar, 174 South Blvd., festival kick-off party: Another animated short film about the ancient Greek myth of Ganymede. The filmmakers tell the story of the supposedly gay Ganymede from his point of view this time, and turn ancient Greek gods and goddesses into caricatures of modern gay and lesbian culture.

The films listed below will be shown Saturday at the Manship Theatre:

"Stonewall," noon-1:40 p.m.: A dramatic retelling of what, in gay culture, is the equivalent of the Boston Tea Party. When the Stonewall Inn was raided in New York City in 1969 neither the police nor the gay community had any idea that the gay rights movement had begun.

"Paragraph 175," 1:50 p.m.-3:15 p.m.: A documentary in which gay survivors of the Holocaust tell the stories of their persecution by the Nazis under Paragraph 175, the section of the penal code that outlawed homosexuality and resulted in the arrest and deaths of thousands of non-Jewish gays, many of whom were sent to concentration camps.

"Masha Mom," 3:25 p.m. 4 p.m.: This documentary follows a Jewish- American lesbian in Russia over seven years, chronicling her "quest for motherhood."

"The Ski Trip," 4:10 p.m. - 6 p.m.: When a bunch of gay friends decide to go on a ski trip, hilarity ensues in this feature-length comedy.

"Sexy," 6:15 p.m.-6:25 p.m.: This 10-minute-long animated short film has been cleaning up at film festivals all around the country. The premise? Five friends try to answer this question: What is sexy? Various opinions on the topic make for fun.

"Adam and Eve:," 6:25 p.m.-8 p.m.: A feature film comedy about two gay men who met in the '80s on a disastrous one-night stand, and then again, 15 years later. The second time around is more romantic, but the two must reconcile how their original encounter changed both their lives forever.

Document BATR000020050815e18f00070

People
Cinematographer creates a new twist on re-enactment of Battle of Baton Rouge

J.D. VENTURA
485 words
1 August 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

If you missed the original event 143 years ago, don't worry. Thanks to the folks at the Foundation for Historical Louisiana and the Historic Magnolia Cemetery, the 1862 Battle of Baton Rouge will happen again.

It's been scaled back a bit. This time around it will involve two soldiers - well, actors, actually - who will represent the Union and the Confederacy. That, of course, will be a much smaller affair than the original clash, which involved thousands of Confederate rebels making an ultimately unsuccessful push to recapture the city from Federal troops.

The Foundation for Historical Louisiana has enlisted local freelance cinematographer Randy Walsh this year. Walsh has decided to approach the annual re-enactment a bit differently than previous years. Instead of having a historian simply read the history to audience members, the "ghost" soldiers will offer first-person accounts of their battle experiences. And singers will offer up live music from the period.

Walsh said he remembers what it's like sitting in a boring history class. So he set out to create a program aimed at a younger generation who would likely respond to a more visual, theatrical format.

"If we can capture the interests of these kids and get them to see history played out, (we'll) be able to stimulate the community to where it becomes more alive with the history of Baton Rouge," said Walsh.

That history includes that hot August day in 1862, where, on the grounds of where the Magnolia Cemetery now stands, the rebels, led by Maj. Gen. John C. Brekinridge, began fighting Union forces. The rebels' defeat on the ground was ultimately determined by their failures on the water, as they were unable to defeat the Union gunboats in the Mississippi.

In addition to the actors monologues, there will be a demonstration by a color guard, the firing of cannons, wreath laying and the playing of taps.

After the program, participants will have the opportunity to have their photos taken with the actors. Cost for the 5-by-7-inch digital print is $5 (e-mailed) or an additional $2.50 (printed and mailed). The photo is free to foundation members.

The free event will be from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. Saturday at the Historic Magnolia Cemetery. The cemetery is located on the corner of 19th Street and Florida Boulevard. Free parking will also be available.

"We encourage families, particularly children, to attend this special program," said Carolyn Bennett, the executive director of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana. "There will be a tent, chairs and bottled water available in the staging area, located under the magnolia trees in the cemetery."

Photo: Color photo of actor Jonathan Butts portraying a Confederate Soldier at the annual re-enactment of "The 1862 Battle of Baton Rouge" (PP)

Document BATR000020050801e181000cv

People
Room to ride Skate parks give boarders place to call their own

J.D. VENTURA
1,497 words
24 July 2005
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1-H
English

There is a hole in the ground in Hammond.

It's full of concrete.

Which is speckled with sweat.

And blood.

Today those bodily fluids are baking in the sun, its radiation rising off the white surface in wavy wisps, miragelike and distorted.

There are a few guys down in "the bowl," shirts off, knees bent, riding their boards around the smooth curving walls, the centrifugal force pushing them along like waves at the backs of surfers.

There are other guys on the sidelines. Just watching. A couple of them don't have their own skateboards yet.

Or had them, but busted them up.

Someone mentions the public pool, a few hundred yards away, which looks cool as a slushie. It's two bucks to get wet, a short teenager says, sweat pouring off his freckled face. A few minutes skateboarding in this heat and you're just as drenched. It's in the high 90s, but it feels like the inside of a parked car.

There are two people in the pool but about 30 skaters at the park. That's pretty typical, someone says. The head of the recreation department says that since this city-run attraction opened in April, the place's popularity has exceeded everyone's expectations.

They skate in the rain, in the dark, in the heat. And many of the kids who come here skate all the time.

Like Robby Mikey.

At 19, Mikey is a fugitive. No banks were robbed, nobody was shot. But like many of the guys doing "ollies" and "nose grabs" at the park, he has, in a sense, run from the law. Street skating is not a popular sport with the cops, who run them out of private parking lots and college campuses for trespassing.

Lt. Sal Mike at Hammond's police department didn't deny that skaters can be thrown out of the park for smoking, or even cursing. "It's disturbing the peace," he said later in a phone interview, when pressed about the swearing.

Skaters like Mikey growl about that. This is their place, to be free, to express themselves. Let's see what words you choose when your tailbone makes contact with concrete at 25 miles an hour, they challenge. They regard this park, and another indoor facility called the Chicken Coop, as refuges.

It's church to them.

Mikey is here every day. He doesn't have a board, but he sits under the big tree shading the aluminum bleachers and waits for his friend to lend him his.

"I walk miles to get here," says Mikey, his white tank top clinging to his lean frame.

Today the talk on the bleachers is about how "they" are going to expand the park. Someone says there's going to be a fence put up. Another teen says he heard "they" are going to start charging for admission. You won't be able to skate at night, a third boy adds, before another skater reminds him "they" don't really allow

that now anyway.

Whatever the city's planning in the way of expansion, there is consensus that the park in its present form is already pretty sweet. Every nook and cranny of the place has a name. There's the whale tail, and the pyramid, and the taco. And, of course, the bowl.

And Trey Waites is the local bowl master. At least to some kids here today, who point him out as one of the best skaters. Like Mikey, he's a fixture.

The 16-year-old from Hammond flies off the course, onto the grass, like Pinocchio just spit from the whale. The 100-pound teen chugs from a gallon jug of water before pulling off his shirt and using it as a sweat rag. He bums a Camel from a friend, and talks in between drags. A police cruiser idles at the corner.

Waites' list of injuries are infamous: broken wrist, dislocated shoulder, cracked elbow, chipped tailbone and a screwed-up leg. Clarification of the leg injury invites a simple, and sickening, explanation:

"Another dude's board hit my leg so hard, my skin ripped open and the muscle fell out," Waites says, as other skaters who have heard this story before nod admiringly.

Kerry Simpson, the guy who runs the local skate shop and the Chicken Coop, and who lobbied local officials to build the outdoor park, knows Waites, and almost all the other skaters who make the bowl a second home. They often walk into his shop like they own the place, shirts off, baggy pants hanging low on their hips, boxer shorts visible as a matter of style.

Simpson, who's 28, is the older brother-type, the cool dude who speaks their language, who knows what it's like to have nowhere to skate. As a kid growing up on a dairy farm outside of Kentwood, he would make due with the 10-by-10 slab concrete carport. He once longed for freedom, too.

So he "didn't feel right" opening up a skateboard shop without giving his customers a place to use the equipment they would buy from him. He and a partner opened the Chicken Coop. But while indoor parks have ramps and stairs that allow skaters to perform street tricks, most don't offer the 10-foot-deep swimming pool-like walls the new city park offers. People travel long ways for that kind of fun.

He never worried about the public park taking business away from his private operation. "We don't make money (on the park)," said Simpson from behind the register at his store. "It's all about the kids having a place to skate."

The philosophy is the same in Baton Rouge. Ben Moran, 22, and Jimmy Puissegur, 30, know they're not going to get rich running Revolutions, a new indoor skate park they built and opened last month. But the two men, both seasoned skaters themselves, wanted to give the city's boarders a "safe alternative" to street skating.

"People tend to be judgmental when it comes to skateboarding," said Puissegur from a back room at the skate park, which occupies a warehouselike building off of Siegen Lane. "(The sport) has a certain look to it."

Today that look is about 20 helmeted kids on skateboards ricocheting back and forth across the concrete floor, down one ramp and up another, like balls between pinball bumpers.

Devin Lindsey has only been skating for a month. The 16-year-old from Denham Springs got his friend Jonathan Nohra, 15, into the sport. The two like the park because it's a classroom within which they can learn new tricks. They watch more experienced skaters and then attempt new moves, over and over again, until they get them right. It's not a painless process.

"You end up not wanting to do that thing you did when you got hurt," says Nohra. "I've gotten a bunch of injuries already."

Back in Hammond the hum of heated polyurethane wheels gliding over baking concrete is punctuated with the squeak of sneakers, as sudden stops send skaters sailing from their boards. Some of the older guys offer praise to the younger riders. Almost everyone showcases their moves, and bravely shakes off their wipe outs.

Andre Mingo runs over to his 6-year-old nephew, Traylon, who is gripping his board and making a beeline to the bowl. The older man explains to the boy he is too small and inexperienced to skate in the park, and points to a flat bit of parking lot nearby.

But an hour later, Traylon is riding the flat course around the bowl's rim, stopping only to watch the other

boys do their tricks.

"These local kids, the ones that live near this park, just give them a couple of years," says Jonathan Kahrs, 15. "They got it all right in front of them."

Revolutions skate park

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: 11617 Industriplex Blvd., Baton Rouge

INFORMATION: Call (225) 752-4871 for information and pricing.

City of Hammond skate park

WHEN: Daily. No evening skating or skating in bad weather.

WHERE: Zemurray Park, just south of the Southeastern Louisiana University campus.

INFORMATION: Call (985) 542-3700.

ADMISSION: Free.

Photo: Color photos of Storm Bertone catching some air while jumping over three skateboards at the skate park in Hammond as other skaters look on; A customized skateboard; Matt Clark skating in Hammond; B.W. photos of skater Mark Clark clearing a barrel at the Hammond skate park as Jacques Derbes looks on; Kerry Simpson standing outside of his store "Small Time Skates" (By Mark Saltz); B.W. graphics are Ten common skating terms explained box; Revolutions skate park info box; City of Hammond skate park box

Document BATR000020050725e17o0005o

People
Learning leadership Academy helps African-American boys succeed academically, socially

J.D. VENTURA
1,333 words
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1-H
English

Life is unpredictable. Lee Henry knows this.

Six months after the 59-year-old Baton Rouge man got married to his wife, Joyce, he was nearly electrocuted. A metal rod he was holding to measure the depth of grain in a train boxcar hit a power line.

Unpredictable. An accident.

Decades later, raising two grandchildren was also not something the Henrys would have predicted. But raising them the right way is no accident.

Both their grandsons, Shanderrick and Josh Williams, 14 and 12, are enrolled in the Young Leaders Academy. The nonprofit group, which aims to help Baton Rouge's African-American boys succeed academically and socially, has been around since 1993.

In 2000 and 2001 the organization received a flurry of media attention when it was featured twice on Oprah Winfrey's show.

The program's reputation vaulted, but its new executive director, Tonya Robertson, is quick to point out that the program continues to succeed because of people like the Henrys. Parents, and in some cases grandparents, who involve themselves in the lives of their children. The academy is work, for the boys, yes, but for their families, too.

"We are not just recruiting kids," said Robertson. "We are recruiting parents. Boys don't drive."

Every year school principals around Baton Rouge recommend third graders for the program. Many people think the academy is for troubled boys, a means of saving at-risk kids who are heading down the wrong path. But that is only partly true.

It's really a program for kids who are already showing promise. They have to have good grades. They have to be willing to commit to hours of community service. They have to have parents who are willing to help the organization raise funds, to bring their kids to and from after-school and summer sessions and, perhaps most importantly, to ensure that what the boys learn in the academy is applied at home.

"Parents need to make sure they are using what they are being taught," said Ken MacFarland, an academy instructor. "And not just yell at them."

Every year it's MacFarland's job to make 15 new incoming recruits understand the program's 12 core values, which are academic excellence, accountability, community, competition, etiquette, exposure, family, hard work, individualism, oratory skills, service and teamwork.

Overwhelmed at first by the structure and sudden 1/2 Please see LEADERSHIP, page 3Hresponsibility, some new boys cry.

Go ahead and cry. That's OK, insists MacFarland. He is tough, but he is not a yeller. He has worked with kids for years, first at the Girls & Boys Club and now with the academy. He is a respected disciplinarian who believes in showing kids the consequences of their actions. And in many cases, he is the only male role model in his students' lives.

And it's tough love sometimes.

For example, when one of his charges recently broke a rule - and there are many - he was forbidden from going on a field trip. But there was more to the punishment. MacFarland told the boy's mother, in front of the child, to spend the $20 she would have spent to send him on the outing on herself instead.

Another boy, on another field trip to the cinema, sat with MacFarland in the lobby of the theater while his academy brothers watched the entire film.

"Having a dad is not the same as having a dad in your life," said MacFarland. "You have to touch their lives more than just infrequently."

The Williams brothers have the same mom, but different dads. Shanderrick's father is the Henrys' son. Both boys have nothing but praise for MacFarland, who they spoke about recently from the living room of their grandparents' North Baton Rouge home.

The Henry's are now legal guardians of the brothers. That means many things. Like 56-year-old Joyce, who still works full time, making dinner every night for two very hungry boys fresh from a day of the academy's summer program, which entails lots of time spent in a classroom, but also plenty of appetite-enhancing outdoor activities, including military-style drills and exercises.

"I see my dad every day and I know him," said Shanderrick, as the smell of his grandmother's chicken filled the house. "But we don't talk."

It's not that he and his dad don't get along, or that they don't have discussions. But the discipline, advice and self-esteem MacFarland and other academy instructors offer their students isn't always something their biological dads can give them.

"He tells me right and wrong," said Josh, of MacFarland. "I know my daddy, but I don't know him so good."

Not all of the boys come from nontraditional or single-parent families. Raphael Richard's biological parents raised him. His mom worked as a secretary and his dad as a plant worker.

Still, Richard, who was in the first Young Leaders Academy class in 1983, found a second home in the program, and credits it for his success. He is now starting his sophomore year at Dillard University.

Even now Richard easily quotes the academy's motto: "If in my mind I can conceive it, and in my heart I can believe it, then certainly I can achieve it."

"But it's not just reciting the motto," said Richard, who credits his 10 years in the Academy with not only his academic success, but with his positive attitude about his battle with Crohn's disease. "To actually implement that into your life and integrate that into your character is what matters."

The secret to that, MacFarland and Robertson both agreed, is getting to the boys at such a young age, which is why entrance to the program occurs at the third-grade level. And both see the very real development of their students as a solid, quantifiable return on the investments pledged to them by the city's philanthropic community.

"I don't want (donors) to say, 'Oh, they are so cute in their blue blazers, if they are rotten to the core inside," said Robertson.

"People say to us 'You're gonna have crowns waitin' for you in heaven,'" said Joyce, who added that without the support of her church and the Young Leaders Academy, raising the boys and keeping them from being separated by the state would have been far more difficult. "...But we have no regrets, and when they are 18 and gone, we'll take in two more kids, because I remember how people gave to us when Lee was hurt."

Giving back is something the program also teaches. Richard's advice to the generations of his younger academy brothers: be prepared to give back.

MacFarland, for one, knows the kids learn how to do that. When his own 21-year-old son died suddenly of a heart problem, his academy students rallied around him, writing him letters and making him personalized condolence cards. He never doubted returning to his work at the academy, even though mentoring the boys was a painful reminder of his relationship with his own son.

"I'm not ashamed to say you all broke me down," he told the boys when he returned from grieving.

It was yet another lesson the academy could teach them: real men cry, too.

Photo: Color photos of Shanderrick Williams, far left, participating in a tug-of-war with his Young Leaders Academy "brothers" (By Richard Alan Hannon); Raphael Richard (By Patrick Dennis); Brothers Josh and

Shanderrick Williams, front row from left, and their grandparents Joyce and Lee Henry, back row from left, sitting on their front porch; B.W. photo of Josh Williams, front row, left, clapping and singing in the choir at his church along with Kendrick Jackson, front row right, Joshua Johnson and Jalcoby Jackson, back row from left (By Liz Condo)

Document BATR000020050718e17h0005m

People
Eyes on the roads; Advanced Traffic Management Center works to keep BR drivers moving

J.D. VENTURA
1,171 words
10 July 2005
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1-H
English

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Baton Rouge traffic is about as much fun as an IRS audit. Christmas shopping season on Bluebonnet. Nicholson on game day. College Drive anytime. But there is a method to the madness. No, really. There is.

It's called the Advanced Traffic Management Center. It opened with minimal fanfare in 2001 near the airport, and since then, the multimillion-dollar facility, which also houses, among other things, 911 operators, is slowly becoming the nerve center for the city's traffic network.

Network? Well, sort of.

Developing a computerized network that can accurately monitor roadway problems and quickly alter traffic patterns has, for the past several years, been the mission of three city workers who run the center.

Ingolf Partenheimer is the head guy. His official title is acting chief traffic engineer. That means he gets paid $72,464 a year to ensure that traffic runs as smoothly as possible in the city. He's well paid, but he's not a miracle worker, and he understands that drivers are still frustrated.

"Being on a synchronized system does not guarantee you a short wait on side streets," said Partenheimer. "But once you get on the main streets you should make up for lost time."

That synchronized system is an effort by Partenheimer and the two men who work for him to link critical intersections throughout the city to their control center. In the past, the hardware that controls street lights, encased in what those in the business call "cabinets," was self-contained. Most of those boxes at intersections have moving parts in them, and can only be changed by actually driving out to the intersection, unlocking the cabinet and manipulating its mechanisms.

Partenheimer and crew are modernizing the system by upgrading many of those cabinets with digital equipment, special traffic cameras and modems that can send data back to the center and, perhaps most importantly, be reconfigured remotely.

The first three phases of the intersection overhaul plan have been completed. Out of the 460 traffic signals the city maintains, 180 are now "talking back" to the Advanced Traffic Management Center. An example of this happened one morning recently. Bruce Valentine, who works for Partenheimer and designed much of the monitoring system, was keeping tabs on rush-hour traffic on a video screen at the center. Suddenly a warning flashed on his screen, followed by the names of cross streets intersecting Florida Boulevard.

"An ambulance just ran up Florida," he said. "He's near the Home Depot now."

Ambulances and fire engines, Valentine explained, have a kind of strobe light on them that causes intersections they approach to turn green. (Police, however, do not have this capability.) Intersections that are part of the upgraded system can tell operators like Valentine when such a disruption occurs. And if he wanted to, Valentine could remotely reconfigure those intersections as an emergency situation evolved.

Such two-way communication becomes even more effective when you consider that Valentine, and his counterpart, Jason Taylor, monitor traffic alongside EMS and police dispatchers.

Taylor more than understands the benefits of advance signal automation. While Valentine deals with the center's computer hardware, it's Taylor's job to study the traffic flow at intersections and figure out the best pattern for each. Reconfiguring any of the 180 upgraded intersections can be done in a few keystrokes from either the center's control consoles or even from Taylor's or Valentine's personal computers at home. Yes, wearing their pajamas, either man could make traffic come to a standstill at any number of intersections throughout the city.

And these days, that they'll be at home is increasingly likely. Partenheimer complained last year to the media that staffing was an issue for the center. It still is, he said. For 12 hours every night, the center is unmanned, with Valentine and Taylor on-call at home. The system pages them automatically when trouble occurs.

In 2004, Partenheimer told a reporter that to staff the center around the clock, he would need to employ 10 operators. As far as operational costs go, that's an expensive proposition. Between their two salaries, Taylor and Valentine make more than $96,000 a year.

When asked to provide a number with regard to how much it costs overall to run the Advance Traffic Management Center, Partenheimer said, "I can't give it to you...there is no line item because we are operating out of traffic engineering's budget."

Partenheimer did provide the total operating budget for the Traffic Engineering division, however: $3.7 million.

It will cost $8 million to bring 77 more intersections online with the system, said Partenheimer. That initiative, known as fourth and fifth phases of the intersection conversion plan, will open for contractor bids in the fall.

It needs to be done, according to Sherif Ishak, a civil engineering professor who specializes in traffic issues. Ishak explained that because many major urban population centers in the United States cannot afford to upgrade their transportation infrastructure (building new roads, bridges and such), the next best thing is to "maximize utilization."

"We have to have a smart system that can simply adapt itself to the changing demand," said Ishak. "...We have to monitor (traffic) in real time."

At the 180 intersections that are currently connected to the center, real-time monitoring is possible using special high-tech cameras. Contrary to what many drivers think, these long, white cylindrical devices are not video cameras. They do broadcast or record video images.

Instead, they are used in conjunction with special software to count how many cars are waiting at the light, what types of vehicles are passing through the intersection at any given moment and how fast traffic is moving.

The center receives live video from only College Drive and Corporate Drive. Partenheimer said live video isn't as important as the data the special traffic cameras send back. And in order to run a live video feed back to the center, an intersection has to be upgraded with costly fiber optics. Whereas, the data cameras can function using easy-to-install and inexpensive phone lines and modems.

Converted intersections allow the operators to run any number of preconfigured traffic pattern programs. For example, intersections near the malls can be switched into different timing routines instantly when the Christmas season hits. And lights near sports stadiums or expo halls can be quickly altered for special events.

The more traditional traffic signals can only run three programs, and have to be changed manually.

"The system is doing a phenomenal job of reporting problems, and it lets us do our timing pattern changes very rapidly," said Partenheimer. "We only find out about the older signals malfunctioning when somebody calls."

Caption: Color photos of Ingolf Partenheimer; A special traffic camera; B.W. photo of Ingolf Partenheimer, center, Jason Taylor, left, and Bruce Valentine (By Bill Feig)

Document BATR000020050712e17a0002p

People
Maus family finds way to reach other Tourette's sufferers

J.D. VENTURA
850 words
4 July 2005
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1-C
English

John Maus would just as soon forget sixth grade. It wasn't a good year. In fact, it was "the darkest moment" in his life.

Schoolchildren can be cruel, period. But the uncontrollable facial and body tics symptomatic of Tourette's syndrome can make a child a particularly obvious target for such cruelty. In John's case, their ceaseless taunting sent the boy into deep depression.

"I would just get real upset," said John, now 15 and entering his sophomore year in high school. "And that would just make me tic even more."

TS is a neurological disorder which usually becomes noticeable in early childhood or adolescence. A diagnosis of TS usually occurs after multiple motor and vocal tics last more than a year. A more extreme, yet very rare, manifestation of the condition, known as coprolalia, makes the affected person use obscene or socially inappropriate language.

John, like most who live with TS, doesn't suffer from coprolalia. But in school he would jerk his head and blink constantly. And then there was an abdominal tic. "I just couldn't even function with that one," said the teen.

Functioning emotionally wasn't easy, either. Classmates called him "queer." He was bullied and threatened. He told his parents he didn't want to go to church anymore. There must not be a God if people are made to suffer with TS, he reasoned.

So, a week after his 12th birthday, with his depression consuming him, his parents checked him into a five-week in-patient counseling program. He came out stronger, but living with TS is still a daily struggle.

He's not alone. The Mayo Clinic estimates that at least 100,000 other people in the United States have the condition. Two of those people are his 10-year-old brother, Chris, and their father, John Sr.

Chris has had an easier go of it than John, both agree. His symptoms have been milder and, so far, he's encountered accepting classmates. When he heard some giggling over his constant blinking, he decided to take action. Last October, he sat down in the teacher's chair and told his fourth-grade class he had TS.

"One of the kids said I was really brave for going up there," said Chris, wearing a Walt Disney World T-shirt while sitting on the carpeted living room floor of the family's Greenwell Springs home. "Another one asked me if I had a shorter lifespan."

Most TS suffers can expect to lead fairly normal lives, and with various medications, can minimize many of their symptoms. And often, but not always, symptoms diminish as they enter adulthood.

"The unpredictability of it is particularly frustrating," said Chris and John's mother, Becky Maus. "How it comes and goes makes people suspicious."

Becky, a junior high band director, had to explain to a few teachers that the random nature of her sons' tics should not be confused as misbehavior. The 47-year-old mother won't, however, have to explain TS to anyone at an upcoming pool party she is coordinating for families in the greater Baton Rouge area living with the condition.

Becky is an active member in the Mid-South Regional chapter of the Tourette's Syndrome Association. The group is holding a summer outing Saturday to unite TS families in the area, and introduce their children to other potential friends who endure TS, too.

Dana Dugas of French Settlement plans on attending. Her 12-year- old son, Ryan, has TS, and she is

hoping the event will result in some new friends for him.

"I tell him one friend's enough and that's all you really need," said Dugas. "But sometimes he doesn't even have the one."

Dugas first noticed Ryan's TS when the boy was 7. He would jerk his head to the left and complained that he "has a bug in his ear." When the ear specialist found nothing wrong, he introduced TS as a possibility.

"He has a hard time with the kids at school because they pick on him," added Dugas. "They call him retarded."

Ryan is excited to meet other kids with TS. So are Chris and John.

"Even though you know there are other people who have it, it's a big relief when you meet them," he said. "Instead of feeling alone, they make me feel connected with the world again."

"Yeah, me, too" said his little brother.

Tourette's AssociationSwim Party

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

WHERE: Berean Ministries pool, 6565 Morgan Road, Greenwell Springs.

ADMISSION: Free to anyone interested in finding out more about Tourette's syndrome.

INFORMATION: Call Becky Maus at (225) 261-1944 for more information.

Photo: Color Photo of Chris Maus and John Maus, from left, watch their mother Becky Maus, at the karate class they all attend; B.W. Photo of John Maus during karate practice blinks uncontrollably, a sympton of his Tourette's syndrome. (By Kerry Maloney)

Document BATR000020050705e1740001b

Fun
Eames Era launches tour with dreams of success

J.D. VENTURA
1,059 words
1 July 2005
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13--FUN
English

It was lunchtime at downtown's new sushi joint, Tsunami, and Ted Joyner, one of the guitarists in The Eames Era, was acting like he just swallowed a ball of wasabi.

He was nervous, he explained, fidgeting slightly in his seat, sipping his beer while staring suspiciously over the glass's rim. He couldn't understand why anyone would want to interview him about the band's upcoming tour. He chose his words so carefully his thought process collapsed under the trepidation.

"It's still just screwing around," he blurted out, before trailing off again.

Is it like backpacking across Europe after college?

His face lit up with resonance. Yes, he agrees, that's exactly what it's like.

But buying a Eurail pass and a sleeping bag can hardly be compared with piling into a van with four of your friends and playing clubs in Chapel Hill, Baltimore, D.C., New York City, Providence, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago and St. Louis. For one thing, the post-college hiking holiday is rarely something that will ultimately define a career. There usually aren't any lofty expectations associated with getting plastered in Rome. But a label- supported record tour that promotes an act's first full length album doesn't happen without even the smallest hope of fame.

Fame has already touched the band. Albeit with a pinky finger. One of their songs, "Could Be Anything" was featured on ABC's Grey's Anatomy. Grant Widmer, the other guy on guitar, dismissively refers to that as "the TV thing," but admits the money came in handy (they bought a van to tour in). And he's squarely in Joyner's camp when it comes to how serious he's taking the rock star idea.

"Rock bands just seem like something high school kids do," said Widmer, who graduated from LSU a year ago. (The other members, including Joyner, graduated this year). "If you look at it on paper, it's a real absurd idea."

The band's reputation locally is hardly absurd. Widmer is a recognizable fixture as a bartender at Red Star, a hipster hangout below C Student Records, the label that represents them. But the Eames Era is also well known at the downtown venue, where they have played shows since 2003.

"This interview would be going better if the members of The Eames Era weren't such drunks," quipped Gabe Daigle, the lead singer of another C Student band, The Myrtles. Daigle walked to the end of Red Star's bar to take a drink order from Greg Gauthreaux, Eames Era's drummer.

"These guys have a real good chance," he said, after thinking long and hard about what to say. "It's the right sound at the right time."

And Daigle appreciates the band's level-headedness. The 32 year- old musician was signed to a big record label with his previous band, Becky Sharp, only to be dropped after a year. His days of "touring all over the country to sell 30 CDs" are over. Without major record label support, making it big by touring like The Eames Era is about to do is "nearly impossible."

"I'll hope for the best," said Ashlin Phillips, who explained that would mean producing a nationally recognized album. "We take it just about as seriously as anybody else."

That's evidenced by the daily practice sessions the band's been having above the bar every night of the week lately. Gauthreaux's drums and the thump from Brian Waits' bass can be heard over after- work cocktail conversation at Red Star.

At C Student's loft offices upstairs, Phillips' usual super- hyper stage presence is replaced by a no-nonsense

rigidity, revealing the concentration she gives the music at practice. She stared into space, as if reading a mental teleprompter, filling the room with her sweet, syrupy voice that sounds more sophisticated than the pop-infused backup. It's that contrast that may be their calling card. Her rich vocals add an ironic depth to upbeat tempos and light-hearted lyrics meant to just abstractly skim the surface.

Frank McMains, the 30 year-old president of C Student, hopes all the hard work will pay off for The Eames Era. "The best case scenario is this tour will prime the pump for their release in September," he said. "Nobody is going to get rich, but the band will maintain a full tank of gas."

Running out of gas wasn't the problem on a recent show date in Houston. The new van had a blowout. Two hours at Wal-Mart's automotive center added an unexpected touch of glamour to the weekend. The band recounted the story on the sidewalk outside of Breezy's, a Lake Charles bar they gigged at recently.

"No toilet paper, no paper towels, no toilet seats," Waits said after checking out the inside of the bar before unloading the van.

"Use the girl's bathroom," Phillips replied flatly.

Thirty minutes later, Widmer sat talking to a woman at the bar. Waits and Gauthreaux drank beers at a table near their merchandise booth (a pool table covered with the band's tee shirts and pins). Joyner people-watched from a bar stool, while Phillips, a Lake Charles native, reconnected with some old friends, many of whom are also musicians.

Just after 11 p.m. Phillips' par-ents stood in front of the stage as The Eames Era greeted the crowd.

As the band launched into their first song, their daughter was all hips and knees, dancing to the music, her whipping hair occasionally obscuring the playful looks she'd shoot at her bandmates.

Her smile was so bright, and her stage presence so electrified, the energy of the performance seemed boundless. Whether her million- watt shine will keep Widmer from becoming a journalist, and the other guys in the band from becoming architects, and herself from going off to grad school, will be partly determined by fate and by how badly they all want to stay on that stage.

But until that decision is made, Joyner and his college buddies are perfectly happy just backpacking across their own kind of Europe.

Photo: B.W. photo of The Eames Era group (by Brian Harkin)

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People
Untangling the tango Group draws many who love the dramatic dance [Corrected 07/13/05]

J.D. VENTURA
1,417 words
29 June 2005
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1-C
English

CORRECTION: 07/12/2005, The Advocate Ran Page 2-A CLARIFICATION In an article about tango dancing that appeared in the People section June 29, it was implied that Rick-N-Robin's Nightclub is a quiet bar for business travelers and guests of the adjacent hotel. The establishment's owner, however, said the bar has a diverse crowd and is busy most evenings with classes, a social dance and live bands Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

From the road, the Calloway Inn off of Sherwood Forest Boulevard doesn't look all that exotic. It's one of those hotels that looks like a million other roadside refuges, alongside the endless miles of interstate crisscrossing the country.

To pop into the establishment's lounge for a drink on most nights is probably a fairly predictable experience. A few businessmen at the bar. The quiet clink of bottles and glasses. The flicker of a sports game on a television.

Unless a patron happens into Rick N Robin's when the gang from Tango Rouge is there.

The dance group received press a couple of weeks ago for staging a tango dance demonstration at the Shaw Center, complete with guest dancers from Argentina, who drew in excess of 200 people. They hosted the event to recruit members into their club, which meets on Wednesdays at the Calloway.

With a little imagination first-timers who show up at the hotel might find it's not what they expected. On the Wednesday before the downtown event, the lounge could have been a nightclub in Buenos Aires.

The place was awash with red light, the scarlet glow making the eyes adjust and the mind associate the color with primitive impulses. The disco ball winked seductively, like some kind of mirrored mistletoe: stand beneath it and prepare to be kissed by the dance.

And in the middle of the week, that dance is the tango.

The Argentines were there, giving everyone a sneak peek at what the general public would see at the Shaw Center that weekend. The regular members cleared the floor, giving it over to their guests.

She was in a sheer grey skirt that clung to her curves like a sports car clings to winding mountain roads, the material whooshing toward a hemline, the cliff, which abruptly ended well before the knees. As she and her partner took the dance floor, the bandoneon, the accordion's cousin, began its baleful whine, a mix of wincing and wanting.

Their hands locked. But they refused to stare into each other's eyes. It was too soon to gaze through those soulful windows. First, the tango would reacquaint the lovers. Boundaries would be negotiated. And then slowly compromised.

She would invite him with her swaying torso and then block his advances with a quickly turned hip, much like a matador thwarts the charging bull with the jerk of his cape.

And he would lead her, command her to follow him, feign the giving of her freedom, only to pull her back to him, possessed over his possession.

Soon the other dancers join their guests.

The dance floor is suddenly filled with couples sharing the music, all dancing the tango, but claiming the dance for themselves, interpreting it, adding their unique signatures to it.

Which, said Jim Faust, one of Tango Rouge's founding members, is precisely why so many people fall in

love with the dance. "It's all improvisational," said Faust, who was surprised at how many people turned up for the demonstration at the Shaw Center. "With tango you are going to always see something that is changing and very different depending on who is on the floor."

Before the group formed in 2003, Faust and several tango-loving friends were driving down to New Orleans to take lessons. But when they advertised that they would host a tango class in Baton Rouge at the defunct Richoux's restaurant (now Parrot Beach), more than 20 people showed up for the first meeting. They knew they were on to something.

Today the club has grown to more than 60 people, not counting the 25 new members that showed up at Rick N Robin's after the demonstration night. And it's not just retirees. The dance's appeal has enticed folks of all ages.

Mario Lozanov and Sarah Brown have only been dating for five months, and they are both just learning the tango. For this reason they somehow stood out among the other couples, some of whom danced with far more fluidly.

The young couple's uncertainty with the dance perhaps mirrored their unfamiliarity with each other. It is easy to imagine the electric feeling of strange fingers clasped tightly together. There are maybe few secrets, yet, or shared experiences, but the music united them, intimately. The dance seemed a discussion. The tango a language, subtle, seductive, theirs.

Lozanov has always loved the music, even if his attempts at the dance have more or less just begun. As a boy growing up in Bulgaria, he would visit his uncle's house in the small country town of Belogradtchik. By age 10 he had grown to despise Serbian music. So when he found his relative's collection of tango albums, he became quickly intrigued. He would sneak into the bedroom where they were kept and play them on an old record player, the exotic, soulful, swaggering sound making a lasting impression on his young mind.

"You cannot forget this music," he said. "Is it bittersweet? Yes, it's like dark chocolate."

Brown grew up dancing to Zydeco music with her "ja ja." Her grandfather would occasionally take her to weddings in the small suburb of Lake Charles, Hackberry. There she would dance the night away with her grandparents. Dancing remained an important part of her life, a natural extension to her strong love of music.

So when Lozanov suggested trying some dance lessons through Tango Rouge she was more than willing. And there was another good reason to give it a whirl: Lozanov's nightclub dancing. "He has his bounce, let's just say," said Brown.

Brown and everyone else fell silent when the professional dancers took the floor for a second time.

She pressed her nose into his cheekbone, a plea for attention against his affected indifference. The crowd began to clap as their pace quickened.

Soon his hand was on her back, cradling her shoulder blade. Then his leg would slip quickly between hers. In reaction, she would kick at him, defiantly. But the outstretched leg would not find its mark. Instead it would wrap around his hip, allowing him to eliminate the space between them, quickly, decisively.

"It is a very sensual way of dancing," said Kai Midboe. "It's a game of cat and mouse with the man chasing the woman across the dance floor...it's a dance that is as unpredictable as relationships themselves."

Midboe loves the 1988 movie "Tango Bar," which stars Raul Julia. In one of the film's opening scenes, a musician describes the importance of the bandoneon to tango. He says:

"With the bandoneon the tango lost its innocence. It became dramatic, almost tragic. And it sang the tango man's misfortunes. His bitterness, his loyalty and, at times, his joy."

That unmistakable sound filled Rick N Robin's again and again that night. As the tango dancers inside forgot about the office and the kids, the bills and any other assorted bad news and let the tango melt them - like bittersweet chocolate.

For more information, e-mail TangoRouge at brtango@cox.net.

Photo: Color photos of Argentine professional dancers Mario Consiglieri and Anabella Diaz-Hojman dancing alongside the Tango Rouge dancers during the club's weekly dance; Sarah Brown dancing with Mario Lozanov at the Tango Rouge dance night at the Calloway Inn, both are new to tango; B.W. photos of regular

attendees of the Tango Rouge dance night swinging around the dance floor at Rick N Robin's lounge inside the Calloway Inn; Sue Braux and Rocco Guarisco listing to a history of the Argentine tango by Tango Rouge organizer Jim Faust during a recent sign-up event that enlisted 25 new members to the Baton Rouge organization; Tango Rouge member Nancy McGraw dancing with her husband, Roy, at the demonstration dance held at the Shaw Center (by Kerry Maloney)

Document BATR000020050629e16t0002j

People
All music and folksy humor

J.D. VENTURA
953 words
22 June 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

"Cute."

That's how one theater-goer described Swine Palace's production of "Pump Boys and Dinettes."

The word means "attractive or pretty especially in a dainty or delicate way."

And that's what this show is. It takes some pretty Americana stereotypes, pairs them up with an attractive set and a dainty musical review to create something delicate, but lacking depth.

And that's OK. It's still fun.

Maybe it's bad form to gush about the set design before ever even mentioning the performances. But what the heck.

F. Nels Anderson's design of a roadside gas station and adjacent diner was exceedingly charming, complete with old Esso gas pumps (the kind where the numbers move on wheels like slot machines), an old jukebox, Formica countertops and cafe tables for some members of the audience.

It was the perfect stage to tell the story of the four mechanics and two waitresses that haunt the place.

Only that's the problem, there really isn't a story.

Now, people who know theater will say, "Well, it's a musical review." And they're right. It's 21 songs that come one after another with very little expository dialogue in between. In other words, there is only a minimal amount of character development and almost no plot.

To assume this is a musical would be a mistake.

In a letter included in the playbill, the directors seemed to almost apologize for the selection of a review, rather than a full- blown Broadway-style musical. Musicals, it turns out, cost way too much to produce in a professional theater the size of the Reilly.

So unlike something like "Grease," where everyone gets all wrapped up in the love affair between Sandy and Danny, which makes much of the score so enthralling, the music in "Pump Boys" is forced to stand on its own.

Although last year's hugely successful "Always...Patsy Cline" was a review as well, there was a simple, yet well-crafted relationship between the Cline character and an adoring fan. In addition, most people are familiar with Cline's real-life story. So, the need to frame the music within the blueprint of a plot isn't as necessary.

"Pump Boys," however, is all music and folksy humor. Its little vignettes are reminiscent of Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon skits. And the material is perhaps more compelling to the over-50 crowd and to those who grew up in the rural South.

All of the lead performers have impressive professional theater credentials. As musicians and singers they were all very good. A review of their acting abilities, though, is harder to give, since there just wasn't a lot of acting.

The casts' interaction with the audience and a brief amount of improv during the song "Tips" was very funny and left this reviewer wanting more of that.

Some of the songs were naughty and full of innuendos. In "Serve Yourself," Michael Hicks, who plays L.M., sings about looking under a love interest's hood and about her needing a new hose. "You want to know what I recommend for that shimmy in your rear end," made old women in the audience giggle like embarrassed schoolgirls.

As one of the two female leads, Sherry Stregack gave a solid performance as Prudie, but was vocally outgunned by Deb Lyons, who played her sister, Rhetta. Her kiss-off song to David Lutken's character, Jim, "Be Good or Be Gone" was fabulous, as her soulful, growling voice slapped him about the head and face.

The only part of the set that didn't work was the big projected circle above the stage, on which, during certain numbers, various slides were shown to complement the theatrics. Some of the slides weren't very effective. For example, during a sad song, "Mamaw," candids of various grandmothers were displayed. It was a hokey tug at heart strings. Just plain cheesy.

Using LSU acting students as the chorus was effective, although their skill levels were at times noticeably different from those of the professional actors, a fact that wasn't glaring, but was slightly distracting nonetheless.

A big hats off to Britt Kelly. The LSU sophomore isn't even a theater major, yet he held his own in a number featuring just the local talent, and provided solid drumming accompaniment to the band.

Bottom line: If you want to tap your feet and feel nostalgic about simpler times, when you could pull off the highway and tell the pump boy to "fill 'er up," before grabbing a slice of pie and a cup of Joe from the gum-snapping waitress inside, this is a show that delivers smiles and sass with a bunch of funny (albeit sometimes goofy) songs.

But, be warned, Patsy Cline's story is a million times more interesting.

'Pump Boys and Dinettes'

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday through July 9, with 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays through July 10.

WHERE: Swine Palace Productions at the Reilly Theatre, Tower Drive, LSU campus.

TICKETS: Tickets are $27-30, adults; $19, seniors; and $12, children and college students.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 578-3527 or purchase online through Ticketmaster at http://www.ticketmaster.com/venue/221980/ .

Photo: Color photo of 'Pump Boys and Dinettes' cast members, Louis Tucci, Sherry Stregack, Michael Hicks, David Lutken, Deb Lyons and Eric Anthony; B.W. photo of Louis Tucci and Michael Hicks checking out the menu at the roadside coffee shop in 'Pump Boys and Dinettes', Deb Lyons taking their order (by Kerry Maloney); B.W. graphic is 'Pump Boys and Dinettes' performer's info box

Document BATR000020050622e16m0002h

People
Dedicated Dads Fatherhood Program provides assistance for single fathers

J.D. VENTURA
801 words
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1-H
English

Mike Tucker likes to say that there is a difference between being "dead broke" and being a deadbeat.

He makes the differentiation when explaining to someone the kind of guys the Dedicated Dads Fatherhood Program helps.

Look around, said Tucker, there are plenty of social service organizations that help single or divorced mothers raise their children. But similar programs designed to help men be better fathers are hard to come by.

"They try and they try and then they give up," said Tucker, who administers the program as director of Operations and Fatherhood for the nonprofit Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge. "And when they do it's a long journey back up."

The program began back in 2002. Family Road had several programs to help single mothers. Case workers administering those initiatives would often meet the fathers of the children involved and realize that the men were also in need of assistance.

Tucker said the problem for many of the dads was a lack of employment and of a means to acquire it. How could these men be expected to pay child support without adequate job skills? Many of them wanted to be responsible parents, but simply didn't have the economic resources to do so.

After a shaky first year, Tucker said the program took shape. The mission eventually centered around three basic goals: to teach the men in a classroom setting "what it means to be a father," to help them develop "job readiness" skills and to encourage them to participate in recreational activities with their kids. Initial funding of the program ran out after the second year. But by then the state had taken notice of the program and stepped in. According to Tucker, continuing to fund the Dedicated Dads Fatherhood Program made sense, especially with $860 million of uncollected child- support payments owed to the state.

"A survey by the child support enforcement (department) found that $600 million of that money was (mostly) owed by guys who paid less than $10,000 a year," said Tucker. "(It was money) that was likely never going to be collected unless we found a better way to handle these guys."

Angelo Izzard was looking for a better way. A year ago the Baton Rouge man's tenuous relationship with his 4-year-old daughter and her mother was "sending him through the blues."

"I was trying to find work," said Izzard, who had to pay $200 every two weeks and had no visitation rights. "All my money was going to support a child I couldn't even see."

Izzard said not being there for his daughter is what hurt the most. He knows that pain firsthand. His father was absent from his childhood. Understanding how much that hurts is what brought him to Tucker's office.

"Everything they were offering is what I knew I needed to do," Izzard said.

"The perception is guys like him don't want to do any better, that they don't want to be a support mechanism for their families" said Tucker. "But that couldn't be further from the truth."

Many of the fathers enrolled in the Dedicated Dads Fatherhood Program are referred to it by the court system, and a smaller percentage find the program on their own. Enrollees participate for 17 weeks, roughly five hours each week. Many of the fathers who join have not paid child support for five years prior to signing up with Dedicated Dads.

Tucker said a major component of the program is the peer support group for fathers, where they are encouraged to talk about the difficulties they are facing with regard to their child support responsibilities. The

sessions help "guys get this stuff out of their systems."

"This stuff" is mostly the frustration many men feel toward a child support system that, Tucker said, often mirrors the societal indifference men face when they begin struggling with their state- imposed responsibilities.

"These guys are in the belly of the fire," said Tucker. "Some need mental health assistance...no one program can offer these guys all the services these guys need, because their lives are complicated and many of them have deep-rooted issues."

To those guys, Izzard heartily recommends the program. Through it, he has re-established communication with the mother of his child, and has found a better paying job to better keep up with his support payments. And he said the program has helped restore a self- esteem damaged by stigma.

"Once you get into the system, you are automatically considered a deadbeat dad," Izzard said. "No matter what."

Photo: Color photo of Mike Tucker, director of Operations and Fatherhood for Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge (By Kerry Maloney)

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People
Murals for the masses Local artist has big plans for public art

J.D. VENTURA
1,665 words
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English

The Volvo's axle is caught on the curb, the one he just ran clear over.

On this Friday night, 74-year-old Emerson Bell would rather be at fellow artist Clark Derbes' party on nearby Richland Street rather than literally spinning his tires in the Albertsons parking lot down on Government.

A rescue seems in order.

As if answering a telepathic distress signal, Derbes is suddenly on the scene. After a quick assessment of the predicament, he dismisses calling a tow and instead sprints to his truck to grab a beat up skateboard deck and a metal dog dish.

Blank stares from bystanders. Nobody understands what the 26- year-old abstractionist is thinking.

He's probably used to that. To spend even a brief time with Derbes is to wonder:

Why is there a sculpted deer head encircled by paint cans in his 14th Street studio? Why does he use the word "golly"? What's with his ping-pong and skateboarding addictions? What is he going to create with all those empty beer bottles in his loft?

"Oh, those are just empty beer bottles," he says.

There's no immediate explanation for the dog dish's utility. But Derbes does have an easy answer for why he plans to paint murals all over Baton Rouge.

"Who's going to fuss?" he asks.

It's a great question. He's not some teenage "tagger" who just spray paints his name on the side of buildings and box cars. Derbes is represented by Ann Connelly Fine Art and some of his paintings fetch up to $4,000.

So when he starts beautifying a blighted bit of Baton Rouge's landscape, will anyone try to stop him? And should they?

He wants to paint murals on privately owned buildings and structures, seeking only the permission of the property owners. Highbrow considerations, like whether the murals will tie in to Baton Rouge's overall aesthetic, or if the general public should in some way have input on artwork they'll drive by every day, are another story.

"I feel like I can do it, and I should do it," says Derbes, sitting on a blue '60s-style vinyl sofa, beside a stack of books, including: "The Quilts of Gee's Bend," the selected poems of Pablo Neruda and Hundertwasser, a coffee table tome about an Austrian painter and printmaker.

His coffee table, incidentally, is covered with bottle caps, little plastic bags of paper clips, a fork, a marble and a yellow legal pad, on which he has scribbled in graphite, "Murals. Public Art. Other cities are filled!"

Cities like Burlington, Vt. After graduating from LSU's bachelor of fine arts program three years ago, Derbes and his girlfriend at the time headed there. She worked at a cafe. He was hired by Burlington's public works department to paint minimurals on traffic light control boxes.

"I had been wanting to do that forever," he says.

Things were going well until the community's arts council complained to the city.

"No arts council wants to squelch a community's desire to be creative," says Sara Katz, the director of administration for Burlington City Arts. "But we basically need to make sure the public is made a part of the process....because the community needs to decide if they want to walk by it every day."

Derbes continued painting two boxes a day until the director of public works pulled up and personally asked him to stop.

Katz said they've since been painted over.

The arts council's intervention Derbes dismisses as art politics. "Public reaction was awesome," he says. "Everybody loved them."

And "everybody" is his intended audience. Public art is too corporate, he charges. Why is it all in bank lobbies? Why wait for a commission when the masses are being denied artistic beauty? Derbes isn't waiting for the answers. He's already bought the paint.

So long as he puts public art on private buildings, the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge doesn't foresee any problems. Genny Nadler Thomas, the council's CEO, says "it's kind of like the 1st Amendment."

"If an artist is expressing himself and has permission to use the building as his canvas, I am not sure there is anyone who could argue with that," she says. "I would just hate to think it would be offensive."

Inoffensively enlightened

Derbes isn't offending anybody at Ann Connelly's gallery tonight. He's sort of the life of the party. It's Art-Hop, and visitors are holding glasses of wine, making their way to the free cheese, looking at the art and shaking hands with the creators of it.

At 6 feet 4 inches, with a shaved head and nerdy-cool glasses, Derbes is a presence, standing out, as loud and cacophonic as his work.

"He personifies a young artist on fire," says Connelly later. "He is a magnet...the glue that is getting the young art community together."

The music he listens to for inspiration in his loft - Ween, The Shins, Beck - is now replaced with the sound of public interpretation, which goes like this:

"I saw your art. Tell us about it," says Mary Moss, a 54-year- old Baptist minister, as she exits the gallery and encounters Derbes on the sidewalk. "We tried to figure out what it was."

A brief bit of nervous silence. Derbes kicks on a huge smile.

"What emotions am I supposed to pick up?" Moss asks.

"What emotions did you pick up?"

"Fear."

"Oh!" cries Derbes, before dismantling the awkwardness with a hearty laugh and a giant hand which he gently places on the woman's shoulder.

"Are you shocked what people see sometimes?"

"I am," he says.

Moss may have seen fear, but outwardly Derbes is fairly fearless these days. He's painting with hot wax, an unconventional process that gives some of his pieces translucence and texture. He's off to Costa Rica, a just-to-go kind of adventure involving surfing and other planned hedonisms. And he invites anyone to his house party, which he interchangeably describes as "a blowout" or a "mega hoedown."

The hoedown

The house is full. People are sporting vintage clothing. It's hot. A couple of people are wearing wigs - as fashion statements. There is curried chicken on the stove, and cold beers are in the fridge. Derbes walks

through the living room cradling two more condensation-covered beer bottles with the fingers of one hand, like chopsticks.

Hunter Roth, 29, a friend of Derbes, is holding court on the front porch, talking smack about his friend.

"He sucks at pingpong!" he says, making the party-goers sitting on the stairs laugh.

Roth and Derbes go way back. They met in 1992, two skate rats then. Both artists now.

"He is a free spirit," says Roth. "It's entertaining to just hang out with him...when someone buys his stuff, they are buying his energy."

Through the haze of Heinekens, Derbes is still all business. Almost every conversation is about art.

He admits his artistic aspirations consume him. "I tend to overbook myself," he says later. "The obsession outweighs the feasibility."

There are plans with one friend to see an exhibit in Houston. On his arm, in brown marker, is written: "Call Josh," which, he explains, is about "buying artwork." Another friend leaves the party, with Derbes shouting after him, "Call me tomorrow, you have the print shop number!"

And then there are all those murals he plans on painting all over the city. Though he doesn't know where or how many.

Soon Derbes' back yard has about 60 people, a crowd that is arguably the who's who of BR's young art scene. But the old school is there, too.

Like Bell. Who made it to the party after all.

Rewind two hours.

Derbes is convinced that a car jack may be the solution. If the old Volvo is raised up, a wooden pallet he borrowed from Albertsons can be placed under the tire, he figures.

His bald head glistening with sweat, he cranks the jack. It doesn't get the car high enough to work, but the vehicle falls forward, which sets it rolling over the curb just the same.

"You are an artist and an engineer!" proclaims an appreciative Bell. "And a scientist, too!"

If there is a science to Derbes' career, it seems to be in his methodical determination, a belief that success, like the freeing of the Volvo, will happen through sheer will.

That will is evident a week after the party as Derbes works on his first mural, on a building on the corner of 19th and Main. Holding a can of paint in one hand and a rolling brush in the other, he applies the colors, then backs up to survey his work.

He has no plans of doing "guerilla-style" graffiti art. (At least not until his other murals gain acceptance, he confesses.)

And he is sure they will, when people "realize they appreciate it." The "it" is Derbes' unplanned, impulsive shapes and haphazard hues, which turn dull cement and sunbaked brick into an interpretable experience.

"It just pours out of me," says Derbes. "It's always there and all I have to do is get the paint brush in my hand and then it happens: I give into the void."

Photo: Color photos of Samples of Clark Derbes' work exhibited at Ann Connelly Fine Art; Clark Derbes painting the first in a series of murals he plans to paint around Baton Rouge; Used paint brushes sitting on a work table inside Clark Derbes' loft workspace in Baton Rouge; Clark Derbes; B.W. photo of Clark Derbes working on a mural outside his old studio space at the corner of Main and 19th streets (By Brian Harkin)

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People
Knight's dedication to LSU education Successful alumnus makes donation to college of business, Student Union

J.D. VENTURA
635 words
17 June 2005
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English

Students can be like seeds. With the right nourishment and in the proper conditions, they can grow, prosper and bear fruit.

And when that fruit comes in the form of a $200,000 donation, well, the gardeners tend to get excited.

Al Burns, LSU's marketing department chair, and Shirley Plakidas, the director of the university's Student Union, were certainly happy to hear that a former student who they knew in the late '70s, Kip Knight, now an eBay executive, gave the institution such a huge sum, and earmarked it for their respective departments.

Half of that gift is going to the E.J. Ourso College of Business, to create a fellowship for an as-yet-recruited candidate for the doctoral marketing program. The other $100,000 is going to the Student Union, to fund an employee and volunteer recognition program, and to jumpstart a capital fund-raising campaign to support the building's proposed new addition.

While neither Burns nor Plakidas could have predicted exactly where Knight's career would take him, they both agreed that he was the type of student that was clearly going places.

"I noticed he had a strange affinity for marketing research," said Burns, who taught Knight, now 48. "(His success) was a great surprise."

As Burns pointed out, Knight's top post at eBay didn't happen overnight. Knight spent 10 years at Procter & Gamble Co., doing everything from developing the Olean brand (the name brand for Olestra), to "negotiating licensing agreements" for products with names like Duncan Hines Pantastic Party Cakes.

He put in another 10 years at Pepsico and a three-year stint at Taco Bell Restaurants before eBay hired him in 2002 as the vice president in charge of marketing to the company's largest online sellers.

Knight credits his LSU experience for much of his career success. As a volunteer at the Student Union, he said he began to understand how to "target consumers."

Giving back to his alma mater became important to him, particularly when he began realizing "the importance of education in order (for American graduates) to remain competitive" in a global marketplace.

"The saying used to be finish your food because there are children starving in India," he said. "Now it's finish your education, because there are students starving for your job in India."

While a volunteer at the Union, Knight proposed what were radical changes at the time: wine being sold on campus, and banking being conducted in the Union building, for example.

When detractors said "no," Knight said he refused to accept that answer. It was a philosophy he took with him into his professional life.

"Louisiana has never made education a high priority in terms of investment," said Knight, when discussing his decision to donate so generously. "(The state) is blessed with natural resources, but those are nonrenewable, and will someday give out. Education is renewable."

Like Burns, Plakidas remembered Knight as a "real go-getter." She said $1,500 of his donation has already been awarded to six Student Union employees, who received $250 each in May. In November, $8,500 will be divided up and dispersed among selected volunteers, who will receive anywhere from $250 to $1,000.

"I was floored," said Plakidas, in describing how she felt when she heard about Knight's contribution. "We have always wanted to have some sort of recognition program for unpaid (Student Union) positions ... This

gives students something to aspire toward."

Photo: Color photo of eBay executive Kip Knight in pose in front of building, full of smiles after recently giving $200,000 to LSU, a contribution he described as a 'modest donation.' (by Travis Spradling)

Document BATR000020050617e16h0002i

People
Not much drama here "The Princess and the Pea" has its moments, but they are very few

J.D. VENTURA
906 words
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1-C
English

"Pray until something happens," is what's printed on sweatshirts hanging in the window of the Sunday Morning Store, which is adjacent to the Baker Little Theatre.

The store should modify them and sell them to theater-goers on their way to see the latest show, "The Princess and the Pea." New slogan: "Pray for something to happen."Like a better play.

Since we're praying, let us thank the heavens for Ryan Sanchez. Because the 12-year-old actor was about the only thing keeping this reviewer in his seat. More on the amazing Mr. Sanchez in a bit.

Now look, folks, this play is for children. It's a fairy tale. Taking the tots to see a production like this sure is better than plopping them down in front of the DVD player or, worse, an X-Box.

But good kiddie entertainment is also able to entertain adults (think: a decent production of "Peter Pan" or the movie "Finding Nemo"). If, as a thinking, literate grown-up, you are interested in this play, your child must be in it.

Putting on a production that has 31 cast members, many of whom are children and teenagers whose parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are assured to attend, is a great way to sell tickets. It's also a great way to make members of the general public feel like they walked into a junior high play. All that was missing was the camcorders.

Now, working with child actors is incredibly difficult. So hats off to Jannean McKinney for taking on what must have been a Herculean task. And none of the kids were terrible. Often their sheer cuteness elicited clapping.

But this story is the Wal-Mart version of "Sleeping Beauty." There is no dramatic tension. The protagonist, Prince Valiant, never encounters an antagonist. He's just looking for a chick to marry. And he finds her in the last 15 minutes of the play, leaving no time for us to invest in the supposed love they have for one another. The only thing at stake is the $10 you spent on your ticket.

Incidentally, there was just nothing valiant about Ronald Coates' portrayal of the prince. His princely innoncence gave the character an unappealing meekness. Playing that to the extreme may have worked, in that the prince's pomposity would have been funnier than what the actor settled for, which was more shy schoolboy then royal bachelor.

Jessica Wilson, who played Old Queen Maude, gave a bronze-medal performance. Her attempts to inject character into such a cartoonish part was as admirable as it was asinine.

The king was played by Matt LaVergne, who apparently thought his patriarch was a million years old, as he insisted on feebly mumbling every line. One word, five syllables: articulation.

Even if this was a play at Zachary High School, and it could have been, student Beth Higginbotham deserves criticism for her flat-as- a-just-rolled-asphalt performance. Why in rehearsals McKinney didn't notice her leading lady delivering lines with less inflection than a Speak & Spell is anyone's guess.

(Hum the theme song to "Superman" here.)

Ryan Sanchez, as the prince's sidekick, Donald, was a joy to watch. His expressions were so right-on, even when he wasn't talking, he was saying a lot. At such a young age, his physical comedy is already very funny. And he was one of the few actors in this play that had a fully developed character.

The scene between Sanchez and Brooke Frost, who played Princess Barbiette, was priceless. Sanchez's puppy-dog flirting with Frost and her lady-in-waiting, played by Lauryn St. Germain, was one of the few

moments in the play when clapping wasn't a gift from cooing relatives.

As a postscript, Tim Sandifer was a stand-out, and did amazing things with a bit part. It's clear if given some wings, he could fly.

When all is said and done, this is a tale better told before bed, from a book. Perhaps this story belongs in the fantastical world of a child's imagination, and not on the stage of a community theater that is presumably looking to be taken seriously.

"The Princess and the Pea"

WHEN: 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays through June 25, with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturdays.

WHERE: Baker Little Theatre, 3121 Van Buren St., Baker.

TICKETS: Tickets are $10; $7 seniors, students at matinees.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 774-5953 or visit the Web site at http:// www.bakerlittletheatre.com .

Photo: Color photos of Patrick Fourroux (Sir Swagger), left, and Derek Wray (Sir Squint) tossing the court jester, played by Matthew Flancers as servents, from left, Laurynn St. Germain, Matthew White and Dustin Lott look on; Ben Lane, playing the chef, yelling to Queen Maude, played by Jessica Wilson as Christel Amar, Beth Higginbotham and Ronald Coats, from left, stand in the background; B.W. photo of Princess Purity, second from left (played by Leila Wolfe), looking at a dirty area on the floor being cleaned by her servants Samantha Dubois, left, and Emily Wright as Prince Valiant's squire (Donald) and Valiant (Ronald Coats) stand by (By John Oubre); B.W. graphic is "The Princess and the Pea" announcement and info box

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People
Reason to celebrate Jazz concert honoring LSU's Chatman also fund-raiser

J.D. VENTURA
924 words
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English

All Pokey Chatman wants when she turns 36 is a little jazz. And apparently she's going to get her wish.

That's because the Sue Gunter Foundation is hosting a fund- raiser to mark the popular LSU women's basketball coach's birthday, which will feature Baton Rouge jazz artist Sherrie Bias.

That Chatman is a jazz fan is easy to see, or hear as the case may be. She had to get up from her desk and lower her office stereo during a recent chat with The Advocate.

The jazz was just a bit too loud.

Chatman said birthdays started to lose their significance after 30, and she usually doesn't treat them with any degree of fanfare.

But in the last couple of years, she has had nothing but fanfare. After taking the reins from Gunter, and her team to the Final Four, Chatman has been thrust into the limelight, becoming one of the athletic department's most visible coaches.

Increased visibility means many things. For example, when she goes to the mall to buy a tube of lipstick, the errand can take more than an hour, because invariably someone will recognize her and stop to talk. Or there's the time she went back to her hometown of Ama (for the community's official Pokey Chatman Day cookout), and was asked by a relative if she "felt like a rock star."

"No, I feel like Pokey," was her reply.

She said the buzz that surrounds her is easy to tune out because she is "so engrossed" in what she is doing: namely being a coach, a mentor and sometimes a surrogate mother to 15 young women she somewhat maternally refers to as "kids."

Even the fact her hometown named a day after her elicited a humble response: "It's not a compliment to me," she said. "It's just a small town outing where people in the community can come together and say they're proud of you."

But her fan base has grown way beyond Ama, and she knows this. She believes all the attention goes hand in hand with a rising public interest in basketball, evidenced, in part, by a marked increase in season ticket holders and solid crowds at the games.

And despite the shine of her star power continually brightening - she has been profiled in USA Today and invited to coach U.S.A. Basketball in Europe this summer - Chatman said many new fans are drawn to the game because of how accessible it is when compared to some other collegiate sports. Her celebrity status hasn't yet turned into a barrier between spectator and sports personality.

"There are not many interviews we will turn down," said Chatman. "And fans can just come up and talk to us."

Of course, to have a little one-on-one time with Chatman at her birthday event will mean spending an extra $15 on the ticket. For $50 a person, attendees get to have champagne and birthday cake with her and Sherrie Bias, the Baton Rouge jazz singer performing at the party.

Assistant coach Bob Starkey said the birthday bash has been in the works for more than three months and that it's "the first time ever" the department's done this. Starkey said the jazz theme was perfect for the occasion, not just because Chatman is such a fan, but because the creativity associated with the musical genre parallels just how creative Chatman has been, as a player and now a coach.

"We are hoping that the love people down here have for jazz and Pokey's popularity will parley into a successful combination," said Starkey.

Success would mean 1,000 attendees. It may happen. Starkey said 7,000 flyers were mailed out and planners launched "a media blitz" on radio and television.

Money from the event will go directly into the foundation, which helps to run the LSU Women's Basketball Complex and the Cox Communications Academic Center.

All the proceeds go to the cause, because Bias agreed to sing at the event for free. Bias said she was surprised to hear that "Coach Pokey" was such a jazz fan.

"I wanted to do this," said Bias. "I love that (Chatman) is continuing the legacy of Sue Gunter. It was really an honor for me to help in any way I could."

Bias hopes the event will "jumpstart" a jazz scene in Baton Rouge that has waned in recent years. The singer has been performing for more than 10 years, and will be accompanied at the celebration by a band.

The sweetest music Chatman could make is something she refers to as "the ultimate prize": the National Championship title. Until then, it seems she'd be happy with some folks with whom to share all that cake and champagne.

"Pokey's Jazz Birthday Party"

WHEN: The party begins on Friday, June 17, at 7:30 p.m.

WHERE: Baton Rouge River Center Theater for Performing Arts, 275 South River Road.

TICKETS: Tickets are $35. (A limited number of VIP tickets are available for $50.)

INFORMATION: Call Ticketmaster at (225) 761-8400 or visit the Web site at http://www.ticketmaster.com . All proceeds benefit the Sue Gunter Foundation.

Photo: Color photo of LSU women's basketball coach Pokey Chatman posing with local jazz singer Sherrie Bias (by Bill Feig); B.W. graphic is "Pokey's Jazz Birthday Party" info box

Document BATR000020050610e16a0002b

People
Reaching for the sky Two state office buildings rising side by side in downtown BR Bienville site

J.D. VENTURA
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English

The guys at the Bienville site, future home of the state's Department of Health and Hospitals, have been hanging pre-cast, too. Huge pieces have been shipped in on tractor-trailer trucks from Arkansas.

The pre-cast guys aren't the only "subs" on the site. The electrical guys are here today, and the drywall crews, and an outfit hanging the metal wall panels. The caulking crews are also up there, somewhere.

Unlike its sister building, which has two massive walls through its center for support, the Bienville building has 15-foot-tall concrete anchors securing it to the foundation. The anchors are held down by 60-pound bolts. Some 302 concrete pilings, driven into "truckloads of concrete," provide additional support.

Movement of any sort is extraordinarily unlikely.

But the site is aflutter with human movement. The pre-cast crews are hustling. Things were supposed to be done by mid-May, now people are talking June.

The pre-cast foreman, Keith Redman, has encountered a problem. On the eighth floor, there is five inches of room for the pre-cast pieces. But on the ninth, there are seven. What to do with that extra two inches? A call to Arkansas Precast has to be made, to "get the fix."

That fix won't repair the elevator, however, which has been out all morning. There are stairs, which is fine for the men, but the elevator is used to hoist materials, too. So a speedy repair becomes a priority.

The guy in charge, Jeff Robichaux, grumbles at all the materials lying around all over the site. The state won't pay for anything unless it's in inventory. That results in the building's real elevators lying unassembled on the first floor, and crates of unopened window glass on every level.

Lots of materials, not enough labor.

"There's just no more people to do this work," says Robichaux, 40. "Manpower is pitiful. Everybody goes to college."

Despite that, the completion date is still set for June 2006.

Are the two sites competitive?

"I think we are gonna finish before them," he says. "But there is no need to get into a race."

A technician comes over and announces the elevator has been fixed. It's 8:44 a.m.

By 8:54 it's broken again.

The "patchers" from Arkansas Precast are fixing tiny chips in the mammoth slabs, which are sometimes damaged during shipping or during placement onto the building.

"We patch light because we can always darken it later," says Brad Suddreth, 26, of Oklahoma City. Like many of the workers employed by the 100 or so subcontractors on the site, he stays at a nearby hotel. "I like working with the bigger rocks, because the really smooth stuff is harder."

Suddreth has been away from home for 21 days. Before here, he worked at the construction site of a county jail in Rapid City, S.D.

Up on the sixth floor the smell of the Community Coffee Port Allen plant is overpowering. The odor is one

part burnt toast, one part melted chocolate and one part coffee-maker left on too long.

It doesn't seem to bother Luis Roldin from Ecuador who is singing in Spanish alongside his friend, Robert Miselem of Honduras. Roldin, who has worked in the United States for the last three years, is framing the studs for the drywall. "I like this better," says Roldin. "In my country we use blocks, but this is faster and cleaner."

Hoping that the foreman will like his work, Roldin says he wants to get referred to do more work when his time at the Bienville site is finished.

So far he has found consecutive work on job sites in Mississippi, Florida, Texas and New York.

Roldin says he sends most of his money home to Ecuador.

Photo: Color photo of worker Luis Roldin; B.W. photo of Jeff Robichaux, right, going over plans with drywall superintendent Joe Cummings, left (By Bill Feig)

Document BATR000020050606e1650008k

People
Reaching for the sky Two state office buildings rising side by side in downtown BR Iberville site

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Iberville site

The front of the structure looks like a facade. Like a stage set of an office building. If someone drove by quickly, late to get somewhere, they might mistake it for what it will be in 2006, the new 280,000-square-foot home of the state's Department of Social Services.

But to glimpse the rear of the building is to peer into a process that almost doesn't make sense. Like when people who are afraid to fly ask how such a heavy piece of machinery can leave the ground, the question here might be: How can something so massive be built so quickly?

It's 8 a.m. and there are already men working on every level of the structure. Vehicles reverse: beep, beep. beep. Metal tools clank, clank, clank into steel. A welder's arc burns hot, sizzling like trick candles on a birthday cake.

Milton J. Womack Inc. is the general contractor for this job, but 90 percent of the actual work is subcontracted out. "The office boys," as the foreman calls them, are in the trailer, guys like Adam Bourgeois and Stephan Dorsey. They make sure everyone gets paid, and manage Womack's relationships with all the other companies on site.

At 23, Bourgeois is the young guy. Like Dorsey, who's 36, he graduated from LSU with a degree in construction management. Dorsey looks like he knows a thing or two. Bourgeois is so fresh faced, he looks like a college intern.

George Griffon is another Womack guy. He is the project supervisor, and roams around the sight "50 to 60" times a day.

Someone from outside yells, "George, hey, your door frames are here, man!"

Much of the really dangerous work on the site is over. The daredevils, the steel erectors, have come and gone.

But that's not to say that the work left is easy - not by any means. One of the biggest projects on the site right now is the hanging of the pre-cast concrete, the huge slabs that make up the exterior of the building and designed to match the Capitol.

"Call Robbie, tell him to bring the elevator down," Bourgeois says into his two-way radio. Soon the metal cage crawls down the side of the building with a hydraulic hum.

Guys come off the elevator carrying trash - paper and bits of PVC piping - and throw it into a huge Dumpster. John Louis Browder is the guy working the elevator. He's a 20-year Womack man. He's done all kinds of construction jobs, but this is his latest assignment. He closes the gate and with the crank of a lever sends the metal box skyward, like a rickety ride at the county fair.

From the eighth floor, without any walls to obstruct the view, the Capitol is easily seen. At this height, ExxonMobil looms beyond the state's art deco icon, some futuristic world, like a lunar base, or a Martian city. The plant's proximity to the Capitol makes absolutely no visual sense from up here, an awkward juxtaposition of a simpler past and a more complicated present.

The wind is cool off the river, blowing through the building unimpeded. It's hard to imagine someday this floor will have walls, that will form offices, which will have people in them. There will be carpeting and lights, and water-cooler conversations. And a run down the hallway won't end with a dizzying freefall onto the landscaped grounds.

Tony Ware of Lundin Roofing rhythmically hammers the metal flashing like a guy from the Blue Man Group, as a crane slowly moves behind him. He works alone, silent except for the tapping of his tool.

A few yards away, two guys from Ranger Welding are staring down at North Street. It's 8:41 a.m. Ed Madrid, who's from Denver, and Craig Ensminger of Sicily Island are taking a break. They are welding "galvanize" which is not at all like welding "clean metal" they explain.

"That's nasty stuff," scowls Madrid. "I try to stay out of the smoke."

The work is good, though. No complaints. They are both working "5- 10s" now (five, 10-hour days). They joke that their break is over when they see the "boss man" coming up, shown in the reflective windows across the street, which allows them a view of the wall- less floors below them.

The boss man is foreman Robert Posey. The 51-year-old Denham Springs man knows they can see him "sneaking up on them." He stands out with his cowboy hat-shaped hard hat.

One of Posey's chief tasks is to make sure the project's "control lines" are perfect. These are red and blue lines drawn throughout the building that serve as "true" indicators of direction (north- south, east-west) and of elevation.

"Sometimes I panic and everything runs right up into my throat," says Posey. "I talk about measurements in my sleep."

At 9:44 a.m. a tattooed crane operator hoists a giant pre-cast panel into place. It swings back and forth, while three men on the ground try to direct its movement, like whalers pulling their kill onto a ship.

Photo: Color photos of Adam Bourgeois, left, taking a cell phone call on the ninth floor of the new Iberville building as worker Lionel Early, right, checks his tools; The Capitol and the new Iberville building reflected in the windows of One American Place (By Arthur D. Lauck); The Iberville construction as seen from the Bienville building (By Bill Feig)

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People
Son's building to replace the father's

J.D. VENTURA
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Veteran architects know they've been in the game for a while when the buildings they've designed start being torn down.

At 79, Harry Smith knows what it feels like. In 1954, Smith celebrated two major achievements: the dedication of the A.Z. Young Building, a structure he designed in downtown Baton Rouge, and the birth of his son, Jeff.

His son is now 51. So is the building, which is why it's slated for demolition - it was only expected to last 50 years.

But Smith still has something to do with where the state's Department of Social Services will end up when their old digs are demolished. Because Jeff Smith designed their new home, the Iberville Building.

When Harry Smith started working on the Young building, he was a young associate architect in his early 20s. It was the first project in which he was in charge.

"I almost lost my job," remembered the senior Smith, seated in the conference room of his son's offices in Hammond. The near- firing came when he protested the mix of red Texas granite with white limestone over the building's exterior. He was not a fan of the checkerboard effect. "I used to call it the Purina building," Harry Smith said.

"It's a good example of '50's post modernism," said Jeff Smith.

Harry Smith intended the covered patio area to be a welcoming place to come in from the rain, a fitting symbol for a building that would house the "state welfare offices." The red granite - which he went out to Marble Falls, Texas, to buy - was his idea, too. He wanted it to cover the entire building.

That he designed a building to replace the one his father conceived didn't initially occur to Jeff Smith. On a visit to the original building, however, he noticed a plaque with the date the building was completed (the year he was born) and the names of those involved with the project, including his father's.

"That's when it got spooky," said Jeff Smith.

Designing the new building in the art deco style gave him "more freedom" as a designer, said Jeff Smith. "You can just be more modern with that deco flair."

What's one design detail of which he is particularly proud?

Employees working in the building will have a perfect view of the capital complex. "I am hoping that the state workers will genuflect to the State Capitol when they come off the elevators," Jeff joked.

Dad isn't a huge fan of the "campus approach," which refers to the effort to stylistically match all the state buildings that ring the Capitol. Jeff Smith said his design will set the Iberville building apart, however. He added oak trees to the landscaping, for example, and, as with other buildings on which his firm has worked, made the structure as energy efficient as possible.

Barring any amazing medical advances, Jeff Smith will probably not experience what his father did: watching something you designed be destroyed.

The plan is for the Iberville building to last 100 years.

Photo: Color photo of architects Jeffrey Smith, right, and his father, Harry Smith, both designed the offices

for the Department of Social Services (By J.D. Ventura); B.W. photo of Travis Thibodeaux spraying water on an exterior window while, inside, a team of project managers, including an architect, watch for leaks and discuss the test results (By Arthur D. Lauck)

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People
Reaching for the sky Two state office buildings rising side by side in downtown BR

J.D. VENTURA
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For months downtown visitors have seen two tremendous works in progress, a complex and improbable jumble of masonry and men, of steel and sweat, scrambling skyward like a grown-up's Erector Set.

With each passing week, the Iberville and Bienville state office buildings gain permanency in Baton Rouge's urban landscape.

The Advocate visited both construction sites recently. Here's a brief peek at each.

Document BATR000020050606e1650008n

People
Band aide Clinton native stays busy keeping major music acts in costumes

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Abby Franklin may be from Clinton, but her home is on the road. Rock 'n' roll is what keeps her there.

No, she's not a rock star. Even though she could be mistaken for one with her tattooed feet and raspberry colored hair.

She is, however, a freelance wardrobe specialist, a person who goes on tour with major concert acts, managing the band's clothes and stocking their dressing rooms.

It sounds easy, but Franklin said it's not as glamorous as many people think. There are 18-hour days, stressed-out rock stars and times when she finds herself in all-night pharmacies in places like Des Moines, Iowa, futilely searching for a hand lotion only available in Beverly Hills boutiques.

Still, Franklin said she's glad she "stumbled into" this career.

Franklin, who's 33, had done a college internship at Disney World. While in Orlando, she was hired at the House of Blues to help prepare the dressing rooms for acts coming to play at the club. But it was the bands' wardrobe people who really caught her attention.

"I met more and more people who did it," said Franklin. "I said to myself, 'That sounds really cool.'"

She ended up staying in the Orlando area for 11 years, doing wardrobe work for Disney and MTV. Soon she started touring with Creed, one of the biggest selling rock bands in America in the late '90s. Eventually she hit the road with Prince and Motley Crue.

Since many big acts play at sports stadiums, their dressing rooms are often the facility's locker rooms. The aesthetic is usually lacking. So aside from making sure all of Prince's many costumes are in order - everything is ironed, purple shoelaces match purple shoes, costumes are hung in the order they are needed - Franklin also plays interior decorator, turning unsightly dressing areas into atmospheric retreats worthy of rock legends.

For example, she has decorated Prince's locker room in Indian or Japanese themes. The first thing to go? - the overhead fluorescent lights.

Aside from the long days, her profession also demands constant travel. Nesters and homebodies need not apply. She spends so much time on the road, she recently gave up her apartment in Los Angeles. Franklin figured why keep a place if you're never there to enjoy it. For months she has lived out of a storage unit and recently rented an apartment in Clinton, where her family still lives, just to have a place for her stuff.

She is currently oversees with Motley Crue, who she has worked for before. Being self-employed, Franklin said her next job is only as good as her connections and whether or not she has maintained good working relationships with production managers. "It's all word of mouth," she said.

Part of doing her job well is just being able to roll with the punches. Like when Scott Stapp, Creed's front man, ordered some pants that Franklin suspected were headed for a wardrobe malfunction. Sure enough: RIP!

She said she just "sat on the side of the stage horrified" as the lead singer's pants ripped right up the backside.

"I just said, 'holy crap!'" recalled Franklin.

Then there was that crazy guy who snuck backstage at a Prince concert, posing as a wardrobe delivery person.

"He was delivering Christmas sweaters. To Prince," said Franklin. "I called security."

Work is not always constant. Even though she is eligible to collect unemployment, she hasn't. More work usually comes quickly. Once people know they can work with you and can trust you, they invite you back on the road, she said.

"We have to live with each other, so you become like a family," she said. "You never know who's going to recommend you for your next job."

Franklin said over the years she has become jaded to the glitz. She's flown on private jets and partied at a hot New York restaurant reserved for one of her clients. All fun, but she remains level headed and reminds herself "it is a job" nonetheless.

"I'll be in a store, and I'll just spend $30,000," she said. "But I have to tell myself, 'This is someone else's money.'"

In fact, she admits the only time she was ever truly star struck had nothing to do with a rock star sighting. She was flying back from a concert with Mark Tremonti, Creed's guitarist, when she noticed a man sitting across the aisle from her.

"I was hitting Mark going, 'Do you know who that is? Oh my God! That's Skip Bertman!'" she remembered. "He had no idea who he was."

She explained to the rock star that Bertman had coached the LSU baseball team to five national titles. He encouraged her to introduce herself.

"Finally as we were getting off the plane I said hello," she said. "And my face turned completely red."

Photo: Color photos of Abby Franklin, currently on tour with Motley Crue, which is playing some festival concerts in Europe before opening the Carnival to Sin tour in July, and Motley Crue drummer Lee showing of the tour's look; Abby Franklin of Clinton adjusting buckles on the cuffs of Jim Root of the rock band Slipknot as he gets costumed backstage for a show (Both PP); Color photo of Abby Franklin displaying mementos, including a pile of backstage passes, from her life on the road as a wardrobe specialist, a position she says sometimes makes her "like a mom" to some big-name rock bands (by Travis Spradling)

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People
Good deals, better meals Cattle auction not only draw at Dominique's Stockyard

J.D. VENTURA
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English

On this particular Monday the cafe at Dominique's Stockyard is serving chicken.

The rain showers have been intermittent all morning, like a watering can tipped forward, and then retracted.

The restaurant belongs where it is, on the roadside. A pull-off- the-road place. Its inauspicious sign more of a command than an invitation: Breakfast $3.75 Eat.

Stockyard and cafe have sat side by side for a long time down on Airline Highway. On the left, carnivores carry orange cafeteria trays, mouths watering from the smell of cooked cabbage and stewed meat. And on the right, nervous herbivores, taken from the lush green pastures of family farms to auction, are now sensing, perhaps, that their carefree days are almost over.

Some of the carnivores, cowboys with hats and swagger, divide their time between the two worlds. The cafe is a good place to go before the auction starts, a little after noon.

Everyone knows Ivy. Ivy Willis. He runs the cafe. He's "been out here since '62." If he doesn't own the place, he sure looks like he does. He is the owner, someone says, no question about it. It's his second go at it. The place has changed hands five or six times. But for decades it really hasn't changed at all.

The lunch crowd comes in from the rain, all reflexively grabbing trays like soldiers in a mess hall. The line is a mix of people soldiering through the workday: the guys in the suits, big stomachs cresting over the straining clasps of slate-grey slacks; state troopers, guns on their hips; workers in jeans and T-shirts and sturdy boots, laces loose, unkempt hair stenciled onto foreheads wet from steamed food and barometric pressure.

Everyone grabs plastic red Coca-Cola cups to fill with already sweetened tea. Every so often a cup falls to the floor, making a sound like a struck bowling pin.

Hardly anyone gets dessert.

"Cornbread!" a waitress yells. And then, "Cauliflower!"

The place doesn't advertise. Good food buys you word of mouth. Joe Scott has been eating here since he was nine. He's 68 now, a man who "wakes up with a different hurt every morning."

But the only thing that hurts after lunch is his distended stomach. "If that were on a woman, Joe, she'd be pregnant," a friend told him the other day.

"If you leave here hungry, you shouldn't be allowed to eat at all," says Scott, who drives all the way from Plaquemine Point for his favorite stockyard meal: endless cups of coffee. Caffeine gets the gossip in gear, making people dish over side dishes of candied yams, and mashed potatoes, and that cauliflower, fried and dipped in cool ranch dressing.

Daily specials

"Awe shoot," Don Richards says, as if remembering how long he's been coming here is an algebra problem where "x" and "y" are utterly unknown. But the daily specials he easily recollects:

On Monday, red beans and rice, and sausage; Tuesday, country friend steak; Wednesday, fried chicken (which some ladies from the Exxon plant wouldn't miss for anything); Thursday, chicken, sausage and jambalaya; and Fridays, fried catfish and that damn homemade potato salad, served warm, which is just about the most irresistible thing to Richards.

"Warm," he says again, almost resentful of its goodness.

"What 'cha doin' with all this butter?" the waitress asks Raymond Haynes, 72, a Mississippian who's there to buy some cattle.

"I was gonna eat 'em," Haynes says of the little unopened butter packets scattered all over his tray. "But I just had no room."

That's what the head cook, Evelyn Hayes, likes to see, patrons pushing back from their tables, too full to continue, but too satisfied to stop. She's been cooking here for 26 years, in this small kitchen, where one of her cooks now shows her a tray of cornbread pulled from the oven, a square of yellow with a swirl of brown in the center, like cinnamon sprinkled on honey.

"It's done," Hayes says approvingly.

As a girl she would cook for her mama, who worked. She's still cooking for those too busy to cook for themselves. "A clean plate is a compliment," says Hayes, who cannot imagine not tasting everything before passing it through the serving window to the girls who run the cafeteria line. "That would be like cooking with your eyes closed."

Meanwhile, the eyes of the cows are open wide. The barn hands zap them with electric cattle prods and yell "Yep, yep, yep!" This gets the animals moving, hooves slipping on the barn's floors, slick with dung.

They are forced into a holding pen. The small calves don't worry the men. But the big bulls and cows sometimes send handlers jumping onto fencing, or closing gates with an unconcealed sense of urgency.

Zap!

The animal runs down a narrow hallway, until it finds itself in the auction cage.

"Boys, she is just a five years old," barks the auctioneer.

The bidding begins. The man with the microphone sits on a platform above the ring, calling out the ascending prices rapidly, creating a sense that only quick action will prevent the loss of a deal.

"Hummana, hummana, hummana, 600, hummana, hummana, hummana, 650, 650, 650 dollar bill!"

Zap!

Back to the barn

The sold animal is sent back to the barn where Donnie Ashford, the manager, paces the rickety catwalks above the pens, gold chain around his neck, face encircled in cigarette smoke.

"This kind of auction is the backbone of farmers selling their cattle," Ashford says, in front of a large sign that reads: Enjoy Beef. Real food for real people.

"The thing about an auction barn, you put that farmer in front of seven or eight buyers representing 35 companies."

From the farmer to the sale barn to the feed lot to slaughter. Sometimes cows are bought to raise calves. Sometimes older animals skip right over the feed lot step and "enter the food chain" right after they leave Ashford's barn.

"Send your donkeys and then the cattle," Ashford yells through the catwalk's planks, to a hand who's covered with manure.

"We sell it all here, boys," the auctioneer says, just as the tittering from the amused bidders subsides. "Gimme a $100 bill on the Jenny."

Charlie Brown from Livonia is looking for "replacement cattle." Or "stocker cows." A purchase of his could wind up in a Texas pasture or roaming around some Florida farm.

Under five years old. No "bad bags." That's what Brown is buying. In a couple of days he'll load his picks onto an 18 wheeler.

"Charlie, why didn't you buy that two year-old heifer?" a man asks, just outside of the auction's office.

"'Cuz I can buy better than her for $1,200," replies Brown. "And get somethin' a little bit fancier."

While the cattlemen are readying the sold animals, fancy and otherwise, for shipping, things are being put away back at the cafe. Dishes are washed. Counters are wiped clean.

Tomorrow the barn will fall silent, until next Monday.

But the cafe will bustle with the sounds of jangling silverware and crushed ice crashing into plastic tumblers, and people enjoying a bit of the food chain, breaded and seasoned just so: country fried steak.

Real food, for real people.

Photo: Color photos of cattle buyers Russell Harmon of Church Point, Gene Schoendoff of Folsom and Bubba Lane of Rayville in front at Dominique's Stockyard; Charlie Brown and his son Charlie Brown, Jr., both of Livonia, eating at the Stockyard Cafe; Mich Dominiaue, owner of Dominique's Stockyard, slipping in a few jokes between his rapid delivery of rising bids; B.W. photos of a cow awaiting the auction ring at Dominique's Stockyard; Lynannie Bell leaving the Stockyard Cafe after her shift in the kitchen ends; Evelyn Hayes in pose after running the Stockyard Cafe's kitchen for 26 years (by Brian Harkin)

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People
Hanging with the dogs Once-doubting trainer now believer in dog socialization

J.D. VENTURA
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English

"Bandit." At least Sandra Aucoin chose a tough-sounding name for her dog. Because the name of the breed is hardly a tribute to ruggedness: Shi-Poo.

On a misty Saturday morning recently, the little white pooch, a delicate cross between a Shih Tzu and a minipoodle, was placed in a large pasture with about 40 other free-roaming dogs, most of whom were at least 10 times as large as Bandit.

It was like putting a peewee football player into the Super Bowl.

Could big dogs distinguish Shi-Poos from, say, cats?

"Why does my dog have to be so scared?" Aucoin asked.

Most immediately, Bandit was terrified of being eaten. But the dog's timidity had been an ongoing problem that Aucoin wanted cured.

So the Baton Rouge woman, like many other area pet owners, called Dick Russell, a nationally recognized dog trainer. Russell recommended "dog socialization." He concluded that in order to overcome his fears, Bandit needed to hang out with other dogs, to roam free with his canine brethren in a big pasture behind Russell's house on Greenwell Springs Road.

Russell is convinced letting dogs interact off-leash with each other corrects several behavior problems not easily fixed by more traditional training methods. The theory is dog socialization helps aggressive animals by reducing their fear of one another, which often causes the aggression. And for little dogs like Bandit, it supposedly instills much-needed confidence.

Russell himself wasn't always a believer. He had heard of the concept through an Internet mailing. The author, a trainer in Spain, was advocating socialization. Russell became curious, but unconvinced.

"I spent years telling him it was the most irresponsible thing I had ever heard of," said Russell. "I told him it was just crazy."

That was until Russell met Rusty.

Rusty was a sheltie mix brought to the trainer six years ago because he couldn't play nice-nice with kids or other dogs. After all conventional training methods were exhausted, Rusty was given one last chance at civility.

Russell decided to set him loose in a field with a bunch of other unleashed dogs. Owner and trainer stood by nervously, expecting to pry a snarling sheltie off of one of the other animals. But that never happened.

"He lost all his aggression," said Russell. "All his aggression was on the leash."

Russell has been evangelizing the advantages of dog socialization ever since. And his clients have bought into the message en masse. On the Saturday Bandit was facing his fears, there were about 50 cars in the driveway of Russell's house.

Dog owners show up for two socialization sessions, an 8 a.m. and a 9 a.m. The earlier one had about 80 dogs on the day the Shi-Poo was socialized.

"It's hard to let your dog off the leash at first," said Luella Willaman, 29, with her two mixed dogs, Boudreaux and Mr. Biggles, by her side. "The dogs are just maniacs about it."

Sometimes the owners are manic, too. Like when Victoria Greene showed up late to the eight o'clock session, her two Dobermans in tow, and became verbally disappointed when asked to wait until the nine o'clock started.

"There are some dogs they wanted to see! Their best friends are in there!" Greene protested, as if translating for foreign friends. "But, OK, if you're policing things today."

Myrna Milani, a veterinarian and author who has written extensively about animal behavior and the "human-animal bond," says assuming that the emotional requirements of dogs are identical to ours is not correct.

"Part of (the desire to socialize dogs) comes from this feeling that the lives of dogs are substandard," Milani said. "As if all these thousands of years of making dogs like human companionship somehow doesn't work anymore."

Milani doesn't completely disagree with what Russell is doing, although that kind of sink-or-swim training methodology, referred to in the business as "sledding," isn't her style. "I don't have time to train my dogs twice," she said, in reference to the belief that dogs, like children, can pick up bad manners from their peers.

Both trainers, however, do agree socialization needs to be carefully supervised.

Perhaps nobody would agree more than Bandit. Within minutes, the Shi-Poo began to squeal and whimper, a sound Russell describes as that of "a dying rabbit." Another trainer, there from Houston to study Russell's session, said it sounded more like a "squeaky toy." Either way, it's not a good sound to make around packs of bigger dogs.

About five of them chased Bandit around the pasture, while Aucoin looked on in horror. Bandit darted to and fro, like a basketball player heading for the hoop. Russell, holding a horse whip he uses to break up fights, ran to the pooch's rescue. Three times.

Then there was a nasty tussle between a Dalmatian and a Catahoula. A blood-curdling yelp made all heads turn and sent Russell running.

Crack! Crack!

Lesson learned: a horse whip is an effective equalizer in canine confrontations.

Over the past decade, dog socialization has actually been a growing trend in the United States. It's just that most people don't call it that.

But thousands of dog runs have sprung up in parks all over the country. They are basically fenced off public spaces where dog owners are exempted from leash laws, and can allow their animals to fraternize with other dogs. There is even a directory of dog parks on the Internet: http://www.ecoanimal.com/dogfun/ .

BREC is planning to build them in four Baton Rouge parks: City, Forest, Greenwood and out near the Burbank Road soccer complex. Some $250,000 has been earmarked for the projects.

Russell said he is in favor of the dog parks, but cautioned BREC officials they should consider staffing them. The Dalmatian and Catahoula showdown was an example of why that's important.

"Without someone out here to break that up..." said Russell. "That would have been nasty."

The dog park in Costa Mesa, Calif., for example, which is more than 10 years old, just had its first fatality, according to Donna Theriault, a city manager who oversees the park's operations.

The fatal dog fight there involved a Chihuahua and a husky.

"Guess who died?" asked Theriault, who added that running a dog park is not always a walk in the proverbial park.

"They work in the sense that they attract a lot of people who do use the 'bark parks,'" she said. "but it's not always easy maintaining them and sorting out all of the social issues between the owners."

Milani contends that dog parks are more about human socialization, and often times are simply traumatic

experiences for the animals. "Some dogs experience physical exhaustion and over stimulation," she said.

"There are dogs that are just totally stressed out by this."

Most cities don't stress out about liability because posted signs warn dog owners to enter the areas at their own risk. (Russell makes his participants sign liability waivers.)

And there is risk, according to Kenneth Phillips, an attorney who exclusively handles dog bite cases. "A third or half of dog bite cases involve people trying to break up a dog fight," said Phillips. "That's what all my dog park cases are."

"Dog runs and parks are a good thing," said Lisa Peterson, a spokeswoman for the American Kennel Club, which publishes a brochure, "Establishing a Dog Park In Your Community."

"And dog socialization is very important because it helps dogs develop proper manners with other dogs and other people."

Whether that development needs the structure Russell provides his clients, or can happen in an unsupervised city park, is something Baton Rouge pooch owners will soon find out.

Aucoin, Bandit's owner, is sticking with Russell, convinced that her Shi-Poo is learning valuable lessons. "I think he needs to be around people," she said, as three big dogs chased Bandit toward the tree line. "He's 10 feet tall in the house, but he realizes what his size is here."

Photo: Color photos of Pooches visiting Dick Russell's "dog socialization" program running in packs in a big mud puddle that added excitement of their being off-leash; Dick Russell meeting with fellow trainers Ami More of Chicago and Chad Mackin and Crystal Phillips of Houston, the three trainers flew in to observe Russell's socialization program; B.W. photo of a white boxer taking a leisurely off-the-leash stroll on a recent morning (by John Oubre)

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People
A place to land Youth Oasis offers shelter and hope to teens at risk of becoming homeless

J.D. Ventura
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1-H
English

She completely covered the piece of paper with thick oily paint, creating a disorganization of color that made little sense.

Except to her.

"The blue is my loneliness and sadness, and the green represents the confused part of my mind," explained the 15-year-old, to anyone who cared to know. "The smudges are my problems, and the colored ones are the problems I am trying to solve."

She's not solving them alone. Neither are the four other girls living with her at the only shelter for homeless teens in Baton Rouge.

The nonprofit that runs the facility, which is located on South Acadian Thruway, is called Youth Oasis. The organization runs two programs: one providing apartments and counseling for young adults aging out of foster care and the other, Kaleidoscope, giving temporary shelter to children and teens (ages 10-17) who either left home, or were told to go.

The reasons for their arrival there, at the doorstep of a converted synagogue, are as different as the oily smudges the teen intends to hang over her dormitory bed. Some of the kids find the shelter on their own, while others are referred there by those in Baton Rouge's social services community who regard the Kaleidoscope program as an important transitional service, a place where youth can go while family problems get sorted out.

That sorting out process can happen a couple of different ways. Sometimes the teens are just not getting along with family, or are threatening to run away, so staff counselors at Kaleidoscope function as mediators, getting parents and kids to work things out by talking to one another.

Other times, a teen shows up and alleges parental abuse. When that happens, the program is a safe place where kids can stay for two weeks while the state investigates the abuse claims. Sometimes the teens go home, and sometimes the state takes them into custody.

"Our main objective is to keep the family together," said Suzie Bernard, a social worker at Capital Area Human Services District, a state-funded agency that often refers teens with emotional or behavioral problems to Kaleidoscope. "But we know that sometimes children and parents just need a break from each other."

That "break" often happens when a child or teenager runs away. According to the National Runaway Switchboard, between 1.3 million and 2.8 million runaway and homeless youth currently live on the streets of America. One out of seven kids in the United States will run away before they turn 18. And it's approximated that 5,000 runaway and homeless youth die from assault, illness and suicide each year.

The Switchboard receives 115,000 calls annually from concerned parents and runaway kids, according to Mitch Oldham, a spokesman for the agency.

Bernard said that the program provides a perfect "respite" for troubled teens who, without Kaleidoscope, would either run away or face only a few other ways to get help: like time in either juvenile detention or a state psychiatric facility.

"Turmoil" is the word Bernard chooses when asked to imagine the shelter not being there.

But unlike a state agency, the shelter must find its own funding sources. Which is why Alvin Smith, Youth Oasis executive director, recently baked brownies. The snacks were meant to sweeten a meeting between him and members of an "advisory committee" made up of some of the city's top charitable givers.

The group met to hear what Smith spends a lot of time thinking about since taking hold of the nonprofit's reins six months ago. Namely that much of the private foundation money the shelter program initially received when it opened in 2002 is gone.

And while federal grants and state contracts are still in place, the nonprofit needs to raise about $150,000 every year to keep the shelter and transitional living program running and to expand services.

"We want long-term buy-in based on an understanding of what we are doing here," said Smith. "...(and) we need to raise money by the end of the year."

Temporary parents

The scene in program directory Jan Gremillion's office provides a glimpse of what the shelter does. Temporarily managing the lives of homeless teenagers has left her desk decorated with curling sticky notes. The organization's "annual plan," which is handwritten on a torn-out sheet of steno paper, was pinned to the wall. Her phone rang with the frequency of a hotel switchboard.

"I need to track down a mom," she said, before jumping from line one to line two.

One of the kids who recently stayed at the shelter was stranded at school. His mother never picked him up and so the principal's office called Gremillion. She called the mother's cell phone number. No answer. She vowed to keep trying.

"Maybe she's going to pick him up at the (bus) transfer point," she said, before a knock on the door interrupted her.

One of the shelter's residents wanted to use the computers, despite the fact she lost the privilege earlier because of an angry outburst that involved thrown objects.

"I don't think it would be fair to let you back on the computer," Gremillion said, even-toned.

"That's not fair!" the teen protested.

"Life is not fair," replied Gremillion. "I am trying to show you there are choices and consequences."

Shelter staff also show the youth how to make meals and prioritize their homework assignments. They make sure they go to and return from school. The teens also receive individual counseling and meet, as a group, to reflect on the day's events.

Moments later the phone rang again. It was an "intake" call. A social worker was on the line and looking to refer a teen to the shelter.

"When she runs where does she go?" asked Gremillion, chewing the ice from her drink while listening to the answer.

"OK, and how long does she stay gone?"

The un-sheltered

Some never find a program like Kaleidoscope, and "stay gone" for a long time.

Heather Hill did.

The 19-year-old from New York ran away from home when she was 15. Since then she has hopped trains and walked all around the country, with her boyfriend and their three dogs.

Nowhere is home. But Baton Rouge is where she is now staying. Hill and some homeless friends, some from Louisiana, others from elsewhere, hang out under the staircase of a ramshackle apartment building near LSU. Youth Oasis estimates there are more than 1,000 homeless teens living in Baton Rouge at any given time.

Hill and her friends sat outside on beat-up couches and chairs, which surrounded a broken microwave they used as a coffee table. Some smoked weed and drank beer. Hill smoked cigarettes, and ate snack chips,

her belly firm and round in the ninth month of pregnancy.

She's not keeping it. The adoption agency has rented her a nearby apartment, which she is being evicted from after inviting 10 homeless friends, and their 15 dogs, to stay there, too.

After the baby is born, she is headed up to New York, and then to California. A shelter like Kaleidoscope was never something she considered.

"If you left home, why would you go to a shelter and follow someone else's rules?" she asked.

Hill and the other homeless kids under the staircase described a vast network of homeless teenagers and young adults all around the country. Some stay homeless in the same city. Others, like Hill, just keep moving. Many of them keep in touch and reconnect every few years, passing each other on the endless road.

Smith wants to reach out to runaways like Hill, before they're acculturated into street life. That, however, requires costly outreach work that, for now, is only a scribble on Gremillion's annual plan. By December, however, the organization hopes to be Baton Rouge's Safe Place site.

Safe Place is a national organization run by the YMCA, headquartered in Louisville, Ky. It works with local and national businesses to hang the Safe Place's logo in storefronts. Staff in those businesses are then trained to refer runaways seeking help to a shelter. Nextel, for example, recently agreed to turn all of its retail outlets into "safe places."

"The whole premise is that we reach kids earlier, so they don't end up on the streets," said Sandy Bowen, National Safe Place executive director. "It's better to run for help than to just run away."

Home too soon?

Helping kids isn't easy, though, particularly when your federal funding stipulates that you can only shelter them for 15 days. That sometimes puts Kaleidoscope in an awkward position. While the state's Child Protection Investigation Unit looks into claims of abuse, the shelter period expires, giving the program no choice but to send teens back to families who have not yet been fully evaluated by state case workers.

"What has been an issue and what our experience has been is that the Child Investigation Protection Unit has not fully taken advantage of that 15-day window of opportunity to complete the investigation and come up with a plan for a youth who is reporting abuse or neglect," said Gremillion.

Which, she added, results in youth being sent back to home environments she, more often than not, doesn't feel completely good about.

Shared concerns

Up in Monroe, Diana Caldwell doesn't always feel entirely comfortable with all of the state's evaluations either. Caldwell is the director of residential services at Our House, a program very similar to Kaleidoscope. Unlike the Baton Rouge program, however, Our House's federal funding does not limit a youth's stay to 15 days.

There have been instances when the state has taken longer than two weeks to complete its investigations, said Caldwell. And there have been times when the state has determined that a teen should go home, but stays at the shelter anyway.

"In many cases it's the parents that don't want them back," Caldwell added. And while she says the state "has done a tremendous job," its resources are "stretched real thin."

"I think (the state) just doesn't want to take them into custody."

"In no more than five days from the date of a report, and that's for a nonemergency, will we open a case and begin an investigation and assessment," said Anne Williamson, the secretary of the state's Department of Social Services. "If that child is in imminent danger and in harms way, we do have an immediate response time of no more than 24 hours."

But how long it takes for the state to complete an investigation, rather than initiate one, is the more critical question, particularly for homeless shelters like Kaleidoscope and Our House, which cannot themselves determine when and if a youth should return home when abuse has been alleged.

"I am going to want to verify that with front line staff," said Williamson, when asked if child protection investigators must complete an investigation in a set amount of time.

Nanette White, Williamson's press secretary, later acknowledged that in nonemergency cases investigators have up to 60 days to complete an abuse investigation.

"The ideal is to get a kid for a year, but you settle for what you can get," said Anne Brown, Kaleidoscope's new assistant program manager. "The reality is sometimes you have only one time, one touch, so you try to be very deliberate and do it well."

Back at the art class, the homeless 15-year-old started putting her paints away and then, almost as an afterthought, grabbed a heart- shaped stamp, and pressed it all over her smudgy collage.

"This is the love I have for people," she said, before hugging the visiting art teacher, and thanking her for showing up.

And a few hours later, under the staircase, the sun began to set on Hill and the other homeless kids, replaced by the cool, familiar darkness of night.

Photo: Color photo of Youth Oasis staff, from left, Alvin Smith, executive director, Anne Brown, assistant program manager, Jan Gremillion, program director, and James Papillion, youth development specialist (By Richard Alan Hannon); Color graphic is an illustration of youth hanging out (By David I. Norwood)

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People
Nurse's work recognized Joni Nickens honored by HIV/AIDS Web sites

J.D. VENTURA
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"Nondetectable." If you have HIV, it's a phrase you quickly learn, used to describe the encouragingly small amount of the virus in a person's body when anti-viral medicines are working best.

It's no small feat to achieve, however. Taking the pills is only half the issue. Staying healthy longer requires taking the right pills at the right times, stopping certain drugs once resistance to them builds, and then switching to different medications when the efficacy of others begins to falter.

Joni Nickens, a nurse practitioner at the Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel, treats quite a few patients who are "nondetectable" (and plenty of others who have detectable levels of the virus in their bodies, but are otherwise healthy). Her success in managing the health of the 84 HIV-positive inmates at the prison has, however, not gone undetected.

Nickens, a 44-year-old mother of two from Prairieville, was recently honored by one of the top HIV/AIDS Web sites, TheBody.com, for her work. She was one of 73 winners, chosen from 1,000 nominations submitted to the Web site. Awardees fell into two broad categories: inspirational people living with HIV, or the people who inspire them.

Nickens inspired inmate Edward Johnson. When Johnson checked into rehab in 1994 and tested positive, he thought "it's over."

"I was more scared than anything," he remembered during a recent check-up in Nickens' office.

He attributes his good health today to her and now counsels new inmates about the virus, a disease he has chosen to face optimistically. "As long as you are taking your medication, you can live a long time with this," he said.

Incarcerated since 2001, Johnson is scheduled to be released in five months, and plans to work for the American Red Cross office in Baton Rouge on HIV-related campaigns. He is fit to do so, Nickens determined, after a quick check of the man's ears, throat, heart and lungs.

"She takes great care of her patients and they all know that," said Nickens' boss, Cindy Park, who submitted the nomination to TheBody.com. "She can't help them all, but most of them know she is there for them."

From a medical standpoint, Nickens treats perhaps one of the most difficult subgroups to care for: those who battle alcohol and drug addictions as well as the virus. It is not uncommon for Nickens to see prisoners released, only to come back "sick as dogs." Since many of the HIV medications require patients to strictly adhere to their dosing schedules, the regimentation of prison life often leads to a quick improvement in their physical health.

Nickens said there are victories: like when she sees someone enter the prison extremely ill, with a huge viral load (a measurement of how much of the virus is in their body), only to become someone whose disease is "undetectable." And defeat: like the two HIV-related deaths last month.

"If only we could get to them sooner," said Nickens.

TheBody.com is an information clearinghouse for people with HIV. The organization is marking its 10th anniversary by presenting its HIV Leadership Awards. The site is visited by more than half a million people a day.

"We were looking for someone who could combine outstanding medical care with a great bedside manner," said Jay Dewey, project manager at TheBody.com. "Someone who was either inspiring patients to stay on a treatment regimen or to come in for counseling."

"She is like a mother to me," said Johnson, with Nickens in earshot. "She does a heck of a job."

Photo: Color photo of Joni Nickesn, a nurse practitioner at the Hunt Correction Center in St. Gabriel, talking with inmate Edward Johnson about his blood work. (By Arthur Lauck)

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People
Playing a little footy Australian native working to introduce his country's brand of football to BR

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Mr. Incredible. That's it. That's who Patrick Muller looks like.

Not literally, of course. But there's something about his 6- foot, 239-pound build that resembles the Pixar-created superhero. His shirt seems slightly tight, the material stretched over bulging muscles, like framed canvas pulled taut. There's no cape or superhuman powers, per se, but there are other similarities.

Like Mr. Incredible, Muller, 36, once lived a far flashier lifestyle. Before the mortgage and the kids, before diapers and domestication, there was always footy. He played the game, which is a veritable sports salad (a little American football, a dash of soccer, some rugby), semi-professionally in his native Australia. A little more than a year ago, now living in Baton Rouge after marrying his wife, Becca, a Louisianian, he formed the city's first footy team, The Baton Rouge Tigers.

Founding a footy team in Baton Rouge was almost as crazy as the time Muller and a couple of friends drove from Los Angeles to Las Vegas in a beat-up VW van (The vehicle had only two working gears, second and fourth.), only to sell it for $20 for pocket money once they got there. Or crazy like the time he returned to Perth to start a successful restaurant, only to turn around and come back to the States when his wife decided Louisiana was the only home for her.

Nowadays the adventure is on the field. After starting the team with a fellow Aussie friend who is no longer in Baton Rouge, Muller has managed to grow the outfit into a 30-plus player organization. About half the team is Australian, but the rest of the guys are Americans who were drawn to the sport because of the athleticism and strategy it requires.

And it's not just here.

A foot'y' in the door

The Tigers belong to the United States Australian Football League (USAFL) which is an association of more than 40 teams around the country. They have divisions and championships, umpires and an official Web site (http://www.usfooty.com). And fans.

"Unbelievable amount of heart," said Muller, standing in the parking lot of one of LSU's soccer fields off of Nicholson Road on a recent windy Saturday. He's referring to his virgin team's showing at the league's nationals last year, where he says they outplayed the defending national champions, but lost because of too many technical penalties. Heart is only half the battle, though, which is why Muller, and other team leaders, call their practices "training" sessions.

Many of the guys who join the Tigers have either never played footy before (the Americans) or have "had a kick" every now and then, but have never played in a league (the Australians). Either way, even practices have a serious overtone. There isn't a lot of goofing around. The mood is one of no-nonsense preparation - like a battalion that realizes it's low on ammo just before the landing craft hits the beach.

Honorary Australians

Three undergraduate-aged Americans - Ryan Ketron, Cullen Jones and Michael Bruckner - recently joined the team, and played their first league game against the Dallas club. First match, first loss.

"It's going to take a while," said Bruckner, an LSU student. "Hopefully in a few months I will be playing up to standards." The Dallas defeat wasn't disappointing, he explained, because, like many older teams in the league, seasoned clubs like Dallas have a tactical advantage, in that they have been playing alongside each other longer and can capitalize on the various strengths of their teammates, and make up for weaknesses. They also commit fewer errors.

A former soccer player, Bruckner described footy as "far more fast-paced" than other sports he's played. (A key difference from soccer: in footy tackling is allowed, and kicking the ball while it's on the ground doesn't get you much praise from fellow teammates.) In fact, in footy it makes you the target of a few jokes. "They have a different sense of humor," is how Bruckner describes the ribbing. His soccer style has earned him the moniker "Pele."

Escaping getting tackled by a guy twice as big is probably easier than escaping playful ridicule by Australian teammates. And almost everybody gets a nickname: like Fester, Girth, Rooster, Zulu and Fit Mick.

Ketron, who, according to some of his "mates," got laughs for his ferocious tackling of the team's only female member at practices, observed that the Dallas team took the game "a lot more seriously."

"I was looking to get involved in something more physical," said Ketron. "It was just way more different than anything I had ever played."

Fast game and one last practice

The uniqueness of the game is what draws many to it, said David Payne, the secretary of the USAFL and founder of one of the organization's oldest teams - made up entirely of American Army soldiers stationed in the Mohave Desert.

"(Americans like it) because it incorporates a lot of the fundamentals of football, soccer and baseball," said Payne. "But it's fast-paced; there's no time-outs, so the game has a constant flow."

The velocity of the game takes some getting used to, explained the Tigers assistant coach, Jim Trevaskis. And sometimes the best play is to just pass the ball on.

"If you haven't played very much, it's easy to get lost," said Trevaskis. In footy, getting lost often happens when new teammates cannot anticipate each other's movements. Players, free to move across the field, fail to play their positions, crowd the ball and quickly turn the game into a defensive battle, lacking technical choreography. "They were all over the place (in Dallas). Against Atlanta we are going to make it an open game and not crowd each other."

At the last practice before the Atlanta game, which would be a home game in Baton Rouge, the team gathered beneath a monstrous Spanish moss-covered tree, jutting out of a field at the BREC soccer complex on Burbank. Muller's voice somehow cuts through everyone else's, revealing his accent, even from a great distance. He shouts things like: "Well, done, Ryan, beautiful!" and "Giddyup, boys!"

His players are in a constant state of hustle. In one drill they run at each other and practice a standard, yet difficult, maneuver: kicking the ball from their hands, to another player, while running. The men run up the field and yell each other's names, as if to say, "The ball's headed your way." And then the kick. The exercise is repeated over and over again, sounding like: silence, silence, hey, hey, punt, silence, hey, hey, punt.

After the practice, talk turned to Atlanta. "They have a music video on their Web site," someone said.

"Doesn't that make you want to kick their asses even more?" asked Muller.

The guys laughed at that, encircled by a horizon oiled creamsicle orange by the setting sun and beneath the blue-black dome of an approaching night and an already present moon. Trevaskis, holding a clipboard, yelled out names and debriefed players on strengths, weaknesses and the coaching staff's expectations of them on the big day.

"It's going to be confusing at first," warned Trevaskis, as a few emboldened mosquitoes made contact with sweating legs and shoulders. "Don't stress out."

Game day

"One, two, three...go Tigers!" the players yelled, arms pointing into the circle, where hands hovered atop others, before the men separated, like racked pool balls sent flying by the cue. They were there to beat Atlanta. The Kookaburras. A few minutes into the game, the Tigers' Anthony Civitarese offered an early prediction. Atlanta was playing hard, right out of the gate. The Tigers, with more younger players than the Kookaburras, had youthful athleticism on their side. But with four 20-minute quarters to play, they could lose that advantage if they tired.

"Their skills are a little better than ours," said Civitarese, before asking another teammate on the sidelines, "Who's the big lanky guy?"

The big lanky guy is a new Tiger named Chris. "Chris! Chris!" Anthony shouted across the field. "Drop behind this big guy here!"

The men chasing the ball suddenly collided, before dropping into a squirming heap, as the whistle signaled a penalty, and failed to stop a brief shoving match between two of the opposing players.

A Tiger came off the field, so out of breath he could barely speak. The other team is a lot bigger, he mumbled, looking a bit stunned. He shook his head affirmatively, as if agreeing with his own statement. Yes, very rough.

The Tigers scored first, and spirits were high. Even the Atlanta guys recognized the threat early on.

"They are a physical team with a lot of young players who you can tell have played rugby," said Greg Cave, a 48-year-old Australian businessman from Atlanta. "Their skills are low, but fitness may prevail."

Tough-love from the coach

Days before the game, BREC was nice enough to lay down sand on the playing field. This was good in that it leveled the terrain. Bad in the sense that it made players feel as if they were running on a beach. By the end of the first quarter, people were already hot and exhausted.

Muller huddled the team together in the few minutes between the first and the second quarter. Mr. Incredible was suddenly incredibly serious.

"Look at the width of that field," he said to the team, pausing to actually allow them to look at the expanse. "Do you see how wide it is?"

What Trevaskis had feared was happening. Unable to fan out and pass the ball to each other as a way of getting it down the field, offensively, some of the Tigers were working independently, crowding the ball, which resulted in an immobile defensive posture.

Muller offered a few personalized critiques of the situation, starting with one of the three new guys, Cullen Jones.

"Cullen! Come on, dude! Don't go down there," he bellowed, pointing to a part of the field where the young player had presumably, and incorrectly, gone. "I want you on the half forward flank!"

Get your breath, he ordered the rest of the team, before pulling four others aside. "We should not be losing in the center," he growled at players 16, 2, 3 and 19, looking like a father giving the final warning to mischievous children.

A few moments later, Muller, red in the face, admitted that his guys were "excited and eager to please," but he was still worried. "We've got to get back to basics," he said, his bald head red from the sun and the exertion.

Ben Clayton, the grandfather of new guy Ketron, thinks the basics should include some protective gear. What contact sport doesn't? When he played football for Ole Miss in the 1950s, he sustained injuries to his back and neck - even with a helmet and pads. On the sidelines, squinting to see his grandson in the brilliant sunshine, he admitted the lack of gear initially "horrified" him.

And the rules of the game remained a mystery Clayton intended to solve later, when he would make time to read the instructional program passed out by the team. Until then, he was just there to show his support, and make a few people on the sidelines laugh.

"This is footy," he said, already grinning from his undelivered punch line. "Not to be confused with footsy, which I played before I met my wife."

Blood and breathlessness

It's anything but footsy, as was proven moments later when veteran Tiger Robert Montanaro limped off the field, his knee stiff and swelling. "My knee ended up in someone's face," he said matter- of-factly, shrugging. "He told me all his teeth were in place."

At the same time, Atlanta's No. 39, a 32-year-old chemical engineer named Barry Collins, came off the field,

too. His profusely bleeding nose made his game jersey look as if someone threw a couple of glasses of merlot on him. The gore didn't seem to phase him. "It's not major," he told a coach, who gave him gauze and a white towel Collins proceeded to quickly turn pink.

"You take a header?" asked his teammate.

"Yeah," said Collins, the gauze now shoved up his nose.

Another player walked by and chimed in, "Looks like he's been in the game now!"

At the end of the second quarter, the Tigers were losing - big time. Atlanta had 43 points to their 8. (Scores occur when the ball passes through one of three goals, one, worth seven points, and the other two worth one each). Baton Rouge players were bleeding. Discouraged-looking faces gasped for breath. Player No. 3, L.J. Eve, decided to soliloquize on the sideline, and challenged his teammates to tap into their anger, to get more aggressive on the field. Those who couldn't do so, shouldn't even play, he said angrily.

Mr. Incredible was more diplomatic. The angry dad was now replaced by the concerned father, gently applying an adhesive bandage to a scraped knee.

"You are doing a brilliant job," he encouraged. "What I am now saying is if you can do more, let's do it."

Civitarese then asked them to give 150 percent, in dedication to not only the fallen soldiers of Australia, but to the Americans serving in Iraq. For a few seconds the team is silent. And then they are on their feet, renewed.

Game over

Maybe it was Civitarese's challenge, but the third quarter was the Tigers' best. Even Atlanta admitted as much.

"They are taking this quarter," said Justin Biggs, 32, who works for the Australian consulate in Atlanta. "It's good to see."

But victory eluded them again.

A quick 20 minutes later, the fourth quarter ended with the clapping of fans, hip-hip-hoorays from the Georgian winners and excited talk of the crawfish and beer that was to follow. A few cold ones would undoubtedly take some of the sting out of the final score: 79 Atlanta, 9 Baton Rouge.

Mr. Incredible said "Circle up, boys!" and they sang their team's song:

Root, root, root!

Root for Baton Rouge!

You can root a kangaroo or a wallaby or two,

But it's better if you root for Baton Rouge!

As people began to make for their cars, the man who played college football in 1955, Ben Clayton, made some folks on the sideline smile again.

"I noticed the accent of Baton Rouge and Atlanta is the same," he said, a grin again before the punch line. "It's Australian."

Photo: Color photo is Michael Bruckner, left, and Sean Sabottka, right, attempting to stop Atlanta's team captain, Brent Bacon, during a footy game between the two teams recently held at the BREC soccer complex; L.J. Eve lacing his shoes during an Australian Rules football practice; Patrick Muller, center, coaching his players during a break between quarters of their game against Atlanta; B.W. photos are Seb Prohn recuperating after playing against the visiting Atlanta footy team; Mark Bruckner, cheering his son, American team member Michael Bruckner, on at the home game against Atlanta (By Brian Harkin)

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People
Movement to "decriminalize" marijuana facing uphill battle in East Baton Rouge

J.D. VENTURA
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English

Daniel Williams hardly looked like counter culture's poster boy. Sitting at a cafe table recently outside of Highland Coffees, he blended into the academic landscape: hair a bit tousled, notebooks askew, brainy-yet-hip glasses over a concentrated stare.

The media clearly made him nervous. His eye contact was intermittent and he went "off the record" almost immediately.

Nervousness is perhaps understandable. This is the state, after all, that considered drug testing all TOPS scholarship recipients, like Williams. So when you become the president of a student group at LSU that is trying to "decriminalize" marijuana in East Baton Rouge Parish, you choose your words carefully. Especially when talking to a reporter who is expecting you to say that you love smoking weed.

Williams, 22, didn't say that. Instead he said innocuous things like "we want to work toward harm reduction" and "drugs are a part of society." And then: "We do not encourage the illegal use of any substance, or breaking the law in any way."

The last statement seemed a bit ironic, given the "420" parties the Cannabis Action Network of Louisiana has put on for the last six years. This year's event, held again at the Spanish Moon nightclub, was a fund-raiser for its ballot initiative - which aims to let EBR voters decide in October whether to lessen the penalties for marijuana possession.

For decades "420" has been drug culture code for marijuana. Several sources attribute the reference to a group of Californian teenagers who would meet, back in 1971, behind their high school at 4:20 p.m. to smoke pot. The "420" reference eventually took off and enjoyed widespread adoption among discreet pot smokers all over the world.

So a 420 party could only mean one thing, right? Maybe. Maybe not.

Politically, marijuana advocates may have some reason to party. A Gallup poll conducted in 2003 showed that, since 1969, there has been a 12 percent increase in the number of Americans who think marijuana should be legalized. Still, a sizeable 64 percent of those polled aren't in favor of decriminalizing cannabis.

Strong pro-pot lobbyist groups, like the Marijuana Policy Project (MPP) and the National Organization to Reform Marijuana Laws (NORML), have enjoyed healthy public support on the issue of medical marijuana, however, with that 1999 Gallup poll indicating that 73 percent of Americans support the drug's prescribed use to treat those with terminal illness or chronic pain.

Allen St. Pierre, NORML's executive director, said there was "very little" going on with regard to marijuana reform in Louisiana, however. It remains among the top third harshest states in terms of the severity of its marijuana sentencing guidelines.

Comparatively, adjacent Mississippi has somewhat decriminalized marijuana, in that first offenders who are caught possessing 30 grams or less face no jail time and are fined no more than $250. On subsequent offenses, for the same amount, only fines increase. The same offender in Louisiana, however, faces up to six months in jail. On a second possession offense, an offender is looking at a $2,000 fine and up to five years of jail time. A third possession offense in Louisiana, no matter what the amount, brings a felony conviction and up to 20 years in prison.

St. Pierre said that despite New Orleans being the "epicenter" of a live music scene sometimes associated with marijuana usage, that cultural phenomenon has not translated into substantive legal reform. Meanwhile, student groups, like CANOLA, try their best to make an impact, he said.

"(On campus) NORML chapters struggle with constant turnover," said St. Pierre. "People either burn out, or someone gets arrested. Many local efforts tend to die on the vine unless they are constantly cultivated."

Williams knows he's got his work cut out for him, admitting the pro-pot movement at LSU doesn't have "great funding" or "much political clout." Which is why, he explained, they proposed a parish- level ballot initiative, as opposed to a statewide campaign. Of the 12,000 signatures Williams said they need to collect, they have had 3,000 registered EBR voters sign so far.

If the measure makes it onto the ballot, voters will be asked whether they think it's a good idea to radically change the city ordinance that prescribes sentencing guidelines for marijuana possession. CANOLA wants to change that ordinance, which is currently in line with the state's sentencing structure, so that possession of marijuana, no matter what offense, would only be fineable. In other words, the city court could no longer impose incarceration, probation or rehabilitation on the drug offender. And the maximum fine would be $100.

Currently, the city court can sentence an offender to six months in the parish jail, up to a $500 fine or both.

"I would have to be against any initiative to soften sentencing guidelines," said the city's assistant chief administrative officer, Alfred Williams. "That would only make marijuana more available to not only college students, but kids in high school."

At one time the city had an Anti-Drug Task Force. But when the Holden administration examined the program, they discovered the initiative was only staffed by its director, Robert Gaston, and an assistant. According to Alfred Williams, it was an office that once employed 15 staffers, but eventually just "faded out." The federal grants allocated to run the task force (about $200,000 to $300,000, according to the mayor's office) had already been redirected to juvenile services and the police department.

Gaston and his assistant were removed from the payroll, saving the city $150,000, according to the assistant chief administrative officer. Currently the grant money pays probation officers to monitor juvenile offenders, and pays police officers who work drug- related details overtime.

The reformation of drug laws has systemic benefits, contend many lobbyist groups, like the New York-D.C.-based Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), which has advocated softer sentencing as a solution to prison overcrowding. A spokesman for the DPA, Michael Blaine, said they have campaigns currently running in eight states, and plan on beginning a lobbying initiative in Louisiana "before August."

"These sentencing disparities are driving prison populations through the roof," said Blaine from his cell phone in the Atlanta airport. "Many of these people who are locked up are nonviolent offenders ... (Louisiana) needs to start taking a look at its minimum sentences."

According to Blaine, the DPA met with Gov. Kathleen Blanco's staff "on several occasions," culminating with a meeting last September, to discuss prison overcrowding as it relates to drug sentencing. Repeated inquiries to confirm whether such meetings took place went unanswered by the Governor's office.

Party-goers at Spanish Moon were not as tight-lipped.

"It seems obvious that there is no significant threat from the growth, use or distribution of marijuana," said John Raleigh, a 24 year-old LSU student from Iowa. "There's ulterior motives for it's illegality. And there are vested interests in the war on drugs."

A few steps away at the bar, Jacob Russell, CANOLA's treasurer and a junior at LSU, launched into a lengthy, detailed history of marijuana prohibition and remained optimistic about furthering a liberal drug policy initiative in such a conservative part of the country.

"You begin to see the more libertarian side of the conservatives and more of them want to legalize it and tax it," said Russell. "So with decriminalization, the only thing they want to know is: 'Will it cost me less tax money whenever some kid gets busted for pot?'"

By 9 p.m., Daniel Williams and some other members of the group set up a table in the bar, covered with a hemp banner, bags of fake marijuana, and cannabis-themed magazines, like Weed World. The petition awaited signatures on a clip board, as the party's guests continued to arrive. Russell and other activists imagine the day when paying a marijuana fine will be akin to paying a traffic ticket, and point to the successful grassroots ballot effort in Columbia, Mo., that led to just such a system being created there.

By 11 p.m. there was a line waiting to get in, and well over 200 people inside the bar. Williams took the stage and cited the number of people arrested in the United States in 2003 on marijuana- related charges (755,186).

"And 88 percent of those arrests are not dealers, smugglers or even cultivators, but rather generally

nonviolent pot smokers, like so many of us here tonight."

Nonviolent or not, Tom Riley, a spokesman for the White House's Office of National Control Policy says legalizing marijuana is also a public health issue. "Marijuana is a much bigger part of the national addiction problem than many people acknowledge," said Riley. "This is not your father's marijuana. It's more potent than it used to be ... and it has very serious effects on (the development of brain functions) in young people."

That marijuana is a "gateway drug" is an old argument that should not be overlooked, either, according to Janice Williams, who represents Louisiana's Partnership For A Drug Free America chapter. "It leads to more harmful and deadly substances," she said, before also suggesting alcohol be more tightly regulated.

The city's Alfred Williams subscribes to the "gateway" argument, too. After "working in substance abuse programs for years," Baton Rouge's assistant chief administrative officer isn't interested in making marijuana use easier.

"I had an opportunity to see first hand what marijuana does," said the city's Williams. "Most who got addicted to cocaine and harder drugs got their start on marijuana and alcohol."

Not long after CANOLA's Williams concluded his speech, the first band of the evening took the stage. People stood and watched the show, beers in hand, greeting friends as they arrived. Just after 11:30, six people had signed the petition. Over the next several months CANOLA will need to gather thousands more signatures. But even if the group manages to get the initiative on the ballot, it may prove fruitless.

Mary Roper, a special assistant in the Parish Attorney's office, reviewed the proposal and found problems.

"The proposed amendment would be unconstitutional in its present form in that it seeks to define as misdemeanor offense ... crimes which are defined as a felony under state law," she wrote in an e- mail.

Roper added, if a police officer charges someone in EBR for possession of marijuana, that officer can choose to cite the offender for breaking either the city ordinance or the state law. So, even if the ballot initiative passed, law enforcement officers could bypass the more lenient city court system by writing-up violations of state law.

And this, explained Roper, would only cause the parish government to lose fine money to the state.

What sorts of questions Roper's findings will pose for Daniel Williams' group is to be seen. At the 420 party, though, the mood was not bogged down by such deflating legalese, and the evening's questions seemed easier to answer.

Like when Williams playfully asked the clapping crowd, "Who here likes marijuana?"

Photo: Color photo of Daniel Williams, president of CANOLA, encouraging attendees at the recent 420 fundraiser to sign a petitition to get a marijuana reform question on East Baton Rouge's ballot in October with Travis Hans, a DJ; B.W. photo of the crowd at the Spanish Moon during a 420 rally (By Kerry Maloney)

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People
Seeking shelter Homelessness reaching into rural areas

J.D. VENTURA
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English

PONCHATOULA - Never mind the unfinished floors. Overlook the mold growing like wild moss on the ceiling of the bathroom. Ignore the chains and padlocks on the refrigerator doors. Forget about the noticeable lack of toys or playmates.

At least Nicole Henderson's three young children have a place to live.

That there is a homeless shelter in her small hometown may have once been reassuring news to the 22-year-old mother from Ponchatoula. She could remain close to her grandmother, the one who asked her to take the kids and make a go of it elsewhere. No need to move to New Orleans or Baton Rouge to find help. They'd go to House of Serenity. It sounded nice. It's just temporary, she told herself.

That was two years ago.

Now, staring blankly at her children - Jack, 3; Kar'Darius, 1; and Reggie, 5 - she says she feels trapped. Maybe she will leave in May. But that's a hope more than a plan.

There are 29 other people staying at the homeless shelter with her. Some of them stay for a brief period of time, or leave to take a job, or to stay with a relative, or just disappear. Some come back. Others, like Henderson, have been living there off and on since Francis Seymour, a retired school teacher from California, decided to open the place back in 2003.

If its mission is to help the homeless, then the House of Serenity is undoubtedly a success. Some who live there praise Jesus and "Ms. Francis" in the same sentence when they speak of salvation. But the success of a rural homeless shelter, advocates of the homeless say, is an accurate barometer of a growing national problem.

Homelessness is no longer just an urban phenomenon.

"In rural areas homelessness is even more hidden," said Brad Paul, the executive director of the Washington-based nonprofit, National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness. "As we learn more about the effects of the housing crisis in this country, we are beginning to learn it's a growing problem...You see (families) doubling and tripling up, or living in houses that would be condemned in bigger cities."

Hardly any of Paul's contemporaries in the advocacy community shy away from using the word "crisis" when describing low-income housing and other programs intended to prevent homelessness from happening. Look at the Section 8 program. Call the housing authority. These programs are overwhelmed and underfunded, advocates charge. And when people cannot readily access the help these programs provide, many end up seeking shelter, not only in big cities, but in small towns like Ponchatoula.

Small town life is all Warren Crawford has ever known. The 60- year-old grew up with nine siblings in Haskell, Tenn. Gone are the days when, as a young farmhand, he bought a Coke for a nickel, or a pack of cigarettes for 25 cents. Most of his family is gone, too. His dad and his two closest brothers died of cancer years ago.

Home for Crawford has been wherever he makes his liver and onions, fried in bacon grease. Home, for now, is the House of Serenity. Before arriving there, he lived at the Super 8 in Covington. Then home was an apartment in Ponchatoula, where he made a shrimp dish the neighbors' kids loved. On a recent morning he watched Henderson's oldest boy, Jack, pour sugar on his cornflakes, "You wanna get this again?" he asked, showing Jack a knuckle sandwich and winking playfully at the giggling child. "I was just teaching him to take care of himself before."

How to take care of families like Henderson's, as opposed to single drifters like Crawford, who policy makers call "the chronically homeless," has created debates over how federal and state funding sources should be allocated, particularly with regard to President Bush's 2006 proposed budget. The major sticking points

include a $174 million increase in funding aimed at only the chronically homeless (the "Samaritan Housing" program) and a $72 million decrease in a USDA-run program called Section 515, which encourages development of low-income rural housing through low- interest loans.

Paul and other homeless advocates say the Samaritan Housing program will effectively narrow the definition of homelessness by making those resources only available to "single adults with disabilities who have been homeless over a year, or at least four times in a three-year period." The worry?: that the homeless loner begging for money on the city sidewalk may be helped at the expense of families in rural areas who wind up homeless due to a severe lack of affordable housing.

"Section 8 (government vouchers that can be used to pay rent to some private sector landlords) is crashing, and we don't have anything to replace it," warned Ann O'Hara, the associate director of the Technical Assistance Collaborative Inc., a Boston-based nonprofit that examines the links between homelessness and affordable housing. "You are not going to get people out of homeless shelters without the affordable housing issue being solved."

Henderson has never applied for Section 8 or public housing (government-owned apartments) because she heard the waiting lists were too long. Officials in Tangipahoa Parish, where the House of Serenity is located, confirmed that it takes anywhere from a year and a half to two years to be approved for Section 8 housing there. There are 110 units of public housing in the parish, with a waiting list that currently has 50 people on it. Getting an apartment in public housing takes about a year once you are added to that list.

In East Baton Rouge Parish, the waiting list for Section 8 assistance has been frozen since 1999. There are 140 people waiting for public housing units currently in EBR.

According to Julie Stafford, lack of affordable housing is creating a "huge crisis." As the director of supportive housing for the Volunteers of America, she manages the Housing and Urban Development grant for five parishes: Ascension, East and West Feliciana, Point Coupee and Iberville. Stafford uses that money to augment the rents of people who are homeless and disabled, but who have some income to pay for day-to-day expenses (usually Social Security Income, or SSI). Here's the crisis part: Her federal grant was only $57,000 last year.

That only subsidizes 12 units -across five parishes.

"There is a very limited amount of resources in rural areas," said Stafford. "People just don't think there is a problem in rural areas because it's not about people in the streets with their families."

Even Seymour was surprised by the depth of the problem. "I've taken in people from out of the swamps," she said, standing in the back yard of her shelter, where there is a shed that's been converted into a chapel. "I would never have dreamt that there were this many people homeless in an itty bitty place like this."

Seymour said that while she's thankful to those who donate clothes to the shelter, what she really needs is a solid funding source. She funds the shelter's operation largely from her retirement savings, and said she receives no state or federal subsidies.

"Hats off to her good intentions in terms of creating such a place," said Philip Mangano, the executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, upon hearing of Seymour's House of Serenity. Mangano, who has been described in the media as the President's "homelessness czar," said the federal government is acknowledging "the widespread nature of rural homelessness." "Ultimately we want the movement around the country to be aimed not at maintaining homelessness, but ending it."

Henderson wants that, too. But with the long waiting lists for affordable housing, and the minimum income requirements of some programs, she and Crawford have perhaps more in common than the various policies that attempt to help them. For now, they share a roof over their heads and a desire to leave the shelter. And although they don't have homes, they cling to country life and dream of independence.

"I'm missing," said Crawford, with Henderson's children playing around him. "But I ain't gone."

Photo: Color photos are: Nicole Henderson giving son Kar'Darius his bottle; Francis Seymour, owner of House of Serenity, putting away "a small load" of groceries at the shelter; B.W. photos are: Hank Vandenakker serving spaghetti to residents of the shelter; Glenn Klein praying during Bible study; Eddie Crosby; Wayne Ogden, far left, Kar'Darius Nelson, Robin Henderson and Nicole Henderson sitting on a sofa at the House of Serenity (By Kerry Maloney)

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Despite fall of ostrich market, Clinton farm finds success

By **J.D. VENTURA**
The (Baton Rouge) Advocate
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CLINTON, La. (AP) - When it comes to ostriches, Maro Dermody is one of the few ostrich farmers in the United States who didn't have his head completely in the sand. Evidence of that is easy enough to come by. He still has 20 ostriches roaming his fields off of La. 961 in Clinton.

He used to have 400. But those days are long gone, along with what many thought would be a thriving North American ostrich industry.

Dermody's abbreviated story goes something like this: man from Guatemala owns successful Baton Rouge restaurant (Acadian Seafood), man sells restaurant in 1992, man decides to raise ostriches with his Vietnamese wife, whom he met in Hawaii.

Typical, right?

Turns out it is. Tech stocks weren't the only over-hyped investment of the '90s. Many people invested heavily in ostrich farming. It seemed sensible, a promising business venture that required very little upfront capital. The meat was far leaner than beef. It was boneless. Ostrich skin produced lustrous leather. Ostrich oil had been shown to have medicinal value when used topically. As health-conscious Americans sought out healthier red meat alternatives, ostrich ranchers would reap the rewards.

Never happened, though. Instead, the domestic ostrich industry had almost completely collapsed by 1980.

LSU researcher Jeff Gillespie published a study in an agricultural trade journal in 2002. The report, which was more or less an autopsy on the ostrich industry, concluded that the market never took hold in the United States for a variety of reasons.

Many breeders were inexperienced hobbyists or career changers caught up in a formidable learning curve. This left them incapable of mass producing quality hides and finished leather -- a big problem, given the intense competition they faced from South Africa. (The highly evolved commercial ostrich industry there is more than 100 years old and corners the global market for all ostrich products.) And perhaps most damning: the average American carnivore, it turns out, wasn't ready to grill a "zoo-type" animal at the family barbecue.

Still, speculation on where the market was going attracted the ambitious and overly hopeful. Dermody made some good decisions early on. For one thing, he got in cheap and took it slow. Instead of buying expensive "breeder birds," those with pedigrees that at the industry's apex were selling for upward of $50,000 a pair, he bought his first two run-of-the-mill ostriches for $3,000.

"There were some people who thought I was crazy," Dermody said, of his decision to start his ostrich farm, The Acadian Ostrich Ranch. "But I had just grown tired of the of the seven-day-a-week, 15-hour-a-day restaurant business."

It was his knowledge of that business that proved invaluable. When the "breeder market" began to change into a "slaughter market," he used his restaurant connections to promote the meat to area chefs. He created some demand.

Those entrepreneurs who were breeding birds to sell them to other breeders suffered some of the biggest losses. The laws of supply and demand were not on their side. David Gulledge of Zachary, for example, ended up with 450 birds he intended on selling to "coops in Texas" that supposedly wanted "breeders," whose offspring would be slaughtered for their oil. Unlike Dermody's target market, however, Gulledge's didn't exist. There were too many birds and not enough consumers interested in their byproducts.

Gulledge ended up killing and burying most of his flock. The funeral's price tag? A quarter of a million dollars.

"The state said they were going to help jump-start the industry," said Gulledge. "But we had no help. It turned into a bad experience for a lot of people."

According to Larry Michaud, the press secretary for the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, the emu and ostrich industry "came on like gang busters," with too many people jumping into an over-hyped "niche" market in Louisiana, and nationally. His department issued several press releases to the "over 100" bird farmers at that time, warning them breeder bird prices were unrealistically high. When the market collapsed, free roaming ostriches were reported all over the state, as farmers got out of the business by opening their pens, or unloading their shotguns.

"We have a marketing division that markets over 550 manufactured food products," said Michaud. "But we don't have the resources to market an individual commodity, by any stretch."

Richard Blalock hoped otherwise. Like Dermody, the Zachary man was looking for a change at the conclusion of his career in construction. At the height of the ostrich boom nationally, the farmer had three pairs of breeder ostriches and 13 pairs of breeder emus in his field, along with 150 birds ready for slaughter. He and several other ranchers hoped that a USDA-approved slaughterhouse in McComb, Miss., would help to legitimize the bird meat with area consumers. USDA inspections would, they hoped, help with proposed marketing efforts.

"It reaches a point when the individual needs some help if it's to go further," said Blalock, who, like Gulledge, felt government support may have helped save many Louisiana ostrich ranches. "Marco (Dermody) had the financial resources and connections to take the hides and process them into finished products. Meat was a sideline product for him. For us, it wasn't."

"I had to stay flexible," said Dermody, who eventually opened up a leather shop on his farm, where he sells custom-made boots, handbags and other leather products made from ostrich, alligator and various kinds of snake skins. Most of the ostrich skins used in his products come from his birds' offspring.

These days, however, the majority of Dermody's business happens not in the field, but on the phone. The leather goods store and ostrich ranch aren't nearly as lucrative as the "skin trade" business he has developed.

He now spends most of his time connecting farmers who produce various raw animal skins with tanneries that turn the skins into finished leather. He is a broker who negotiates prices for clients in the United States and abroad.

"I think there will always be room for small producers that do specialty things," said John R. Wade, a Folsom veterinarian who ran one of the largest ostrich farms in the country, Pacesetter Ostrich Farm. At its height, Pacesetter had 5,000 ostriches on two ranches, in Louisiana and Arizona. Wade mostly blames the South African ostrich industry for killing much of the U.S. market in its infancy. Overseas prices were simply too low for the domestic market to compete for important international business. Like Blalock and Gulledge, he bristled at alleged government indifference.

"I think that the (federal government) didn't do anything. If you were raising cattle or horses, then you made a difference (to them). We just gave them a good little chuckle."

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LA Ostrich Ranch; Despite fall of ostrich market, Clinton farm finds success

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7 | 20050320laostrichranch

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LA Ostrich Ranch; Despite fall of ostrich market, Clinton farm finds success

By **J.D. VENTURA**
The (Baton Rouge) Advocate
1,170 words
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Associated Press Newswires (APHO)
English

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By **J.D. VENTURA**
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Associated Press Newswires (APHO)
English

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The (Baton Rouge) Advocate
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The (Baton Rouge) Advocate
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16 March 2005
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English

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People
Louisiana's movie man Mark Smith has worked hard to make the state more "film friendly"

J.D. VENTURA
1,482 words
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The Baton Rouge Advocate
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English

The state's entertainment industry director is a recovering alcoholic.

His beloved father died of a heart attack.

And his mom has lung cancer.

Mark Smith isn't afraid to talk about these things. Because, he says, he has learned to "deal with life on life's terms." That doesn't mean the 44-year-old lawyer who many credit with creating Louisiana's now-thriving film industry is a victim of passivity. Hardly.

But knowing how to play the cards you've been dealt has undoubtedly come in handy, especially when you are in charge of getting the slow-moving machinery of state government to function by Hollywood's fast-paced terms. Making Louisiana "film friendly" has been his mission for the past eight years, four of which he has spent in director roles.

Despite some recent budgetary criticism of the 2002 Louisiana Motion Picture Incentive Act, which he was instrumental in passing, few would dispute that Smith has been a driving force in bringing more than $500 million dollars worth of movie business to the state.

Those who know him say his professional bilingualism, his fluency in governmental legalese as well as the language of big studio Los Angeles, has made him the go-to guy for film producers and state lawmakers alike. He has a reputation as a red-tape cutter, but, he says, scissors are not his preferred tool. He's not about dismantling government. Instead, "facilitation is what we do best," he says.

That he ran the Boston Marathon in under three hours seems about right. He is one of those Blackberry-toting, digital-watch-wearing, conference-call-in-the-car executives who seems to get people excited with the sheer velocity of his schedule.

Lunch, for example, tends to slow Smith down. So sometimes he just doesn't eat one. To spend even a morning with him is to need a can of Red Bull and possibly a nap.

Recently, Smith, who is tall, clean-cut and somehow organized in a way that somehow exemplifies his military background, met with Terica Cobb, a 32-year-old woman interested in starting her own record label. (Smith now oversees economic development as it relates to all entertainment, not just movies.) Seated at a conference table across from Smith, Cobb described how she represents a young singer, who goes by the name Lady Royale. She was "seeking finances" to market her client, she explained, before handing him the executive summary of her business plan.

"We don't have a pot of gold for you," Smith told the nervous entrepreneur, before explaining that Cobb would have to "do her homework" and learn how to incorporate her business and apply for private bank financing. But he promised to help her, too, and agreed to meet her again to discuss her progress. "These are our diamonds," he said to her, referring to artists like the young rhythm and blues singer Cobb manages. "You want to produce music, and that's a product you're selling. Like Starbuck's coffee."

Creative types might flinch at the comparison. But Smith, a native of Rhode Island who came to Louisiana in 1990 to attend Southern's law school, has spent a good part of his career making lawmakers and people like Cobb understand that art is a business.

"On the 'Runaway Jury' soundstage in New Orleans, I brought key members of the Legislature through the set," said Smith. "I wanted them to see that the carpenters were local, that the lumber was from Louisiana."

"For someone who is not from here, he is an amazing salesman for the state," said Alex Schott, who works for Smith as the director of the Governor's Office of Film and TV. "He knows how to get people fired up. And

one of the greatest things I have learned from him is everyone has something to offer. Sometimes a person just doesn't know their own value. He is good at pointing people in the right direction."

There was a time when Smith struggled with the direction of his own life. It wasn't until his mid-20s that he admitted to himself he was an alcoholic and went sober. He dealt with the issue by spending the next six years working with substance abusers: first, hands-on, as a counselor back in Rhode Island, then as a grant researcher, working to secure federal money to fund treatment programs in Louisiana during his law school years.

Jim Becnel, a professor at LSU's medical school who specializes in issues of addiction, knew Smith then. "While Mark doesn't wear it on his sleeve, or let it define who he is, it's an important part of him," said Becnel, of Smith's recovery. "He is so solid about what he does professionally, he can openly talk about those things."

There have been professional low points, too. When legislative restructuring moved the state's Office of Film and Video from the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism to the Department of Economic Development in 2001, six colleagues of Smith's faced unemployment. He was the lone survivor. "It's hard to even think about it," Smith says now.

If his resume is the sheet music, Smith managed to turn his one- man band into a symphony of achievement. The encore was the Motion Picture Incentive Act, which, he is quick to point out, was not a singular effort, but happened, rather, through the support he received from the many "allies" who believed if movie-making in Louisiana was made easier for Hollywood, the state's economy would reap the rewards.

After his meeting with Cobb, Smith spoke to a class at Southern University's Law Center. He passed the bar exam the first time, he told them, because "I perceived it so I achieved it." And state entertainment commissions don't achieve success by not supporting even ambitious unknowns who go on to make it big (John Hardy and Steven Soderberg, who filmed "Sex, Lies and Videotape" in Baton Rouge, for example). "What did the state do for them when they were no-names?" Smith asked the class of aspiring attorneys. "I will not tell you here," he added teasingly.

Look at New Zealand, he continued. They took a chance on a relatively unknown Peter Jackson, who went on to film a "Lord of the Rings" trilogy there that grossed $3 billion in worldwide box office sales. His next movie, "King Kong," is also being shot in New Zealand. Coincidence. No, says Smith.

"Everybody knew economic development was important, but everybody was scared of it," said Bernie Cyrus, executive director of the Louisiana Music Commission, who works closely with Smith and said he remains impressed with the man's "vision." "We were always in a stepchild mode with (the film office), but now I see the horizon and it's incredible. I am renewed again."

It's that sense of imparted renewal that has curried favor for Smith along the way. Cobb obviously had it when she left Smith's office, smiling, eager to prepare for her next meeting with the entertainment director. And the law students that stayed after class to shake his hand seemed renewed, too, thanking him and telling him of their piqued interest in entertainment law.

Smith found renewal in sobriety, and in making a hardworking garbage man and a laboring laundress from Newport, Rhode Island, proud parents by obtaining the education they never had.

Still, despite the success, he gets introspective. He admits he has always wanted to be a teacher. And that he "cried like a baby" over the poignancy of midlife crisis in the film "Sideways," touched by the central character's struggle to realize his true dream.

"You know he was thinking 'Deep down am I following what really drives me?'" Smith said, of Paul Giammatti's character. "'Is this how it's supposed to end?'"

By all accounts, he is already a teacher with little to cry about. He's credited with educating lawmakers that making movies isn't just about glitz and glamour, but about real jobs for real people. And for showing producers and directors that the state of Louisiana wants to be in the credits.

"Mark's name is synonymous with the (state's motion picture incentive) program," said Ernest Collins, executive director of Arts and Entertainment for the city of New Orleans. "Right now Mark is the guy everyone in Hollywood wants to talk to."

Photo: Color photos are: Attorney Mark Smith (By Patrick dennis); Movies filmed in Louisiana, "All the King's Men," "Dukes of Hazard"; Actor Jude Law, left, taking a break in the fliming of "All the King's Men" (By Arthur D. Lauck)

Document BATR000020050314e13d0005l

People
These boots are made ... from ostriches Despite fall of ostrich market, Clinton farm finds success

J.D. VENTURA
1,427 words
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The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

CLINTON - When it comes to ostriches, Maro Dermody is one of the few ostrich farmers in the United States who didn't have his head completely in the sand.

Evidence of that is easy enough to come by. He still has 20 ostriches roaming his fields off of La. 961 in Clinton.

He used to have 400. But those days are long gone, along with what many thought would be a thriving North American ostrich industry.

Dermody's abbreviated story goes something like this: man from Guatemala owns successful Baton Rouge restaurant (Acadian Seafood), man sells restaurant in 1992, man decides to raise ostriches with his Vietnamese wife, who he met in Hawaii. Typical, right?

Turns out it is. Tech stocks weren't the only over-hyped investment of the '90s. Many people invested heavily in ostrich farming. It seemed sensible, a promising business venture that required very little upfront capital. The meat was far leaner than beef. It was boneless. Ostrich skin produced lustrous leather. Ostrich oil had been shown to have medicinal value when used topically. As health-conscious Americans sought out healthier red meat alternatives, ostrich ranchers would reap the rewards.

Never happened, though. Instead, the domestic ostrich industry had almost completely collapsed by 1980.

LSU researcher Jeff Gillespie published a study in an agricultural trade journal in 2002. The report, which was more or less an autopsy on the ostrich industry, concluded that the market never took hold in the United States for a variety of reasons.

Many breeders were inexperienced hobbyists or career changers caught up in a formidable learning curve. This left them incapable of mass producing quality hides and finished leather - a big problem, given the intense competition they faced from South Africa. (The highly evolved commercial ostrich industry there is more than 100 years old and corners the global market for all ostrich products.) And perhaps most damning: the average American carnivore, it turns out, wasn't ready to grill a "zoo-type" animal at the family barbecue.

Still, speculation on where the market was going attracted the ambitious and overly hopeful. Dermody made some good decisions early- on. For one thing, he got in cheap and took it slow. Instead of buying expensive "breeder birds," those with pedigrees that at the industry's apex were selling for upward of $50,000 a pair, he bought his first two run-of-the-mill ostriches for $3,000.

"There were some people who thought I was crazy," Dermody said, of his decision to start his ostrich farm, The Acadian Ostrich Ranch. "But I had just grown tired of the of the seven-day-a-week, 15-hour-a-day restaurant business."

It was his knowledge of that business that proved invaluable. When the "breeder market" began to change into a "slaughter market," he used his restaurant connections to promote the meat to area chefs. He created some demand.

Those entrepreneurs who were breeding birds in order to sell them to other breeders suffered some of the biggest losses. The laws of supply and demand were not on their side. David Gulledge of Zachary, for example, ended up with 450 birds he intended on selling to "coops in Texas" that supposedly wanted "breeders," whose offspring would be slaughtered for their oil. Unlike Dermody's target market, however, Gulledge's didn't exist. There were too many birds and not enough consumers interested in their byproducts.

Gulledge ended up killing and burying most of his flock. The funeral's price tag? A quarter of a million dollars.

"The state said they were going to help jumpstart the industry," said Gulledge. "But we had no help. It turned into a bad experience for a lot of people."

According to Larry Michaud, the press secretary for the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, the emu and ostrich industry "came on like gang busters," with too many people jumping into an over-hyped "niche" market in Louisiana, and nationally. His department issued several press releases to the "over 100" bird farmers at that time, warning them breeder bird prices were unrealistically high. When the market collapsed, free roaming ostriches were reported all over the state, as farmers got out of the business by opening their pens, or unloading their shotguns.

"We have a marketing division that markets over 550 manufactured food products," said Michaud. "But we don't have the resources to market an individual commodity, by any stretch."

Richard Blalock hoped otherwise. Like Dermody, the Zachary man was looking for a change at the conclusion of his career in construction. At the height of the ostrich boom nationally, the farmer had three pairs of breeder ostriches and 13 pairs of breeder emus in his field, along with 150 birds ready for slaughter. He and several other ranchers hoped that a USDA-approved slaughterhouse in McComb, Miss., would help to legitimize the bird meat with area consumers. USDA inspections would, they hoped, help with proposed marketing efforts.

"It reaches a point when the individual needs some help if it's to go further," said Blalock, who, like Gulledge, felt government support may have helped save many Louisiana ostrich ranches. "Marco (Dermody) had the financial resources and connections to take the hides and process them into finished products. Meat was a sideline product for him. For us, it wasn't."

"I had to stay flexible," said Dermody, who eventually opened up a leather shop on his farm, where he sells custom-made boots, handbags and other leather products made from ostrich, alligator and various kinds of snake skins. Most of the ostrich skins used in his products come from his birds' offspring.

These days, however, the majority of Dermody's business happens not in the field, but on the phone. The leather goods store and ostrich ranch aren't nearly as lucrative as the "skin trade" business he has developed.

He now spends most of his time connecting farmers who produce various raw animal skins with tanneries that turn the skins into finished leather. He is a broker who negotiates prices for clients in the United States and abroad.

"I think there will always be room for small producers that do specialty things," said John R. Wade, a Folsom veterinarian who ran one of the largest ostrich farms in the country, Pacesetter Ostrich Farm. At its height, Pacesetter had 5,000 ostriches on two ranches, in Louisiana and Arizona. Wade mostly blames the South African ostrich industry for killing much of the U.S. market in its infancy. Overseas prices were simply too low for the domestic market to compete for important international business. Like Blalock and Gulledge, he bristled at alleged government indifference.

"I think that the (federal government) didn't do anything. If you were raising cattle or horses, then you made a difference (to them). We just gave them a good little chuckle."

Dermody isn't the absolute last guy standing. "There are small niches of farmers in a few areas of the United States that are doing fairly well..." said Daryl Holle, the U.S. representative for the World Ostrich Association. "(Because they are) establishing their local markets for meat and making skins into leather products, and selling those products locally."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported in its 2002 Census of Agriculture that 1,643 ostrich farms had an inventory of 20,560 ostriches. (Comparatively, in that same year, there were almost 38,000 chicken farms, raising more than a billion birds.) According to the same report, 27 ostrich farms remain in Louisiana, with an overall inventory of just 297 birds.

Twenty of those are Dermody's. Twenty birds that cause many people driving down Highway 961 to stop and stare. Many who pull into the dirt driveway to gawk at the prehistoric-looking creatures probably don't realize they are staring at all that's left of an industry that could have been. Others shake hands with an affable man from Guatemala, who measures their feet and orders them the ostrich boots they've always wanted.

Photo: Color photos of Phuong Dermody, Marco Dermody's wife, taking orders for custom-made ostrich and alligator boots; 20 ostriches that live at Marco Dermody's rancih in Clinton; Marco Dermody in pose in front of his ranch; B.W. photo of an ortriches at Marco Dermody's ranch, his ortriches produces between 800 and 1,000 eggs a year (by Brian Harkin)

Document BATR000020050310e1390002s

People
"It's mostly about the music" All-ages club gives area's teens a place to catch live acts

J.D. VENTURA
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English

The tall, gangly blond teenager they call "Big Bird" can't believe the boy he has been dancing with, the short stranger nobody has seen before, slammed into him.

It's not right, Josh Wheat, 19, insists, his face red, flush with blood, coaxed to the surface of his skin by the volatile collision of testosterone and adrenaline in his veins.

The stranger from French Settlement, Justin Simoneaux, needs his Kools. After going nose to nose with the "Big Bird" from Prairieville - who had towered over him, chest puffed out, heels off the floor, spine stiff, yelling his objections over the music - the 16-year-old retreats to his pickup truck to find his cigs.

"It's crazy up in here," a baby-faced Simoneaux says, a cigarette held between lips crowned by a barely discernable moustache. "I don't dance. I just push. It ain't about dancing," he explains. "I guess it's just a different kind of culture here."

In fact, there's a cornucopia of cultures at the Darkroom. The all-ages rock club in the 10,000 block of Florida Boulevard means different things to different people. Many of the regulars say it's the place for anyone who can't get into 18 plus venues to experience live music, or at least the live music scene.

It's popular with Abercrombie & Fitch fashionistas who fraternize with thrift store hipsters. And devotees of indie music who flirt with cheerleader types. Or wide-eyed 12-year-olds getting their first taste of teendom.

Usually the cultures blend together fluidly, like tributaries meeting up in the same river. Sometimes there's a conflict. Like when a rural kid, who thinks the tamer version of moshing, "hardcore dancing," is silly, smacks a suburban kid who only likes his violence simulated.

The club's owner is a paunchy 23-year-old named Chance Roppolo, a college drop-out who also fronts a band of his own. His first name is fitting. Because his dream, to create an all-ages live music venue in Baton Rouge, straddles the line between ambitious and downright chancy. After all, a nightclub for teenagers isn't a business model most MBA types would rush to endorse.

But beneath the baggy hooded sweatshirts he favors is a man who is doggedly determined to make the concept work. He's a sleep-in- late Gen-Y guy whose organizational abilities equate to writing "Pay Rent, Electric" in ink on his hand, but a savvy entrepreneur, too, who went from hosting shows at an American Legion Hall, to attracting national touring acts to a club many Baton Rougeans have never heard of.

Roppolo wears many hats, but above all he is the peace keeper. In the rare instance when the clash of cultures threatens to ruin an otherwise good time, he is there.

"We just haven't had a lot of problems with booze here," says Roppolo. "There are two kinds of kids that generally come to shows in Baton Rouge: Christian kids and kids who are so into the music they want to enjoy it sober. It's mostly about the music. It's why most of them are here."

To know Roppolo is to understand that Wheat and Simoneaux weren't half as close to having a real problem with each other as they may have thought. To know Roppolo is to know why many parents drop their kids off at the door of his club as if it were the local shopping mall.

But it's not the mall. And that's what makes Roppolo a hero to a community of young musicians in Baton Rouge who credit him with creating a sort of cultural refuge, an alternative to ho-hum hangouts where kids can take ownership of their own social scene and young local artists can not only perform to an appreciative audience, but can network with more established, veteran bands.

When the sun goes down, a ritual begins: friends are called, hugs and handshakes are exchanged, amp volumes are cranked and the room, dark, yes, its walls blood red, fills with laughing and the smell of sweat,

as the music, loud as a landmine, explodes.

Any given night

It's a typical night for the guys from The Planning Fallacy, a "post hardcore" band from Baton Rouge, which formed a year and a half ago. It's 5:30 p.m. and they are hanging out in drummer Jason Hebert's apartment in Tigerland before heading to the Darkroom.

Hebert, 19, isn't a neat freak. His apartment looks like it's been searched thoroughly by a team of FBI agents. And then lived in by guys who still cannot believe their mothers can't tell them to clean their rooms. There's a mattress on the living room floor and a pile of dirty boxer shorts in the bathroom. The place smells of sweat, microwavable Chef Boyardee and unwashed hair.

That Hebert lives in LSU's shadow is odd. Jesse Sampson, 20, the group's lead singer, scowls for everyone when describing the "stupid fraternity" culture that surrounds them, made up of bars and clubs that are "full of testosterone." It's not for them.

Members of The Planning Fallacy and many of their friends have their own culture, and it doesn't involve football and shot gunning cheap domestic suds. It's OK for guys to hug, or playfully kiss each other. It's stylish for boys to wear really tight girls jeans. The tighter the better. No, they're not gay, but they are in a sort-of underground music scene in Baton Rouge that regards originality as a super power.

It's Baton Rouge's youth bohemia. Messy hair, retro clothing, body piercings. And pierced eardrums. The music is loud. And it's at the Darkroom, where they are going tonight to hear a band from California they worship. The Reflux show is going to be huge. Everyone will be there. Everyone.

"Show me the love"

Rewind. It's two weeks before the Reflux show and Sheila Roppolo, 58, is at her post as the Darkroom's "doorman." She's Chance's mom, and a sort of surrogate mother to many of the club's regulars.

"Show me the love, thank you. Show me the love, thank you," she says to the teens who walk in and out of the club. She's asking to see heart-shaped hand stamps which indicate the $6-$10 cover charge has been paid. Many of the kids hold their hands up reflexively as they pass her. Most of them come at least once a week.

Perhaps nobody believes in Chance's dream better than his mother. She knows the music's a part of him. She was there when, as a boy, he used pots and pans as an impromptu drum set, and for the 4-H talent shows and the junior high concerts.

It wasn't easy seeing her son's all-ages live-music concept get booted from seven different locations in and around Baton Rouge. At one locale, Chance recalls, police, dressed in "S.W.A.T. gear" and wearing bullet-proof vests, raided the venue. "They just thought that if all these kids were there, they must be doing something wrong."

The reason for each shut down was different, but, according to Chance, an all-ages nightclub simply made people nervous. Finding a long-term locale proved difficult. Nobody wanted the noise. Everyone naturally assumed teenage rock fans spelt trouble. Nobody but the kids understood the music.

"They need to look beyond the noise and body piercings and strange hair," says Sheila. "And if they bother to do that, they'll find extremely intelligent, peace-loving, nonviolent kids."

Sheila says it's not uncommon for parents to come into the club. She puts them at ease. Gives them her private cell phone number. Most of them, she says, agree with her: better for them to know exactly where their kids are than to have them driving around, waiting for boredom to bring trouble.

"I tell them rough language is the worst they can expect," she says, as her son pulls the register tape, which reveals 387 people have turned out to see As Cities Burn, a Baton Rouge band that amassed a huge following playing the Darkroom.

(The Baton Rouge Fire Department subsequently inspected the club and determined that it should never admit more than 208 people. In fairness to the Darkroom, their capacity was never spelled out on their initial permit, according to Barry Mounce, the department's spokesperson.)

"What's the door count now?" asks Colin Kimble, one of As Cities Burn's guitarists.

"I don't know anymore," answers Chance, as he passes by. "We lost count."

Just beyond a small sign that reads "Mosh At Your Own Risk," people stand 15 deep around the stage. Roppolo's band, Torn Apart By Horses, is the opening act. A sound technician uses the light of his cell phone to follow a jumble of wires. "Hey, does anyone have a speaker cable?" he yells. Like a man preparing to dive overboard, the lanky drummer peels off his shirt.

Darkroom veterans point to several people in the front row who are clearly new to the scene and unaware that this is not going to be anything like a Hillary Duff concert. One girl, dressed in a neatly ironed pink top, hair just so, makeup neatly applied, glances nervously at the growing throng of moshers gathering behind her, like a football team waiting to break from its huddle. Another teen, wearing a scarf and an Abercrombie and Fitch shirt, shoves his fingers in his ears during the sound check.

When Roppolo grabs the microphone and opens his mouth he transforms from the nice guy who owns the joint to hell's town crier. His vocals sound monstrous, like the roars of some speared beast. He shakes his head violently to one side, as if to clear water from an ear. His body tics to the soundtrack of his own screaming, as he paces back and forth, momentarily interrupting the synaptic connections of the front-row posers.

Behind them, the mosh pit starts growing like a cancerous cell, its flailing legs and arms replicating as Roppolo cheers on the chaos, his singing as harmonious as a headache. The moshers go wild, forming a spinning circle, its center full of teenage boys air- punching and shoving off of one another. Some kids in the front row text message others, their digital missives all that can penetrate the auditory interference.

The crowd undergoes a music-induced mitosis. Those who love the noise, who live for the noise, show their devotion through angst- ridden aerobics. Those who like pop music make for the wall.

Into the dark

The Strawberry Shortcake air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror does little to improve the atmosphere inside Chris Lott's SUV. It doesn't smell like gym socks. More like the feet that were in them. He's unapologetic to his Planning Fallacy band mates as they make their way to the Darkroom.

He quickly makes it up to them by inserting Reflux's new CD into the player. The music has a lightening quick staccato sound, the drums and guitar licks come with shocking rapidity, like kernels of corn popping in a hot pan.

"I want to know how he does his sweeps," says David Kemp, a local band member and a friend of The Planning Fallacy guys. Kemp's referring to Reflux's guitarist, who everyone in the car agrees is a technical genius on the instrument.

"The guy is an alien," says an awestruck Sampson.

The digital instrument panel in front of Lott reports that the temperature outside is 52 degrees, they are traveling northeast and it's 6:48 p.m. When they arrive, there is already a crowd of shivering kids waiting for Sheila Ropollo's stamp.

The guys bypass the line, with a nod from Ropollo. Reflux is already inside. So is Big Bird. And the kid from French Settlement.

Leighton Harvey, 36, and Paul Flores, 38, aren't sticking around. The two Baton Rouge fathers decided to check out the club before dropping off their two middle school-age sons for the evening.

"At first I told him 'no'," says Harvey, standing in the parking lot. "But after looking at the crowd, it's not what I pictured. There are kids his age, no drunks. I don't smell drugs. And they have their cell phones."

As far as effective communication devices go, cell phones will be about as useful as staplers when Reflux takes the stage in a few minutes. Some members of The Planning Fallacy claim the front row so they can catch the show up-close. Guitar players focus on the guitarist. Drummers watch the drummer. Bass players study the bassist. All hope to be as good someday. Some congratulate The Planning Fallacy guys, who, like As Cities Burn, have also just been signed by an independent record label.

By 9:47 p.m. Reflux is done. Sweaty moshers make for the door, their movement a mosaic of chains, studded leather belts, handkerchiefs and ratty old sneakers.

"I quit!" exclaims David Kemp, The Planning Fallacy's guitarist, after taking in the set. "I can't play guitar."

Kemp and his band mates regroup in the parking lot, where everyone from the club is now hanging out. Parents pick up their kids. Many others walk to their own cars. Another night at the Darkroom comes to an end. But every ending marks a beginning.

"There's a toga party down on Carlotta Street," someone yells, as Ropollo begins closing up.

Photo: Color photos of The Planning Fallacy's Jesse Sampson, right, socializing with Christine Sonnier outside the Darkroom; Stephen Chew, left, dancing with Rick Haigood; The parking lot of the Darkroom (By Brian Harkin); B.W. photo of Darkroom owner Chance Roppolo (By Richard Alan Hannon)

Document BATR000020050228e12r0008b

People
"Exonerated" talks (a lot) on injustice

J.D.VENTURA
1,126 words
23 February 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

"The Exonerated," which opened at the Reilly Theatre on Wednesday, was certainly food for thought.

But show up hungry - for dialogue.

Those who require singing, action, dramatic momentum, or any semblance of a set should ask themselves one question: "Am I at all interested in exploring, verbally, just how screwy the American justice system is?"

If the answer is "no," stop reading this and turn to the movie listings.

The production unfolds on a bare arena stage, a square platform with the audience seated on all four sides. The central characters are based on the lives of actual people who were wrongfully convicted and sent to prison, their stories told through documentary- style interviews in which they recount their alleged crimes and subsequently how the judicial system failed them.

And that's the thing: "The Exonerated" would have made an amazing documentary. Hearing from the actual victims of such outrageous injustice would have been powerful commentary. But when their stories are interpreted theatrically in that format, something gets lost. Maybe because their voices are borrowed, which somehow dilutes the authenticity of the message. Not to mention the title gives away the ending. For those unfamiliar with the word: everyone's set free.

Although it tackles several themes well (faith in God, the resilience of the human spirit, redemption), "The Exonerated" explores racial inequality in the criminal justice system most adeptly. That said - and this is a criticism of the script, not the actors - the inclusion of the Caucasian characters feels obligatory, as if the playwrights were afraid to just make this thing all about race. Which is too bad, because that issue is far more interesting than the obvious broader theme: that sometimes the legal system doesn't work. (Gee, really?)

That it doesn't work for African Americans far more often is where the real drama lies.

So it really wasn't a surprise to find the quality of the acting dividing down racial lines. Equity actor Terry Bellamy was the show stealer, hands down. Bellamy played David Keaton, an African American convicted in 1971 of a murder in Florida. Bellamy brilliantly showed the audience a broken man, a dispirited convict robbed of his convictions. His dialogue was heavy with all of the expected hurt and bitterness a man like Keaton would harbor.

In the best scene of the play, Bellamy describes how, in prison, he lost his relationship with God. Through the monologue his tears are barely held at bay, his hardened pride the tourniquet on a mortal wound.

OK, whoa! There is nothing little about Eric Little's acting prowess, by the way. Apparently he is one of LSU's secret weapons. Based on his performance Wednesday night, it's clear the young acting student was completely underused in the company's last play ("The Illusion").

As Robert Earl Hayes, an African-American man who was wrongly convicted in the 1991 rape and murder of a female co-worker, Little was fantastic. He was so comfortable with his lines, so conversational, so guy-next-door, that his character's plight was made more poignant by the believability Little brought to the role. (Kudos to Kesha Bullard, too, who played his wife, among other parts. She only added to the realism.)

William Jay Marshall, a professional actor who played ex-convict Delbert Tibbs, gave a solid performance. Although his role had some of the most interesting lines, it strayed into the cliche at times. His prison cell philosophizing and spirituality weren't nearly as interesting as his observations about the country's racial divide.

Christine St. John's character, Sonia "Sunny" Jacobs, didn't display the fragility one would expect. In

fairness to St. John, it's hard to say if this is just an accurate reflection of the real woman she portrays. Regardless, the fact that Sunny is almost emotionless when she describes her husband's head bursting into flames when he is (wrongly) executed in Florida's electric chair, seemed like a missed dramatic opportunity. There were a few of those.

Same goes for Derek Mudd's Kerry Max Cook. When he describes being gang raped in prison, or the shooting death of his brother, he may as well have been ordering a hamburger at the Wendy's drive through. Where's the emotion?

Ditto for Nick Erickson, who has less of an excuse as a card- carrying member of the actor's union. His Gary Gauger was flat. This is a guy whose parents were brutally murdered, and he was blamed for it. The memory should require at least one Kleenex.

Shameful underuse of talent: Shawn Halliday and Michelle McCoy. Whoever clipped their wings should find them, buy some Super Glue and get to work.

Matt Penn: decent.

On a more technical note, having the actors come out and just sit on the stage 15 minutes before the show started was awkward. The audience needed its own script as to how to react to this.

Sound effects seemed superfluous.

If the audience is expected to imagine the arrest, prosecution and imprisonment of six people, it should be assumed they can imagine what a car crash sounds like. No need for the cartoon soundtrack.

"The Exonerated" had its moments, and for those who want to debate whether or not the American justice system is in a state of abysmal disrepair on the car ride home, it's a great way to kick things off.

In one of the play's more memorable lines, Sunny asks the audience to imagine how they would feel if they had to erase 16 years of their lives. Good question. Those who prefer plot over politics, however, may not want to erase 90 minutes of theirs waiting to be sprung from this play.

"The Exonerated"

WHEN: Performances are at 7:30 p.m. today through Saturday; Wednesday through Saturday, March 2-5; and Tuesday through Saturday, March 8-12. Matinees are at 2 p.m. Sundays, Feb. 27 and March 6 and 13.

WHERE: Reilly Theatre, Tower Drive, LSU campus.

TICKETS: Tickets are $27-30 for adults, $19 for seniors and $12 for students. Discounts are available in advance for groups of 10 or more.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 578-3527 or http://www.swinepalace.org .

Photo: Color photo of "The Exonerated," collaborative production between LSU and Swine Palace, taking place on an empty stage and relying solely on dialogue to move it forward, while Nick Erickson, and five other actors portray the wrongly convicted; B.W. photo of Derek Mudd playing Kerry Max Cook, a man who was convicted in 1978 of murdering a female acquaintance (by Patrick Dennis); B.W. graphic is "The Exonerated" performance information

Document BATR000020050223e12n0002t

D
Surfing for love * More and more people are turning to the Internet to find a perfect match**

J.D. VENTURA
1,540 words
14 February 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1D
English

In the past week, at least 87 men in Baton Rouge signed onto the Internet looking for love, hoping that Cupid shot an arrow into their in-boxes.

At least 37 women did the same.

And that's just singles between the ages of 25 and 45 on Yahoo! Personals who live right in the city limits. In reality, the number of active online romantics in the area is certainly higher, especially given just how many online dating services there are.

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Who's to say what that might mean to the perky-looking 43-year- old Capricorn who has "middle of the road political views" and enjoys the occasional chocolate croissant in the French Quarter when she's not playing with her new poodle, "whipping up some gourmet munchies," or rocking out on her guitar in the courtyard of her Baton Rouge apartment building. "Some say I am a raucous intersection of Gidget meets Audrey Hepburn," she writes. "...With so much talent and spunk, nothing is unobtainable."

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"We e-mailed on Thursday, and by Thursday night he asked if we could talk on the cell phone," remembered Fuchs. "We spoke for four hours and from that point on we talked every single night."

The romance continued for two and a half months until the man from Indiana boarded a plane and flew into Lafayette regional airport. Fuchs, her nerves wracked with excitement and apprehension, met him at the gate. "He was exactly like his pics," she said. "By that time I felt as if I knew him."

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People
Surfing for love More and more people are turning to the Internet to find a perfect match

J.D. VENTURA
1,558 words
14 February 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-D
English

In the past week, at least 87 men in Baton Rouge signed onto the Internet looking for love, hoping that Cupid shot an arrow into their in-boxes.

At least 37 women did the same.

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Photo: Color drawing of a couple reaching through their computer screens to hold hands (By David I. Norwood)

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People
Music man Varsity Theatre promoter learns to expect anything when bringing live acts to BR club

J.D. VENTURA
2,356 words
6 February 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

When the two gleaming silver tour buses roll in around noon, carrying sweaty rockers in need of showers, cymbals, bleary-eyed drivers, guitar cases and roadies - to whom Baton Rouge might as well be Minneapolis, Minn.; Des Moines, Iowa; Columbia, Mo., or any of the seemingly countless cities before and after here - Chris Lundgren doesn't really know what to expect.

As the music promoter for the Varsity Theatre, he has expectations of how things will go, sure. He's been doing this for a while, and hosting rock shows isn't all reading tea leaves and tarot cards. It's a business, one that can be figured out, predictable but not formulaic, random but manageable.

But when the bus doors swish open, chaos always threatens to arrive. Usually it's just a threat.

Usually.

The Tommy Lee thing was a tarot card. One of those dark, scary ones that makes you want to tell the fortuneteller she's full of crap. One you just refuse to be dealt.

Lundgren hopes tonight won't be like that. It won't be, his instincts tell him. How could it?

It was 2002. The former Motley Crue drummer (inadvertent amateur porn star, convicted felon) was blowing through BR on his first solo tour. Young, boyish Lundgren had more or less just started at the Varsity. Sure he had done promotions work for the former LSU-band- turned-big-name, Better Than Ezra, after years as a jack-of-all- trades in the university's radio scene. But Lee is a tatt-strewn rock 'n' roll iconoclast. This was a guy who told Maxim magazine he shot up Jack Daniels after the coke and heroin ran out. A dude who is inarguably way "badder" than Ezra.

So when Lee's tour manager walked through those swishing bus doors and told a stunned Lundgren, as he tells it, "This is ... ! We are not playing here," did anyone need to be sedated from the surprise?

Come on, Tommy, it's not that bad. Some would argue that Baton Rouge is lucky to have a midsize music venue, with its solid acoustics and 800-seat capacity, large enough to entice some bigger acts, but small enough to give concert-goers an intimate experience nearly impossible at stadium shows.

To the public, the club is only as good as the talent it attracts. Booking the right performers (those that sell tickets) and then making sure their shows run smoothly isn't without its challenges, though. Lundgren can testify to that.

"I was panicked," he says, with regard to his evening with Lee. Lundgren, who for the past three years has determined who does and does not play at the rock club attached to the popular Chimes restaurant, calls that experience the "worst day" of his life.

The club's sound guy had gone out of town, which was unfortunate given that Lee's people had brought way more audio firepower than originally forecasted, causing the rocker's sound tech to matter-of- factly announce that interfacing the two systems would result in a sort of high-fidelity Chernobyl.

Nothing blew up, but Lee's personality melted down shortly thereafter over the venue's failure to stock his dressing room with some select stogies, which the (still panicking) Ludgren sent scrambling staffers to find.

"When someone is used to playing stadiums and arenas and then they are suddenly playing clubs, it doesn't bode well with the egos of certain rock stars," says Lundgren, who logged a 19-hour day when Pam Anderson's ex played to only 100 BR-area fans. "Now I kind of get a good idea how the show's going to be when I advance it on the phone."

Big names in wasteland

If opening for Van Halen doesn't make you egotistical rock stars, having an almost platinum first album might. Whether tonight's headline act, the metal rock band Shinedown, will be as demanding and onerous as Lee is anyone's guess.

The most educated assumption comes from Lundgren. His dealings with their tour managers have been solid up to this point. No red flags. A reasonable list of dressing room "must-haves." Professional phone calls and no contractual surprises.

And so far, down on the club's floor, no drama. It's just after 3 p.m. (only five hours until doors open). The show has been sold out for a couple of weeks and panic feels like a thing of the past. The mood is laid back in the office Ludgren shares with the club's general manager, Mark Brennan.

Below them, on the Varsity's stage, the band is tuning up. Ludgren and Brennan check their e-mails and take phone calls from ticketless fans hoping to get on the guest list. The pace is busy. Every few minutes the intercom beeps and a female voice intrudes from the club beneath, "Chris, we have a problem..." or "Mark, you have a call..."

Comparably-sized clubs, like the House of Blues in New Orleans, have a promotions staff of "about 12 people," Lundgren explains. But down on Highland Road, it's just him and Brennan running the show. And the GM insists that Lundgren's the man behind the scene.

"To be honest, I don't like (a lot of) the music," admits Lundgren. "But it's good because I treat this like a business and I book bands that people want to see."

He does get some help. Program directors at local rock radio stations in Baton Rouge let Lundgren know what artists receive the most airplay in this market. Shinedown, for example, is heavily played by Rock 93.7, which is sponsoring the concert. Interest in the band generally increases as their songs receive more airplay. With three hit singles behind them and a fourth song, "Burning Bright," holding at No. 3 on Radio and Records magazine's (top 100) rock chart, the band has already sold 700,000 copies of its first big-label release, "Leave a Whisper" (Atlantic Records).

Record companies pitch their artists to radio stations, the program directors tell local clubs which artists listeners like, the venues book the artist and then the stations promote both the event and the club in return for sponsorship of the show.

It's the classic "win-win," says Paul Cannel, 93.7's program director. "(The Varsity) is important, both musically and culturally. Baton Rouge really doesn't have that many live music venues, but we get a lot of national touring acts that we would not get otherwise. Without that club here we would be sitting in a (musical) wasteland."

Smooth setup

After 21 months of touring, Brent Smith, Shinedown's lead singer, admits he could feel better. His voice is froggy through the sound check. But each show is a "rebirth," and he is determined to rally. Smaller sold-out gigs, like tonight's, are always fun because the fans are usually diehard and it's easy for the group to "feed off" the crowd's energy.

And Shinedown hasn't outgrown hanging out with them post-show, either. It helps merchandise ("merch") sales, and it's just not something you can do in a stadium full of 50,000 people. "If you lose that connection with fans, it's a really sad day," Smith says, before saying "hello" to a waitress from the Chimes who Brennan has allowed in to meet the band.

After three hours of problem-free sound checks, the first issue of the night is a minor one: an hour before show time the hallways running along the sides of the stage have become almost impassable with equipment, including a bunch of symbols that teeter precariously every time someone walks past them.

Crash!

"That sucks," the first guy to knock one over says.

Lundgren helps the roadies move the equipment outside. Problem solved.

At 6:15 band members are hanging out back stage, congregating in front of the dressing room door. There's shop talk about who's signed with what label, about their contracts, about who's recording what next. Their instruments are tuned, the sound boards are tweaked. Nothing left to do but play.

Thirty minutes later, the merch booth is set up near the front doors, behind which a crowd has started to gather. The line continues forming, as the bar backs begin to stock the coolers with cases of cold beer. Someone cuts up limes and lemons. Someone else brings an icy tub of Miller Lites backstage.

Then the mood changes.

Ramping-up for rock

Just after 7 Lundgren is moving like a man who has freebased seven cafe lattes. He's moving chairs and cleaning up the place. "Anyone want to lay claim to these?" he yells, as he simultaneously pitches a forgotten order of stone-cold onion rings into the trash.

Clark McLellan, the guy in charge of security, is giving his staff of 17 their instructions. There are three passes, All-Access, Support and VIP, he explains. Only All-Access can bring guests past check points, manned by men like Jeremiah Johnson (6 feet 5 inches, 330 pounds), an affable sequoia tree of a guy who says reassuring things like, "We never drag people out of here. We walk them out."

A 50-something couple convinces the band to put them on the guest list and proceeds to hang out inside the club before the doors are opened. Then a 12-year-old somehow acquires a backstage pass. Lundgren escorts the protesting couple to the line outside and sends the preadolescent metal fan home (The venue is 18 plus.)

The merch guy is furiously pulling his wares from big plastic tubs. He hopes to make $4,000 for Shinedown tonight. Not likely, says Lundgren. Fans in Baton Rouge aren't big on $20 T-shirts. Too many college kids on tight budgets.

(And the bar will only make an average of $10 a head, because many of the show-goers aren't old enough to drink.)

The couple Lundgren kicked out pokes their heads through the slightly opened doors before a security guard closes it.

At 7:40 the line outside spills onto the sidewalk.

Lundgren tells Clark he wants four security guys posted near the stage at the end of each break.

"Who?" Clark asks.

"I don't care, as long as they can take direction well."

Silence from Clark until he notices Lundgren still standing there, as if waiting for an answer.

"Four guys at each break. I got it," Clark says, smiling broadly, the tension in his face barely concealed.

The brass on the bars is polished at 7:49 p.m.

Egoless stars

The doors open just after 8 and people stream into the club as the lead singer of No Address, one of the opening bands, takes the stage and says to the growing crowd, "I see LSU is right around the corner. I went to FSU."

Silence.

Lundgren emerges from the audience looking flustered. Second problem of the night: No Address has started playing 30 minutes too soon, and they only know a limited amount of music. "They didn't get the memo," he says, before telling their tour manager to get them to stall by playing a cover - or the same song twice.

Bands have to be spaced out to last the night. Bar sales depend on it.

While the opening acts play, people socialize and get their drinks. They stake their claim on available tables and on places to stand up front.

Backstage, the guys from Shinedown sit on old sofas in their dressing rooms, drinking spring water and Gatorade. No crazy party. No drugs. No groupies.

"Showers are a big plus," says Smith, off-handedly, pointing toward the open bathroom door.

Barry Kerch, the band's married 28-year-old drummer (who used to be a biologist), slouches on the couch, looking tired, like a guy who has been living on a tour bus.

The glamour of selling 15,000 CDs a week is hard to find here. These digs are harshly lit, looking more like a bohemian basement apartment than a celebrity dressing room.

What's it like to be rock stars?

"Do we want to sell millions of records? Yeah," says Kerch, his arms folded across his chest. "We just don't live like that. (Our fans) don't know what a normal day is for us. It's not like we are living in mansions. We live in apartments."

Kerch is about rock, not red carpets. He'd take a career like "Dimebag" Darrell Abbott's, Pantera's slain guitarist, a guy who made a near legendary name for himself in metal rock without being an MTV darling.

They are not "Lindsay Lohan," Smith expounds. They write all their own music. It took them a full year to put their hit album together.

In the club, the crowd gives the second band, Theory of a Deadman, solid applause. Some look at their watches. They came for Shinedown. And Shinedown came to the little theater in Baton Rouge just for them.

When they take the stage later, with fans from Zachary and Denham Springs and Gonzales at their feet, the voices of admirers are audible, their expressions easy to read. The band sees smiling people happy to finally hear them raw, in a small room where they own the stage, and not on the radio, where the record company owns them.

"We are dirty rockers," says Kerch earlier, with pride.

Lucky for the band the Varsity has good showers.

Lucky for Lundgren Shinedown can still appreciate that.

Photo: Color photos of The Varsity Theatre on Highland Road; General manager Mark Brennan, left, and music promoter Chris Lundgren, right, sharing some down time before doors open for the sold-out Shinedown show; Shinedown lead singer Brent Smith strumming a guitar at the Varsity's green room (By Kerry Maloney)

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People
Happy hookahs Trend reaches BR as some restaurants offer Middle Eastern water pipes

J.D. VENTURA
1,333 words
31 January 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-C
English

Bong smoking in Baton Rouge is taking off.

OK, not really.

Well, sort of.

The tall water pipes with the hoses protruding out of them, which are being smoked in at least two Baton Rouge restaurants, are not bongs, but close cousins.

Meet the hookah. Or the shisha. Or the nargile, depending on where you are in the world.

People have been smoking them in the Middle East for centuries. In the West smoking the pipe, which is usually done during or after meals, or as an accompaniment to coffee or alcohol, was a chic fad during the Victorian period.

But some contend that the mass production of cigarettes eventually stopped the humble hookah from going global.

Until now.

The hookah is back, if it ever truly left. Over the past few years, hookah bars have been appearing faster than the aromatic clouds fashionable devotees of the experience exhale in such establishments all around Europe and the United States. California is shisha central in this country, with several hookah bars encircling some college campuses like so many scented smoke rings.

Here in Baton Rouge at least two establishments, Aldana and Marrazil, offer shisha on their menus.

On a recent evening at the trendy Marrazil downtown, Jade Nakhleh, 26, and Elizabeth Jones, 25, shared a hookah pipe, tipping back cocktails, as other patrons sipped caipirinhas and martinis at the bar, or mingled in the dining room to the thumping, cool-but- unidentifiable world music pulsing loudly around them.

The flavor du jour: apple.

Nakhleh and Jones prefer one of the most popular flavors. And flavor is what hookahs are all about. Choices include mango, mint, lemon, cappuccino. The list goes on and on.

"It just tastes good," shouted Jones over the bass and treble and the clink of glasses and bottles. "It's so much better than cigarettes. There isn't all those chemicals. It smells better. It tastes better. "

The taste comes from flavoring - usually honey, molasses and fruit - added to the tobacco, which isn't dry like pipe tobacco, but kept moist. It's placed in a small bowl beneath charcoals. When a person takes a drag off the hose, which is fitted with a disposable, sanitary plastic tip, the smoke is cooled through a chamber of cold water. When inhaled, it's not hot and dry like cigarette smoke, but steamlike.

Roger Pastore, a manager at Marrazil, said the restaurant doesn't allow cigarette smoking inside, but hookahs are available after 10 p.m.

The smell leaves a pleasant scent in the room, he added.

"On the weekends we have people waiting to try them," said Pastore.

"It's a social thing...and it's much healthier than cigarettes, because it's filtered through water."

Not true, said Thomas Eissenberg, a researcher at the Institute for Drug and Alcohol Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, who is currently conducting a National Institutes of Health-funded study on water pipe usage in Syria.

Eissenberg, and others in the "tobacco control" industry, worry the increasing popularity of hookah smoking worldwide will result in a new wave of tobacco addiction and pose a major threat to public health, a phenomenon described in his research as "a virulent strain in the tobacco epidemic."

"There is no doubt that you get a buzz from (smoking hookahs), because you are getting nicotine," said Eissenberg, who added that it's believed carbon monoxide levels in the body also skyrocket because many hookah users smoke the pipe continuously for hours.

In his latest study, Eissenberg and his colleagues cite research that found one "normal" use of a water pipe delivered as much tar as 20 cigarettes. "What we haven't answered yet is whether you can get addicted to hookah smoking, but I imagine dependence is possible."

Hookah is certainly habitual down at Aldana, a Greek and Lebanese restaurant on Sherwood Forest Boulevard that also offers hookahs. Friends Charlie Williams and Bill Williamson, both 22, make it a point to smoke the pipe once a week, often sharing the experience with friends on the outside patio.

On a recent night, they puffed away on a bowl of rose-flavored tobacco, their table full of empty plates, save for some sauces and pieces of torn pita bread.

Williamson, a mechanical engineering student at LSU, said smoking the hookah goes perfectly with food. Although he smoked cigarettes for five years and quit, he isn't worried about the potentially negative health effects of the hookah or that smoking the pipes will lead him to smoke cigarettes again.

"There are worse things I could do to myself," said Williamson. "I could go out and kill my liver. Choose your vice."

Avid hookah smokers like Williamson and Williams represent the target market Aldana's owner, Emad Elayan, was hoping to attract when he opened up a shisha bar down the road from his present location. But without a full food menu, the concept never took off. Located nowhere near LSU's campus, it became clear to Elayan that the university crowd, a demographic that has excitedly embraced the hookah concept in other college towns, rarely wound up searching for culture on Sherwood Forest Boulevard. So he moved his cafe to a larger space and expanded his menu. Business, however, has been as flat as tobacco leaves.

"I am waiting for the day that people will get educated about the hookah concept," said Elayan, who pointed out that he offers hookah for nearly half what shisha bars charge in bigger cities ($6.95 a bowl, versus $13 and up). "Up north, in bigger cities like Chicago, hookah is doing very well."

Part of why hookah bars are proliferating is the attractive profit margins, said Brennan Appel, the president of Southsmoke.com, a Web-based business that sells hookah pipes and tobacco, both retail and wholesale. According to Appel, it only costs a hookah bar about 30 cents to pack a hookah with the tobacco.

And the "Starbucks" atmosphere hookahs create, an environment where captive patrons hang out for long periods of time, creates demand for other menu items.

Appel said his growing sales figures evidence the trend. "It's a multimillion dollar industry," said Appel. "In a year's time, we sell thousands and thousands of hookah pipes and tobacco (buckets)."

The industry's boom isn't making everyone happy. In Iowa, for example, state legislator Kevin McCarthy has proposed a bill aimed at closing a loophole in that state's tobacco control laws that allows establishments to serve minors hookah tobacco.

"The goal of many of these places is to attract young people," said McCarthy. "And many of those young people are under the impression that this is not dangerous."

(Worries that hookahs attract new, younger smokers parallel new concerns anti-smoking lobbyists have raised with R.J. Reynolds Tobacco company, which is now producing cigarette flavors similar to those offered at hookah bars, like "Winter Mocha Mint" and "Warm Winter Toffee." Health officials in Michigan, for example, recently demanded the company discontinue its sales of such products there.)

Brian DeJean, general counsel for Louisiana's Office of Alcohol and Tobacco Control said, unlike Iowa, there are no loopholes in Louisiana. "Serving is the same thing as selling, and IDs should be checked," DeJean

said.

Because it's a bar after 10 p.m., you're at least 21 if you're smoking a hookah at Marrazil. Justin Dorsey, the manager in charge of the hookahs, said weekends continue to bring a steady stream of virgin hookah smokers looking to try it for the first time.

"All it takes is one bowl, really," said Dorsey. "Once I light one up, it starts a chain reaction."

Photo: Color photos of Bill Williamson smoking a hookah at Aldana restaurant; Charlie Williams mellowing out after a big meal by inhaling rose-flavored smoke at Aldana; Hookah pipes (By Kerry Maloney)

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People
Law school at night Southern launches four-year law program for part-time students

J.D. VENTURA
2,008 words
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1-H
English

She keeps Hot Tamales in her medicine cabinet.

Since she completely gave up sweets, Rosalind Wright treats the fiery, red candies as emergency supplies, like those allergic to bees regard epinephrine.

To spend a day with Wright, 33, is to understand why she had an out-of-control sugar habit. It's all about energy. And as one of the 35 Southern University students who make up the area's first evening division law program, Wright needs all the get-up-and-go she can get.

Hardly anyone would disagree law school is academically rigorous. Normally accomplished in three years of full-time study, the attainment of a juris doctorate tends to be an all-consuming experience. Many law schools go so far as to warn incoming students that employment of any kind, especially during the notoriously intense first year, is completely absurd.

But many law schools have identified a large target market of prospective lawyers: working adults who want to study the law, but aren't able or ready to completely abandon their current careers.

So evening programs, like Southern's, allow potential career- changers to become lawyers after four years of study, including coursework over the summer.

Although the American Bar Association doesn't track how many part- time evening division programs they accredit, John Sebert, a consultant for their educational division said five schools have created part-time programs in the last two years. Of the 189 law schools accredited by the ABA, 87 now offer part-time degree programs.

Part-time programs make sense for law schools, which often struggle to differentiate themselves from one another. Depending on the city, an evening program can make a school the only game in town for a base of nontraditional students looking to transition into another career - and, in some cases, take advantage of employer- offered tuition assistance programs.

But such academic ambitiousness is often easier said than done.

Wright's day starts at 5:30 a.m. After getting her own children - Jessica, 7, and Kelly, 14 - off to school, the Baton Rouge woman starts work as a special needs teacher at Istrouma High School by 6:50 a.m., teaching her students basic living skills.

"How many hands do you use when you iron?" she recently asked one of her students, Robert, when he tried flattening his pants with one arm by his side. "Two!" the boy enthused.

Her other students, meanwhile, made tacos with the help of another instructor in the classroom's kitchen. The day's menu, written on the chalkboard, also included "corn-on-the-cob, green salad and Hawaiian Punch." Hung on a wall, a poster promised, "Tomorrow's success begins today."

Words to which Wright clearly subscribes. She already has a master's degree in education, but believes a law degree will enable her to help special needs students at a much higher level, working one day, she hopes, to attain and protect their legal rights.

"I can only do so much as a teacher," Wright said later, after she closed down her classroom at 2:30 p.m., met with Kelly in the halls of Istrouma (where she's a freshman) to discuss the teen's need for new cleats, picked up Jessica at grammar school (where Wright's husband, Daryl, teaches) and went home to make dinner.

And help her younger daughter with math homework.

And do the laundry.

And resist the Hot Tamales.

First, and only, evening program

If there had been funding available, Wright could have started law school a lot sooner. That's because the school has had the green light to create an evening program ever since federal court decisions in the '80s promised additional funds to black universities interested in expanding their course offerings. The goal, said John Pierre, a law professor at Southern, was to get minority curriculums up to the funding level enjoyed by mainstream institutions.

But "green lights" aren't always green in a monetary sense and actual funding didn't happen until 2003. Soon after, the school applied for, and received a year later, ABA accreditation for the evening program.

Then came finding the students.

"Even before we got ABA approval, we began our marketing efforts," said Pierre. "We did a survey in Baton Rouge and had over 300 respondents. We concluded there was a demand."

Pierre and others designing the curriculum decided the classes needed to be held from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., giving students enough time to not only get to school, but to study after class or when they get home. And classes, it was also decided, could not meet more than four times a week.

The formula appealed to a wide range of people. Ages of the applicants ranged from 23 to the mid-50s. There were some paralegals. Some retirees. One person had an MBA, another a master's in biology. One was a nurse.

The program costs slightly more than the day program. "We had to place a premium on (evening) tuition to account for extra costs (associated with) security," additional staffing and the costs of keeping classrooms up and running in the evening, said the Law Center's chancellor, Freddie Pitcher, Jr. "Evening programs are almost always more expensive than day programs."

"Expensive" is relative, though. Evening students don't accumulate as many credits as the day students, but the yearly tuition still comes in at an affordable $5,000 (the day students pay $6,300, but complete more credit hours). Comparatively full-time students at LSU's law school pay more than $10,000 in tuition and fees per year.

According to the vice chancellor of LSU's law school, Cheney Joseph, the school is less likely to consider starting an evening program now that Southern, as well as Loyola, are offering them. LSU did away with its part-time day program more than 20 years ago and there "is not a strong impetus to re-evaluate that decision," said Joseph.

That leaves Southern cornering the "evening" and "part-time day" markets in the Baton Rouge area. (Former Gov. Mike Foster still attends the part-time day program and is close to graduating.)

Continuing to serve non-traditional students should serve Southern well, so long as they can keep finding people like Foster, Wright or Keith Anderson.

Starting a second career

For the past 17 years Keith Anderson, 45, has been a chemical engineer at Albemarle, "making the things that make your life better," he explained, half-joking, when asked by a professor in one of his classes to mention what he does for work.

It was questionable how much better he was making his own life during his first semester of evening classes at Southern, though, especially when the headaches set in. (Thankfully his employer makes, among other things, ibuprofen).

"Our professors had us scared to death," said Anderson, who holds a Ph.D. in chemical engineering. Having to be prepared to discuss several cases in class made for a high-stress environment initially, he added. "But toward the end of the semester people began to relax with it."

On a recent Tuesday, Anderson prepared to leave his office - which has dry boards covered with scientific

equations hanging from the walls - and head over to Southern's campus a few exits up 110. But not before dropping in on his wife, who works on a floor below his.

"It's difficult because I am used to having more attention than I have now," said Kay Anderson, a research librarian at the firm who had to learn how to adapt around her husband's demanding study schedule. "I am the one he can easily put off."

She never wanted to be viewed as an impediment to her husband's attempts at a second, post-retirement career. Still she said she misses the "little trips" the two of them took on weekends, time she has learned to spend alone.

Despite his advanced degree, Anderson has always found the law "incomprehensible" and enjoys how the discipline challenges him to think differently.

"Given enough time, we can calculate the answer to just about any (engineering) problem," said Anderson. "But in law, it's not like that. There's just a lot more uncertainty."

I want candy

During her first semester of law school, Wright's candy addiction reached its apex. She wasn't just a user. She was a pusher. Her classmates at Southern knew she could hook them up with anything: peanut butter cups, Sweet Tarts, Mr. Goodbars.

Life without the sweet stuff, she admitted, has been hard.

These days the energy she uses to juggle her work, family and school schedules is au natural.

"What do you have for homework?" Wright asked her daughter in the precious couple of hours they have together before mom must leave for night class.

"Spelling," replied Jessica.

After quizzing the girl on words like "authority" and "posture," the five-minute spelling bee turned into a mini math marathon on a dry board set up in the living room. Wright scribbled down some multiplication problems, asked her daughter to solve them and then darted into the laundry room to throw in a load.

With chicken simmering on the stove, and broccoli steaming in the microwave, Wright later said, "If I make a 'B' or a 'C' that's fine with me, because I did that with everything else."

Her kids are a different story. "They cannot bring a 'C' into this house, or a 'B' for that matter. But if it's their best I'll take it," Wright said.

(Anderson has a similar attitude, comforted by the fact that he already has a career, so excelling in law school is not a make-or- break situation).

Wright almost didn't enroll. Around the time she got accepted to the program one of her brothers was shot to death. It was her husband, Daryl, who suggested she attempt the program anyway, since it's what her brother would have wanted.

Like Anderson's wife, Wright's husband has had to find other things to do with his time. He takes business courses at the University of Phoenix. In the throws of his wife's first semester, he sketched and framed cartoon characters and hung them all over Jessica's room.

It's a team effort, he insisted. "People used to tell us marriage is 50-50," said Daryl. "But when one of you is in law school, it has to be 100-100."Everyone sits down to eat at 5:05 p.m.

Everyone except Rosalind, who is in the next room checking her law school e-mail. She joins them, briefly, but by 5:15 p.m. the kids are done and up from the table. It's a collective pace, and it's fast.

"Will you be at my play tomorrow?" asked Jessica as her mother prepared to leave for school.

"Yes, 9 a.m.," replied Rosalind.

It's 5:20, and around the same time Anderson gathered up his things downtown, Wright grabbed her coat, kissed her husband goodbye and left the house (sometimes not returning until after midnight from after-class

study groups).

Earlier, Wright pondered her schedule, the one that she will have for at least another three and a half years. "Sometimes, when I leave work, I tell myself, 'Your day is only half over.'"

A day that, at least for now, includes legal writing and Constitutional law, but absolutely no Hot Tamales.

Photo: Color photos are Rosalind Wright helping her daughter, Jessica, during a multiplication drill; Rosalind Wright searching for some required reading after class; Keith Anderson, right, offering the professor answers; B.W. photos are Rosalind Wright leaving her job while meeting briefly with her older daughter, Kelly, before heading home for a quick dinner; Rosalind Wright picking up her younger daughter, Jessica, from school (By Kerry Maloney)

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People
Characters carry "Squabbles" Solid acting and witty script add up to good show at Baker Little Theatre

J.D. VENTURA
1,002 words
19 January 2005
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1-C
English

What a difference a play makes. That should be the Baker Little Theatre's new motto.

The little theater that couldn't became the little theater that could in the form of its latest production: television writer Marshall Karp's comedy, "Squabbles."

It was a delightful departure from its last theatrical embarkation, the never-to-be-mentioned-again (after this mention) "It Was a Dark and Stormy Night," when the little engine that tried took 90 long minutes to derail.

There were no storm clouds at Saturday's matinee. In fact, the weather forecast for anyone planning on seeing the show this weekend goes like this: decent acting, coupled with a witty script, followed by expected smiles and a chance of a belly laugh or two.

First, a quick plot synopsis. A New York couple suddenly finds their in-laws (her father, his mother) living with them. The problem? The two parents hate each other.

Simple, right? Exactly. So kudos to producer Tara Dixon and director Aileen Hendricks for selecting a play that doesn't overburden their actors with complex blocking, crazy costume changes or always-risky physical comedy. It's the simplicity of "Squabbles" that clearly allowed the cast to focus on what community theaters sometimes need to focus on most: characterization.

The two parents, played by Baker Little Theatre veterans Dave Besse and Kella Simonin, had all the chemistry of a smoking science project - it started as a bubble and moved speedily to a dangerous boil. Watching them, well, squabble - surprisingly -

never got old. It was obvious they gave some thought to not only who their characters were, but who they were in relation to each other. Important, especially later, when the squabbling subsides and is replaced by more complicated emotions.

Besse, who played the Archie Bunkerlike Abe Dreyfus, was the keeper of the zingy one-liners. His performance, however, was halting at first. There were times when his dialogue seemed as flat as pita bread. But as the story unfolded, it became apparent the actor had carefully planned such emotional reservedness, which eventually played out in delicious contrast to co-star Simonin's garish, moody Mildred Sloan.

(Just a comparison: Besse bears a striking resemblance to, and even sounds like, Jack Albertson, who played "Grandpa Joe" in the 1971 movie "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory." And Simonin's character was reminiscent of George Costanza's mother in "Seinfeld," played by Estelle Harris. And like George's mom, her voice could grate cheese.)

While their sarcastic sparring was hard not to appreciate (example, when Besse's character says he's "all ears," Simonin retorts, "Mouth, maybe. Ears I find hard to believe."), it was the gentle delivery of other more thoughtful themes that ultimately save the play from becoming a meaningless exercise in trivial argument. Like a plump scallop wrapped in salty bacon, the exploration of loneliness, friendship and a refreshingly juicy look at a couple of frisky seniors was a tender chaser to all of the crisp, vitriolic banter that preceded it.

Playing their children, Cooper Helm and Shannon Hebert did an adequate job with parts that truthfully had no chance of outshining the jocular dialogue enjoyed by the company's older thespians. Still Helm mistakenly played his role too intensely, as if it were the lead (Note: Side dishes should never be served as entrees.). Hebert, on the other hand, knew her place.

Both actors, however, are to be commended for a very funny (and revealing) scene at the end of the play which they both delivered winningly.

And both could take a lesson in subtle hilarity from John Smith, who played Sol Wasserman, a neighborhood friend of Abe's. Smith's underplayed Wasserman was perfect. The actor was relaxed, natural and understood exactly how his role fit into the comedy. Without fanfare or muscle flexing, he managed to nearly steal the scenes he appeared in with his mastery of deadpan aloofness.

Everyone did an admirable job with accents, including those who played bit parts (Keith Sagona, as the Puerto Rican handyman, and Shannon Sagona, as the German - or was it Russian? - nanny). However, some of the jokes and characterizations relied on tasteless stereotypes, which for some might dull otherwise bright humor. And Simonin's attempts at what a Jewish mother should sound like alternated between fair and just plain wrong, as her Southern accent duked it out with her attempted New Yorker. (The Southerner won by a knock out).

In the end, though, Baker Little Theatre pulled it together, producing a play that left audience members laughing aloud, talking about their favorite lines at intermission and reaching for a tissue or two in the final act. It was a funny play with a tender underbelly, which Hendricks clearly knew how to tickle.

There is no squabbling necessary. This is good community theater. Hard work pays off. No arguments here.

"Squabbles"

WHEN: Performances are at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Jan. 21 and 22 and Jan. 28 and 29, with matinees at 2 p.m. each Saturday through Jan. 29.

WHERE: Baker Little Theatre, 3121 Van Buren St., Baker.

TICKETS: Tickets are $10, with seniors and students admitted for $7 at the Saturday Matinees.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 774-5953.

Photo: Color photos of the cast of "Squabbles" posing as one big happy family, Keith Sagona, Shannon Hebert, Shannon Sagona, Cooper Helm, John Smith, Kella Simonin and Dave Besse; Dave Besse playing as the fathr who just won't leave, sharing the stage with Shannon Hebert, as his daughter, Alice Sloan, in Baker Little Theatre's "Squabbles"; B.W. photo of cast members caught in the middle of squabbling, Keith Sagona plays Hector Lopez in Baker Little Theatre debute in "Squabbles", Dave Besse, plays as Abe Dreyfus, and Kella Simonin as his argumentative counterpart, Mildred Sloan (by Kerry Maloney); B.W. graphic is "Squabbles" play information

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People
Thrifty business Distribution center helps St. Vincent de Paul Society serve expanding operation

J.D. VENTURA
1,603 words
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The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

The frilly pink dress was lucky.

Clothes that arrive here face two fates. They are pulled from dusty boxes - along with mismatched shoes, books, plates, eye glasses, lamps, luggage, toys - and then they are, along with everything else, judged: resalable or disposable.

It's anyone's guess if the previous owner would be pleased to know the gown she perhaps wore to a cocktail party one summer, the one that maybe brought out the blush in her cheeks and caught the attention of gentlemen there, was spared being fed into a giant hydraulic machine that would reduce such memories to rags.

Not many of the thousands and thousands of garments that pass through the St. Vincent de Paul Society's new central distribution center on Nicholson Drive every month are shredded though. Donated Hawaiian shirts, miniskirts and faux fur coats are either sent to any of the nonprofit's seven local retail stores to be sold as merchandise or the items are fed into that big hydraulic "bailer," which actually doesn't rip them apart, but rather crushes them into giant clothing cubes.

The facility, which looks more like the distribution center of a major U.N. relief mission than a building leased by a humble religious nonprofit, is part of a so-far successful expansion effort meant to increase efficiency in a retail operation that topped $1.4 million in gross revenue last year.

The site, which was previously home to Louisiana Food Systems, is now used by the charity to sort through truckloads of donations. Recently, in one corner, near a forklift, sat more than 40 60-pound bags of shoes and 54-pound sacks of women's handbags. Another room was full of children's footwear, discarded fossils from thousands of fleeting childhoods. And many miscellaneous things: some random mannequin body parts, a pair of Incredible Hulk hands, and lots and lots and lots of hangers.

The enormity of the operation is better appreciated after considering that just three years ago the organization had only one store on Plank Road. Since then it has added five more in Baton Rouge and one in Hammond. As the thrift stores' business increased, the need for a central distribution center became apparent to the management team.

"(The warehouse idea) was born from frustration to tell you the truth," said Pat Davenport, the stores' division director, who shares a cramped, no-frills office at the hangarlike building with colleagues Lucille Dunn, in charge of store management, and Kay Kyes, the processing manager. "We had a very long meeting at a Cracker Barrel one morning where we considered making part of the Plank Road store (into the distribution center)."

It was concluded, however, that wouldn't work. The stores were already overwhelmed with donated merchandise. Clerks at the retail sites were trying to wait on customers while wading through mountains of unpriced goods. And the shopping experience suffered too. Stores didn't look like stores. At best they resembled poorly organized garage sales.

After touring similar operations in Madison, Wis., and Phoenix, Ariz., Davenport became convinced that their retail operation's growth required a processing center. It would not only create much- needed room at the retail locations, it would also allow managers to control the inventory more effectively. If one store was low on shoes, managers there could request more. If jewelry sold better at one location than at another, that location would be supplied with more jewelry.

Dunn, who wanted nothing less than a "department store look," called the new warehouse "a blessing." "Now when we meet with store managers, you can feel the excitement," said Dunn. "There has been a 180-degree turn-around in our store programs. We've created a new image and a new workplace."

They've also created a booming wholesale business. Almost nothing that winds up in the thrift store food

chain ends up in landfills. Items, particularly clothing pieces, which cannot be sold at retail centers are unloaded wholesale to used-clothing brokers, who buy those clothing cubes, unbundle them, sort through them again and then resell them to distributors in foreign countries. A coat that St. Vincent de Paul determines won't sell in Baton Rouge may find its way into a thrift store in Guatemala.

According to Michael Acaldo, St. Vincent de Paul's executive director, these bundles are sold by the truckload for around six cents a pound. Each bail is approximately 1,000 pounds. "You do the math," said Acaldo, who added before the distribution center launched the charity was either "ragging" unsalable items, selling them unbundled for only a cent per pound or throwing them away. "Big companies don't want to deal with a group that doesn't have their stuff bailed."

Now St. Vincent de Paul has contracts with companies like Atlanta- area-based Interdom, which purchases 2.5 million pounds of clothes every month from thrift store operations throughout the Midwest and South. Interdom then sends them to sorting facilities before selling them to oversees distributors at a markup. "In these Third World countries, these clothes are being sold for a penny on the dollar," said Terry Kasha, Interdom's vice president. "It's a viable way for people in those countries to get clothes for cheap."

It's also the way many people here meet their family's basic needs, Acaldo said. Despite the efficiency the distribution center has added to the charity's thrift division, making the books balance is still difficult, especially when St. Vincent de Paul still gives away large quantities of goods to families who cannot afford to buy them. Davenport agreed: the new facility is losing money on paper, but it's hoped streamlined operations at the stores will make up for red ink elsewhere.

On a whole, the industry is hardly struggling. The thrift store business is not just mom and pop consignment shops and small charity retailers. Adele Meyer, the executive director of the National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops said concrete numbers are hard to come by but it's a multibillion dollar, "recession-proof" sector that seems to be in a constant state of vitality. Many for- profit resellers have sprung up around the country and huge charity- driven outfits, like Goodwill Industries International Inc., have begun to open 35,000-square-foot mega-thrift stores, she said.

Meyer explained the industry's growth can be attributed to several factors. When the economy softens, charities have an easier time getting people to donate old coats and shoes than cold hard cash. At the same time, second-hand shops no longer have the stigma they once had. Thanks in part to eBay, it's cooler than ever to buy used. Consumers of all ages and economic classes are exalting in "the thrill of the hunt."

"Teens have become a significant (customer) base," said Meyer. "Stores are adding teen departments and changing their decor and even playing their music. Everything they do is for the teen consumer, who (as a demographic) has lots of money but is also budget conscious."

$6.54. That's all college student Jennifer Hudman, 20, spent on six T-shirts at the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store on Government Street, where you can buy Billy Squier's cassette tape, "Signs of Life," for 50 cents, or a pair of fuzzy dice for half that. Hudman said she "has a thing" for T-shirts and is drawn to thrift stores because, unlike clothes sold by mass-market retailers in the malls, the clothes she finds at second-hand shops are usually unique. "(Mall stores) are making shirts that look vintage for $20," said Hudman, whose favorite find that day was a little yellow kid-sized LSU Tigers shirt (price: $1). "Why not just buy the real thing."

A couple of aisles down from Hudman, Tanga Richardson, 42, was shopping alongside friend Wanda Brown. Richardson said she doesn't have to shop thrift stores but, like Hudman, can't justify spending full price for new. "Why spend $80 for a pair of jeans, when I can get the same pair here for $6?" asked Richardson.

While bargain hunters are of course welcomed, the St. Vincent de Paul management team stressed that the organization remains primarily focused on the family that has lost everything in a house fire or the woman who flees an abusive partner, too afraid to return for her clothes. "Whenever we hire somebody we make them realize we do have a mission here, and that they are a part of it," said Kyes.

That said, with the stores less cluttered and aesthetically more pleasing, the needy will continue to share the aisles of St. Vincent de Paul with those just looking for Percy Faith's "Themes for Young Lovers" on vinyl - or a frilly pink dress.

Sometimes bargain hunters set hopes too high. "I don't know if it's an original or not," Richardson said, as she dusted off a framed print of the U.S. Constitution.

"Probably not," counseled clerk Bertha Vaughn.

"Well you never know," replied Richardson. "Sometimes people don't know what they're throwing out."

The Constitution, incidentally, costs $10. It's still for sale down on Government.

Photo: Color photos are the St. Vincent de Paul Society's thrift store management team, from left, Pat Davenport, Kay Kyes and Lucille Dunn; A frilly pink dress at the Government Street thrift store; Bails of newly crushed clothes (By Eric Wright)

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People
Reaching out to offenders EBR program provides counseling for homebound juvenile sex offencers

J.D. VENTURA
1,402 words
9 January 2005
The Baton Rouge Advocate
1-H
English

In a neatly kept subdivision in Baton Rouge, a 14-year-old who molested a 6-year-old boy opened the door to find two probation officers, nine millimeter handguns holstered to their hips, there to enforce his court-ordered curfew.

But in East Baton Rouge Parish, officials are doing more than keeping close tabs on released underage sex offenders. They are providing them with sex offender counseling, something they could not do before.

Two and a half years ago some probation officers at the Department of Juvenile Services realized only kids who were sent to juvenile detention facilities received counseling aimed at preventing them from becoming adult sex offenders. Youths who were released pending trial or who were granted probation, however, were sent home, often with little understanding of why what they had done was wrong or with any insight into how to change their behavior.

"Basically you had a juvenile with issues relating to improper sexual activity and you couldn't provide treatment for them," said Deron Patin, a 31-year-old senior probation officer with East Baton Rouge Parish, who today supervises 15 homebound juvenile sex offenders. "They were not receiving any kind of treatment at all and were put back with normal children."

(Unlike adult sex offenders who must register with the state's sex offender registry, most juvenile offenders don't have to alert neighbors as to their presence in the community.)

The counseling program has been funded by an annual $29,000 grant obtained from the Governor's Office by Yvonne Lewis Day, the project director for the city's anti-drug task force. She said she decided to apply for the money when it became clear that "a subset of kids had fallen through the cracks."

"They needed treatment and counseling focused on sexual trauma and other offenses," said Day. "The same kind of counseling violent kids were getting did not fit."

At the request of the juvenile probation office, local psychologist Alicia Pellegrin designed a treatment program geared exclusively toward underage offenders. At one time she counseled the victims of sexual abuse, until she decided treating the offenders held the promise of possibly stopping future sex crimes from occurring. Pellegrin went on to develop a reputation for working with adult offenders, many of whom started committing sex offenses as juveniles.

"The reason it's so important to reach juveniles is because you want to prevent them from becoming adult sex offenders," said Pellegrin. "The chances are we can reach someone in the earlier stages of developing a problem like this."

Her colleague, Brandon Romano, who administers the program, regularly holds group therapy sessions for the young sex offenders at the juvenile court probation office. For some of the kids, the meetings are "the only safe place they can talk about their offense and not be judged." In the past, Romano has found some law enforcement agencies less than collaborative when attempting to provide counseling to criminals. Not this time.

"It does take all of us to make it work," said Romano, referring to Patin and his team of probation officers. "Without them, we could be providing mental health services for the youth or the family of that youth and then that youth just walks out the door and everything we've processed goes out the window."

Patin makes sure that doesn't happen. On a recent Wednesday night, he and his partner, Lakeasha Cooley, drove around various Baton Rouge neighborhoods in an unmarked police car, paying the homes of several juvenile sex offenders an unannounced visit. They know these kids, many of whom they supervise for years. Some of the teens need to be in by 6 p.m. or 7 p.m., some by 9:30. Patin and Cooley make sure they show up to counseling too.

Many of the youths they manage come from lower-income families struggling to make ends meet. Parents are sometimes either uninvolved, absent, or just ill-equipped to handle such complex social problems. Patin and Cooley said some of the kids they supervise - who they see at least once a week - appreciate the fact that anyone is checking up on them at all.

And Romano said that juvenile sex offenders benefit similarly from the structure of group therapy. Other group members reward them when they've made progress and admonish them when they have not. "They are able to see themselves in others and call each other out on issues," said Romano, who agreed with Pellegrin when she said "socio-economic status" often "complicates the whole treatment picture."

It was just after 6:30 p.m. when Patin and Cooley pulled up to a darkened house, its door ajar. After knocking on windows and pointing a flashlight into the home, several grammar school-aged children emerged. One pointed a toy gun at Patin, whose hand reflexively hovered over his weapon. After educating the boy as to why pointing a gun at a stranger isn't a good idea, Patin asked where the sex offender was. The 15-year-old was across the street with his mother, at a neighbor's home. Curfew was 20 minutes away, they reminded the teen.

"When people think juvenile probation they think we mostly deal with runaways and truants," said Cooley, 28, who manages more than 40 juvenile offenders (not all charged with sex offenses). "I don't think they realize the magnitude of crimes some of these children commit."

Lee Wilson has some idea. As the section chief of the East Baton Rouge district attorney's juvenile division, it's his job to prosecute juvenile sex offenders. While he thinks the treatment program is "a great thing to have," it "concerns" him that such outpatient counseling often places an offender back into the same environment in which the offense was committed.

"I am not a big fan of doctors when they delve into people's minds because they don't always make the right call," said Wilson, who explained that part of his job is to determine whether the offender is a "danger to society." "...We have to keep in mind that there are some dangerous kids out there, and prosecution needs to go forward while the kid gets treatment."

Those running the treatment program said 50 offenders have received the counseling so far and there has been only one case of an offender committing another sex offense.

Juvenile Court Judge Kathleen Stewart Richey is so happy with the program, she "bragged" about it to 300 of her peers at a recent meeting of the Louisiana Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. She said some want to try the model in their parishes.

"(This program) allows kids to stay in a community without being put in an abstract environment," said Richey, who explained the challenge for everyone working with juvenile sex offenders is to determine who is a dangerous predator and who made a clumsy mistake in the confusion of adolescence. Prisons, added Richey, are bad places for juvenile sex offenders to learn how to behave acceptably, given the predatory sexual behavior that can take place there. "The key to a successful rehabilitation program happens at home."

One of the kids playing with the child who pointed the toy gun at Patin did cartwheels across the lawn and briefly climbed onto the back bumper of the unmarked police car, yelling and laughing into the dark night. When asked how old he was, the boy said "7," then offered, "I have a girlfriend. She's pregnant. She comes (through) my back window when it's open." He then ran down the street as Patin slowly backed the sedan from the driveway, mentioning to Cooley that the sex offender's mother smelled strongly of alcohol.

"I would like to involve the parents more and have some family sessions," said Pellegrin. "I think we are doing a good job but it's a very circumscribed job, and at the end of the day, these kids go back to where they came from."

Photo: Color photos are Probation officers Deron Patin, left, and Lakeasha Cooley stopping by the home of a juvenile sex offender on a surprise curfew check; Mental-health professionals, from left, Alicia Pellegrin, Brandon Romano, Deron Patin and Rodger Aucoin (By Richard Alan Hannon)

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People
Coffee culture Sit-and-sip crowd gets company from study-and-sip students at coffee shops

J.D. VENTURA
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Coffee shops used to be about coffee.

You see it in the movies. A Formica countertop, an indifferent, over-worked waitress barking out orders to a sweaty cook while refilling and re-refilling white ceramic cups of joe.

Pie and coffee at the local greasy spoon can still be easily had, but it's hard not to notice just how radically America's coffee culture has changed over the past several years. The coffee shop concept has morphed into what coffee industry types call "the cafe experience," which includes comfortable, modern furniture, atmospheric lighting and an obvious commitment to a questionably lucrative demographic: students.

Students are to Baton Rouge's coffee shops what pigeons are to New York's Central Park, in that they are everywhere, not going away and tend to nest when they find a favorite spot. Some patrons grumble at this, questioning why a single cup of coffee grants a bookish undergraduate indefinite squatting rights on the coolest leather chair or at that new ergonomically correct desk near the window.

"Store owners have concluded that it is easier to attract new customers into a full store than into an empty one," said Ted Lingle, the executive director of the California-based Specialty Coffee Association of America, a trade organization that represents gourmet retailers and roasters. "(Lingering) tends to build, rather than discourage, traffic."

As a marketing concept, the tactic is nothing new. Big city nightclubs are a good example, letting people in slowly, two at a time, to create a line on the sidewalk. The illusion - that the place must be popular if people are lining up - often works.

Coffee shops aren't nightclubs, but they have become social hot spots, something coffee marketers call the "third place," a locale that is neither school nor home, but offers a comforting sense of familiarity.

Starbucks is behind that concept 100 percent. In a brief statement e-mailed through the company's public relations firm, regional marketing manager Heywood McGuffee said, "Basically, we believe Starbucks is a community gathering place where people can enjoy spending time together over a great cup of coffee."

Why certain people choose certain coffee shops to be their home away from home varies widely.

Josh Clayton, a Shreveport native and second-year law student at LSU, "mixes it up" and tends to patronize different establishments. During finals last semester, he struggled with a particularly nasty take-home exam at Coffee Call on College Drive. According to him, the noise of other patrons doesn't compare to tempting domestic diversions.

"There aren't the distractions of home here," said Clayton, a smoker who was particularly fond of the old, pre-Wal-Mart Coffee Call because it was "dirtier" and he could light up a Marlboro Light with his java. "There's no Internet or couch, and I don't feel like I have to rake the yard or wash my clothes."

He said there is "an implied obligation" to purchase the cafe's goods to justify the amount of time he spends there studying, but admitted he coasts for a while on $1.50, which gets him a cup and a refill. And he never goes to Starbucks - too expensive and too corporate.

Starbucks' McGuffee sounds pretty corporate when he describes students like Clayton as part of a "larger cross-section of customers" the company is pursuing through "innovation in beverages, food and technology."

The fact that smaller coffee retailers, like Coffee Call and Perks, are even staying in business against bigger commercial chains, like Starbucks and Community Coffee, may be evidence that the little guys are offering boutique drinks, food and atmosphere a larger retail operation cannot mass market.

Atmospheric conditions

"Starbucks isn't scaring them away anymore," said the editor and co-publisher of New York-based Tea & Coffee magazine, Jane McCabe, who added that as larger chains expand and implement necessary efficiency measures, such as the mechanization of barista (espresso) stations, they risk losing the homey atmosphere that has become as much of a commodity as the coffee. "They (small shops) are offering personal attention where Starbucks is not."

Sometimes the best form of attention is to not pay attention at all.

John Cannatella, the owner of Coffee Call, said he has always appreciated the university business that frequents his shop - which, like Highland Coffees, has enjoyed a strong student-friendly reputation - and rarely worries about student sippers taking up too much space. The long wooden tables at Coffee Call are perfect for study groups, he pointed out. But "space management" is something at which he has had to become good, especially during finals, he said.

"We have had to move people along, or we have asked them to double up," said Cannatella.

The same night Clayton was learning the law at Coffee Call, fellow LSU seniors Jeremy Bergeron, Clay Prather and Othman Elhelou were studying business, psychology and finance, respectively, over at Perks on Perkins Road. Seventeen other students sat around them, scribbling in notebooks, flipping through flashcards or typing away on laptops glowing atop the bistro tables.

The LSU trio had been at the cafe "all day" and had purchased only a few cups of coffee.

Elhelou said he also avoids corporate chains because he feels they have become too popular with high school kids using the cafe as a hip hang-out (translation: they seem a lot noisier). Perks, conversely, is quiet and seems to attract a noticeably older clientele perhaps more interested in getting some serious work done.

"You see other people studying and it motivates you to study, too," said Elhelou. "The corporate places have the drive through and the head-sets and just all that hustle and bustle."

In the Northeast, Tea & Coffee's McCabe has witnessed the phenomenon Elhelou describes: high school-age kids going to Starbucks to see and be seen socially, but frequenting rival Dunkin Donuts for "affordable" specialty drinks.

Several students interviewed in Baton Rouge agreed that part of the coffee shop allure is, unlike libraries or private homes, cafes allow for studiousness and socialization simultaneously. Often the decision as to which coffee shop to go to is influenced by how much of either they want to do.

Setting the scene

Creating a social scene to lure consumers sounds like an obvious marketing plan. But Starbucks originally embraced the fast-food, coffee-to-go model that has made Dunkin Donuts such a success, according to Specialty Coffee Association's Lingle, until the Seattle-based chain entered the Asian market and realized just how successful the cafe approach could become. Esther Campi, a Starbucks' spokesperson, said it was actually a trip taken by a company executive to Italy in the early '80s that inspired the chain to emulate Milanese espresso bars and import the sit-and-sip coffee culture to Seattle.

"In the beginning, Starbucks didn't even want chairs in their units," said Lingle. "But they were pulled (in the cafe) direction by their consumers."

Perks manager Michael Mahaffey said his customers like the fact that his shop is "tucked away in a neighborhood" and is "laid back, but not sterile."

The students are certainly welcomed at Perks, but Mahaffey said, unlike Starbucks, there is no plan to install desks. For now the wireless Internet is as far as it goes.

"I don't want to turn this into a library," said Mahaffey. "...We do have people who consider it a library rather than a coffee shop that needs to make money."

Those looking for cool atmosphere rather than hot coffee may find the big chains in better financial positions to tolerate those addicted to the culture rather than the beans.

At a local CC's, Scottie Love, an LSU sophomore studying chemical engineering, crammed with fellow student Katherine Feig. Their texts and notebooks splayed across the two small tables they occupied didn't provide any room for cups of coffee. But that was OK - because there wasn't any.

"Usually one cup of coffee buys you unlimited time," said Love. "But if I come to a coffee shop (to study), I really don't feel like I need to buy anything."

Photo: Color photo of LSU students Jeremy Bergeron, Clay Prather and Othman Elhelou, from left, studying at Perks on Perkins Road (By Mark Saltz)

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People
Monsour's mission Mayor-elect Kip Holden's chief administrative officer looks forward to "being a part of history"

J.D. VENTURA
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Snowboarding? Yes, Walter Monsour, the mayor-elect's 61-year-old choice for the chief administrative officer position, would give the sport a whirl. If it weren't for that bad knee.

And perhaps his upcoming career change that will presumably leave him with a lot less time to hit the slopes.

For the time being, however, his schedule still allows for Sunday dinner with his family. One of his four adult sons, Jordan, an avid boarder, just laughed over beef tenderloin and twice-baked potato at the thought of his father on a snowboard, then, a few minutes later, said of himself, "I like just doing the blue diamond slopes, although I'll still do the 'blacks' (the most difficult) - just to say I can do it."

It's an esprit de corps that seems genetically installed into the bloodline, although his father certainly has a lot less to prove.

Monsour has met with success in both politics and business. Not long after graduating from LSU's law school in 1969, he became the chief aid in district attorney Ossie Brown's office. Six years later he was briefly the parish attorney until accepting former mayor Pat Screen's offer to do the exact same job Kip Holden is asking him to do today.

He has been involved in several business ventures, most notably the founding of the first Coors Beer distributorship in the state, which he sold in 1986.

Quite accustomed to money and power, it seems Walter Monsour's decision to re-enter the often thankless world of public service has far less to do with personal achievement than it does with a simple belief that the new mayoral administration is poised to do great things for the city.

Some political observers say the first great thing Kip Holden did for Baton Rouge as mayor-elect was tap Monsour to be his right-hand man, someone who walks in the door with strong ties to a business establishment that didn't wholeheartedly support Holden's run. The mayor-elect admits that he was so confident in his choice, he simply hadn't considered anyone else for the job. "I never thought about him not accepting, because I am an eternal optimist," said Holden. Monsour, who friends say can be notoriously analytical, didn't exactly jump at the chance.

The offer was "out of the blue," according to Monsour, who wrestled with the decision for two weeks. He said his wife, Mary Ann (his "best friend and biggest confidant"), gave him an enthusiastic "you gotta do it."

(She said she let him reach his own conclusion first. "But had I said 'no' he wouldn't have done it," she added.)

"He told me after he made his decision he had really prayed about it," said Monsour's priest, Miles Walsh, the pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church. "Someone said to him 'Well, maybe it's a call from God and that really resonated with him.'"

Whether a return to the municipal building was a divine invitation or a black diamond trail Monsour needed to ride, he took the job, despite the assured raising of eyebrows over the fact that he's a Republican (he voted for Bush) and a former Simpson supporter. Partisan politics aside, he said the idea of joining Holden's team left him with a "sense of being a part of history."

"I was assured by Kip that he wanted to give me a lot of authority and leeway and that he wanted to make significant changes, and not change for the sake of change," said Monsour from the den of his 7,000-square-foot home, from which he and his wife have run their respective businesses for the last 10 years. "He was not interested in the status quo."

Neither is Monsour. As a man who has an uncanny way of getting to the bottom line, both figuratively and on the spreadsheets he has a reputation for scrutinizing; he bristles at bureaucrats who offer established process as a reason for not enacting reform. And financial turnaround seems to be his specialty. He was a human tourniquet for a Screen administration that found itself hemorrhaging money with a ballooning budget deficit. Monsour said he reduced the size of city government by "1/4." He's proud of that.

"It was radical surgery, it wasn't cosmetic," recalled the new chief administrative officer, whose scalpel-wielding resulted in the privatization of the city's garbage pick-up and the headline-making layoff of several teamsters.

Monsour looks back on the garbage controversy as an event that got "blown out of proportion" - it resulted in death threats and a security detail assigned to guard him -and points to his years as a Democrat when making the case for his understanding of labor. His swift dismantling of what he then contended was an inefficient waste management operation fits with a belief he still holds about Baton Rouge government today. "I don't think taxpayers in this parish over the last 40 to 45 years have gotten their money's worth," said Monsour. "And so, that includes Dumas, that includes Screen, that includes McHugh, that includes Simpson, and I hope it doesn't include Holden."

Getting the most out of the least taxpayer dollars is never easy, especially when you understand that you cannot run the government like a business. Monsour knows this. The "profit motive" that drives business must be, in some sense, replaced by a constant deference to "public concern." He acknowledges that there is also a difference between running the city and running city hall. Incidentally he intends on doing both, while preventing Holden from getting bogged down in the details.

"Kip is not a micromanager," said Monsour. "I don't expect him to be, and if he were, then I don't think he would need me." It's too soon to tell if Monsour will micromanage city hall. He does, however, speak of "redirecting" staff and "reshaping work habits."

"Walter is not a soft touch," said longtime friend and another former chief administrative officer under the Screen administration, Mary Olive Pierson. "When people come in and they want money in this budget for this and that budget for that, he will always have his eye on the big picture. He knows where all the component parts are and how they fit together."

Keep it simple, stupid

Monsour is fond of the acronym K.I.S.S. (Keep it simple, stupid). A quest for simplicity is apparent in a managerial style that allows for digression, but is quick to pull everyone's focus back to the business at hand. It's as if a mental hourglass is turned upside down and the sand is running its course. He is a man who seems acutely aware that time is indeed money.

In a transition meeting with the casually dressed outgoing mayor, Bobby Simpson, Monsour, clad in a red power tie, barely sipped his coffee while engaging in preliminary chit-chat before announcing, "We have a lot of fish to fry."

The comment was appropriate because he was referring to the myriad of issues the departing and arriving administrations had to discuss before the changeover can be completed. It could easily be misinterpreted in the sense that on the immediate agenda Simpson and Monsour were to discuss personnel, many of whom were vulnerable appointees.

The conversation was civil, diplomatic. There was a compliment about Simpson being "too young" to retire and then, a comment about a staffer that was less than receptive upon meeting the transition team. "It's not a good sign when she doesn't say 'hi' to the mayor- elect or me," Monsour said, his voice even-toned, the statement somehow more fact than warning. When the outgoing mayor suggested Monsour may "butt heads" with another staffer, Monsour smiled confidently, "Only once."

When asked if Monsour was a diplomat, longtime friend and local businessman Jim Bailey hesitated. He met the new chief administrative officer 40 years ago when they were both frat brothers at LSU, where Monsour was also head cheerleader before entering law school. "Well, I think that he is (diplomatic), but I also think Walter is a pretty tough guy," said Bailey.

A meeting between Atlanta's first female mayor, Shirley Franklin, and Holden later in the day seemed to somehow spin around Monsour's stalwartness. Franklin was seated across from Monsour, not Holden, who sat instead by her side. When Franklin asked everyone to guess how many potholes she had filled in the first six months of her term, Holden said "500." Monsour offered, "5,000." Franklin was impressed - with Monsour's guess (correct answer: 6,000).

Whether Monsour extracted the information from his new Blackberry (wireless e-mail device), which he checked several times during the meeting, was not clear. Far clearer was how unnecessary Simpson's parting advice was to Monsour earlier that day, when he told him to "get a good filing system."

By all accounts, Monsour is fanatically well-organized and never needs reminding. When Holden told Franklin he was asked to be Santa Claus at a fund-raiser that Friday, it was Monsour who gently reminded him that the meeting he had already scheduled with newly elected U.S. Sen. David Vitter may pose a conflict.

Dick Cheney?

Is Monsour the Dick Cheney of the Holden administration?

"That's exactly right," said Jim Greely, the CEO of Regions Bank, who has known Monsour since 1994. "That's exactly as I view him, more of a statesman than a politician."Neither Holden nor Monsour like the comparison. If running the city were a football game, Monsour said Holden is undoubtedly the coach and he, the quarterback.

"Well I take his position very seriously for the fact that he has been in that position before," said Holden, who feels Monsour's resume of fiscal responsibility will come in handy, given that Baton Rouge has only "a very small surplus." "But, at the end of the day, he and I have a mutual understanding that it's my call."

"He is not the Dick Cheney of this administration," said Pierson. "But I will tell you something - Kip Holden made a very wise decision."

At that Sunday dinner at home, Monsour was at the head of the table, unquestionably the coach of his clan. Or seated on the kitchen countertop, his sons standing around him talking about cell phones and law and golf. And then in the back yard, gazing at the fountain there, rocking on his porch swing as he smoked on an Arturo Fuente cigar (the "Robusto" grade, not the best of that brand, but a smart choice for the money).

Spotting the silver-haired Monsour in his silver BMW 740 or on his Harley Davidson Fat Boy is far more likely than catching him cruising the trails of Aspen on a snowboard. He still wants to try it, though. He likes how it's less cumbersome than skiing, no poles to carry, no skis to take on and off. Snowboarding just seems more...

"Efficient?" a guest suggested.

"Yes," said Monsour with a hearty laugh, a reward to his visitor for being on the same page. "It just seems easier. There's not as many moving parts."

Photo: Color photos of Walter Monsour checking his notes while his new boss, mayor-elect Kip Holden, gets some advice from Shirley Franklin, the first female mayor of Atlanta; Mayor-elect Kip Holden being briefed by his new chief administrative officer, Walter Monsour (By Richard Alan Hannon); Walter Monsour chatting with a guest in the den of his home in the Jefferson Place subdivision; Walter Monsour, center, background, plays with his only grandchild, Ian, while having dinner with his sons and their families. Clockwise from Monsour are Trey Monsour, Ian's father; daughter-in-law Kristy Monsour; Marron Monsour, Kristy's husband; Michael Monsour and fiancee Emily Hipwell, and Jordan Monsour (By Patrick Dennis); B.W. photos of Walter Monsour, front row, second from left, was a cheerleader as an undergraduate at LSU (PP); Heads hung in prayer, the Monsour family says grace. Mary Ann, Walter Monsour's wife (left of him) (By Patrick Dennis)

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People
Radio's rising star J-Tweezy has made a name for himself as hip-hop radio executive

J.D. VENTURA
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Long before he redefined the hip-hop market in Baton Rouge and saved WEMX (MAX 94.1) from its ratings free fall, Joshua Bursh saved himself.

While other students at Southern were doing their homework, Bursh was doing crack cocaine. He was mad. Ticked-off that his parents had divorced, that his athletic aspirations had vanished, that all of his friends had already completed college. Ten treatment centers had failed him. His "disease" was winning.

And his dreams of being a disc jockey were melting away too. Boozy nights chugging 40-ounce beers "to take the edge off" the coke left him chronically unemployed. Going to work turned into going to the Skylark Motel in Scotlandville to score another hit. Then one night he saw an unfamiliar ghost, a mockery of who he had been and a haunting premonition of who he would become. "I literally went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror," recalled Bursh from his office at WEMX, where he has been program director for the past two years. "I didn't see Joshua."

The drug addict living in a cramped one-bedroom apartment with a black-and-white television and only two changes of clothes is long gone. Today, Joshua Bursh glimpses his reflection and sees J- Tweezy, a popular, on-air hip-hop personality and a rising star in the competitive world of radio programming.

Program directors decide what songs a radio station plays. Many rely on market research or record company promoters to tell them which singles will resonate with listeners. Not Tweezy, who instead frequents area hip-hop clubs, studies other rap stations in bigger cities and more or less hangs out with his target market. Those who have watched his professional ascent over the last decade say he's good at what he does because he "lives the lifestyle." The result is a guy who recognizes a hit when he hears one.

Back in 2000, Tweezy was a "night jock" on WEMX. He wanted to resign. They wanted to keep him. (Tweezy remembers the program director at the time repeatedly ripping up his letters of resignation). It was a classic case of show-me-the-money that ended with Tweezy programming at a station in Natchez, Miss., and then working nights again as a DJ in Houston.

Back in Baton Rouge, Rebecca Breeding, then the new vice president and general manager at Citadel Broadcasting, the company that owns WEMX, was getting her butt kicked by a robot. To be more precise, WTGE (107.3), entirely automated at the time, was crushing WEMX in the hip-hop format, without any local programming or radio personalities. "My main objective was to restore integrity," remembered Breeding, who now consults for a Tulsa-based broadcasting company. "We were a 6000 watt (station) up against a 1000 watt flamethrower."

So when Tweezy called Breeding's cell phone one day out-of-the- blue to say "hello," the veteran radio executive had a light bulb moment and pulled her car over on Airline Highway. She told him they had to talk, that she was "in trouble." Tweezy got off the air in Houston late that night and drove straight through to Baton Rouge to meet with Breeding. The offer? Come to Baton Rouge and be the top jock and the station's program director.

"I knew I had to have him," remembered Breeding. "I am an over- 50 white woman, but I recognize talent when I see it."

Within three months, Breeding's instincts about Tweezy and his instincts about music began pulling up WEMX's ratings. Within a year, in what some observers described as an act of surrender, WTGE switched its format to country.

Such a dramatic turnaround didn't surprise Glenn Edwards, an "afternoon drive" DJ on Citadel's R&B station, Q 106.5. Edwards worked with Tweezy in 1992 at a station in Lafayette. He remembers playing music trivia with Tweezy and always losing. It's his encyclopedic knowledge of the hip-hop industry, coupled with always having "an ear to the street" that Edwards says makes Tweezy "a new breed of program director," one who can retain listenership in the face of growing competition from satellite radio and digital

music.

"He is a student of the game," said Edwards. "I was always jealous of that."

Game or not, Tweezy can be all business. His two personalities, the streetwise rapper and the shrewd industry analyst, are best displayed when he is on the air.

Recently, on the morning drive show Tweezy effortlessly engaged in macho banter with his 23-year-old co-host, Tony King. (Example: "Oooooo, you sound kind of, ooooo," he cooed to a female caller, while shooting a knowing glance to his grinning sidekick). But then, minutes later, there's a commentary on gun control in the wake of the shooting death of Pantera's lead singer in Ohio. "This is not something that just happens in rap," he reminded listeners. "The bigger issue is the use of guns."

"He can go into one building and be hip-hop and then go into another building and be as Fortune 500 as anybody else," said Demetrius Lloyd, a record promoter for Sony/Columbia Records, whose job it is to convince Tweezy to play the records of the artists he represents. "The program director gig is a door opener to get people to notice you."

Tweezy is no longer an anonymous name in hip-hop radio. His connection with mainstream entertainers, like Louisiana native Master P, is well known and much talked about in Baton Rouge's underground rap culture. And while his celebrity connections may impress hangers-on at area nightclubs, it's his growing reputation as a radio executive that may one day land him back in a big metropolitan market as the program director for a flagship station.

Singing Tweezy's praises is something Judy Ellis, the chief operating officer of Citadel Communications, is reluctant to do - because she doesn't want to lose him to another chain. "Baton Rouge is not an unimportant market," said Ellis, who is based in New York City. "Everybody in this business knows who J-Tweezy is, all over the country."

His friends know Tweezy best, friends like Demarcus Jones, 22, and Demetri Harris, 27. The two aspiring recording artists, known by their rap names Tank & Derty, respectively, are trying to break into the business, and they are relying heavily on Tweezy, who's producing their CD, to use his connections to get them noticed. It may prove to be a smart move.

"A new artist cannot make it unless he is attached to an (already established) hot artist," explained Gloria Fitts, a promotions manager for Jive/Zomba Records who has known Tweezy professionally for 10 years. "(Market) research is designed to destroy the new artist."

In other words, if Tank & Derty signed with a record company prematurely, before creating a name for themselves, and market research showed that consumers weren't identifying with their first single, chances are there would be no second chance. Many newly signed artists are dropped by record companies if success does not happen overnight.

Which makes knowing someone like Tweezy all the more vital to their careers. Tweezy, for example, knows a famous hip-hop producer (who, according to Tweezy, sells just the song's "beat" for $150,000). New rappers like Tank & Derty, who use such beats as the foundation for their songs, rarely have that kind of cash. They also can't afford to have mainstream artists insert cameo raps into their tracks. But connections like Tweezy's can result in deep discounts.

"He is making it possible for us to show our talent because we are going to be for real," said Tank, who attended a meeting in Tweezy's office recently to discuss the artwork for their album. "It's about who you know, how you know them and if they are going to help you."

Derty says the support Tweezy tries to offer emerging artists (he often gives new acts some airplay during an on-air showcase of local talent) afford them more than just professional opportunity. "He is saving our lives," said Derty. "Because if we were not doing this, we would be on the streets doing Lord knows what."

These days, his professional split-personality is on the mend. At age 34, Tweezy says the program director hat is a better fit than the do-rag and backward baseball caps favored by Tank & Derty. He admits he now relates more to Joshua Bursh than J-Tweezy.

"At this point I have done the on-air thing, but the managerial side is what will keep me in this business for a long time," said Tweezy. "Because it's challenging."

That's not to say he's not still out there. He's ordered new rims for his white Mercedes sedan. He wears long chains around his neck. His ears are pierced. He looks like a rapper. Or a popular hip-hop DJ. But the art of business is just as thrilling, he says.

"Here I have a chance to create every day. I can say 'OK' this song is going to hit the radio at 11:47 and go out to my car and hear how that song sounds," he said. "It's like I'm painting something."

Photo: Color photos of J-Tweezy and Derty listening to audio samples for their next CD; Joshua Bursh (aka J-Tweezy) hosting the morning show on WEMX; J-Tweezy shuffling through CDs in his office (By Kerry Maloney); B.W. photo of J-Tweezy on the air at WEMX (By Arthur D. Lauck)

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People
Joshua Bell new poster child for Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation

J.D. Ventura
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As the young boy sang for a visitor to their home, his voice flutelike, high and breathy, his mother stared not at him, but off into space, smiling slightly. "Like an angel," she said.

By most accounts, Joshua Bell doesn't have an awful lot to sing about.

The new poster child for the Baton Rouge Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation has experienced more pain and lengthy hospital stays at age 9 than most healthy people experience in their lifetimes. And, according to his family and his doctor, the struggle continues.

Joshua's pain happens when his red blood cells, which are sickle- shaped and sticky, sometimes clump together and block the flow of blood through small blood vessels. "Crisis" is what the adults in his life call it. For Joshua, the pain that erupts in his knees - which, in terms of severity, is akin to that of a heart attack - isn't summed up with neat, clinical terms.

"When Joshua hurts everyone knows it," said his doctor, Sheila Moore, the medical director of St. Jude's Hospital's Baton Rouge affiliate. "His pain is frequently managed with morphine."

It's painful for his mother, Dimetra, too. Soon after her son was diagnosed, she had to quit her job and college classes. Managing Joshua's disease quickly took up all of her time.

"A lot of people think it's an easy disease," said Dimetra, who compares raising a sickle cell child to taking care of an elderly person, given how physically vulnerable they can be. "He looks healthy now, but if you saw him in the hospital, it's two different children."

According to Dr. Anthony Stallion, a pediatric surgeon who specializes in sickle cell at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, significant new advances to fight the disease, like re-engineering the genes that result in the blood disorder, are still very early- stage.

"Pain management of this disease has to be aggressive," said Stallion, who points out that sickle cell is not exclusively an African-American or pediatric disease. "We used to ration medication, but we now understand these patients require pain medicine to function, and you can't assign a value judgment to that."

When Joshua is functioning, he's playing his drums or his guitar or watching his favorite TV shows, "Smallville" and "The Power Rangers." If TV time includes either of his two favorite foods, pancakes or pizza, well, even better.

Joshua was chosen as the poster boy in April after interviewing in front of a panel of 14 of the foundation's board members. He will help the organization "promote awareness" of the disease, according to the foundation's executive director, Lorri Burgess.

"Joshua has mounds and mounds of personality despite his disease," said Burgess, on why the boy was selected. "He has tried very hard to have a normal life despite his limitations."

Hydroxyurea, a chemotherapy treatment now used on adult and pediatric sickle cell patients, has helped Joshua lead that "normal life," said his mother and doctor.

Moore describes it as a "wonder drug" that "mimics the safety net fetal hemoglobin provides newborns." At birth, newborns seem to resist the onset of sickle cell disease which is attributable, researchers believe, to the presence of fetal hemoglobin still found in their blood.

Despite the success he has had on the drug, Joshua misses 45 to 65 days of school a year and has spent more birthdays in the hospital than at home. Neither those facts, nor the daily shots he puts up with seem to phase him, though.

A smile, then a shrug. "I've gotten used to it," he said.

Photo: Color photo of Joshua Bell (PP)

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People
Christmas cards Many families turn to debit cards for gift buying

J.D. Ventura
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Sitting on the floor of the mall, slumped up against an ATM machine, Patricia Allen of Denham Springs looked like a lot of the other dazed die-hard shoppers who braved "Black Friday" crowds to get her Christmas shopping done in a day.

Until she pulled from her purse the stack of rubber-banded credit cards financing the upcoming holiday festivities.

Having a credit card Christmas was once typical, but unlike Allen, more and more consumers this year seem to be using debit cards - the plastic equivalent of cash - to put presents under the tree.

Some shoppers aren't charging because their Christmas savings clubs are automatically transferred into their checking accounts, which are linked to their debit cards. Others are finding many of the benefits they once enjoyed exclusively with their credit cards - insured purchases, frequent flyer miles, points programs - are now offered by their bank-issued debit cards.

Although credit card sales still account for the largest share of holiday spending, many shoppers vying for bargains at the Mall of Louisiana alongside Allen said this would not be an entirely credit Christmas, citing their debit cards as one reason for curtailing charging.

The theory makes sense. More and more people make a habit of paying for everyday purchases with their debit cards. Use of such cards forces even the most serious shopaholics to budget more carefully. By the time Christmas rolls around, debit cards, not traditional credit cards, become a familiar payment option.

According to one Web site, http://www.CardWeb.com , more and more holiday-related transactions are being placed on debit cards: 20 percent of all retail sales this season. And that figure continues to grow at 16 percent annually.

If such a trend continues, it spells good news for shoppers who at one time placed all their purchases on credit cards under an (often delusional) plan of paying off balances by January.

Cindy Sagnibene, along with her two daughters, Brielle, 14, and Brittany, 18, drove up to Baton Rouge from New Orleans, rented a hotel room and spent the entire weekend after Thanksgiving shopping at the mall for bargains - on Cindy's debit card.

"We put the hotel on credit cards," said Sagnibene, after exiting American Eagle Outfitters, bags in hand. "But never the Christmas shopping."

Some people, like Oakdale resident Deborah Whatley, 51, who also set up her shopping command center at a local hotel room, said Christmas spending has become a mixture of debit card and credit card purchases. "We are putting the bigger purchases on credit cards," said Whatley, who charged a CD player on a card she said she would pay off in January. The majority of smaller purchases, however, were paid for with her debit card.

"This year we are buying more gifts, but spending less," she said.

Beyond the holiday shopping season, increased usage of debit cards has been tracked by several studies. Dove Consulting, a financial research firm in Boston, and the American Bankers Association looked at how consumers were paying for things from 1999 to 2003. They found that credit card usage remained constant, but more or less flat. Debit card transactions where the purchaser types in their pin number increased from 48 percent to 57 percent (debit card purchases requiring a signature also jumped, from 42 to 54 percent).

"Debit card growth rates are off the charts," said Melissa Fox, a senior research analyst with Dove Consulting, who said that far fewer people are paying with cash or check. "But it also would not surprise me

to find out that debit card usage is infringing on (the usage) of credit cards."

Gregory Papajohn, a spokesperson for MasterCard International, doesn't quite agree. According to a 2003 study done by MasterCard, consumers are more often forgoing cash and checks and using debit cards to buy things that cost less than $100.

"It isn't that debit (card usage) is taking away from credit (card usage), but the usage of debit cards is expanding," said Papajohn.

Cold hard cash still works, however. At least it does for Baton Rouge residents Renee and John Sims, who spent Black Friday shopping for the kids at Toys-R-Us. After years of tolerating high credit card interest rates the couple just stopped using cards and "went straight to cash." Renee says they use a debit card, although withdrawing a set amount of cash from an ATM before shopping gives them a real sense of how much money they are actually spending.

"I do use the debit card to buy groceries," said Renee Sims, who spent $225 at the toy store. "But when using any kind of card, even a debit card, there is a temptation to spend more than what you should."

Allen tempers her temptation by keeping her balances and interest rates stuck to her cards on Post-It notes. Despite being a faithful charger, she says the regular use of a debit card has helped her be somewhat more responsible. For example, knowing that she was going to make several purchases on her debit card, she stayed up until 3:30 a.m. balancing her checkbook.

"We overspend every year for Christmas," said Allen, who relies on a mix of high-interest store cards and lower interest charge cards to buy presents for her family, including toys for her grandchildren. "We're still paying off last year's Christmas."

Photo: Color photo of Renee and John Sims shopping at Toys-R-Us (By Kerry Maloney); Color graphic titled "How we will pay" includes a pie chart that displays several methods of payment and the percentage of U.S. consumers who say they will use them and the expected amount of spending per person (Source: National Retail Federation survey of 7,349 U.S. consumers, Nov. 3-10, 2004; 1 percent error margin) (KRT graphic)

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People
Adoption options "Open" model invites tense moments but appears to be working for Campagnas

J.D. VENTURA
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A ringing phone woke them at midnight.

The baby was coming. Maybe within hours. They should make for the hospital. Fast. It would be delivered by C-section. The mother was wheeled into the OR and then, after a healthy baby girl was removed from her, into recovery.

The father held the newborn first, for just a moment. Then he gave his daughter to her adoptive parents, before returning to his sleeping girlfriend's bedside - empty handed.

Rather than cradling her baby girl, she would awake to face an irrevocable decision. In five days she could sign the papers making the adoption permanent. The law, in effect, would give her some time to think it over.

The law, however, had nothing to do with the fact that Brad and Tyra Campagna, of Prairieville, were called to Woman's Hospital that night to witness the birth of their adoptive daughter, Khyli, or that they were allowed to hold the baby moments after her birth.

In the months before delivery, the Campagnas and the biological family had become friends. Most decisions were made together informally through an "open adoption" process that encourages communication between the birth and adoptive parents.

The model helps a birth mother feel good about her decision, say proponents. Most of the time she is allowed to choose the new family. And often her involvement in the adoptive family's life continues after the child is born. Some birth mothers want just photos and phone calls. Others ask to be allowed occasional visits.

Some experts contend that "birth mother satisfaction" is higher in open adoption and that helps mothers move on with their lives. But what surprises many people is the level of openness many adoptive families are willing to have with a birth mother.

By the time the Campagnas were selected to be Khyli's parents, they were open to new ideas.

After running up credit card balances during three years of expensive in vitro fertilization treatments, the couple had all but given up hope that they would ever have a family. "I remember thinking, 'There is nothing to live for if I can't have kids,'" recalled Tyra, who said the infertility issue had begun to take its toll on their marriage. "All I could do was cry."

And cry she did. On the Halloween before they called the Baton Rouge-based adoption agency, St. Elizabeth Foundation, the sight of costumedchildren at their doorstep left Tyra inconsolably weeping. Brad put the candy away and turned the porch light off.

Things began to brighten, however, when they attended one of the agency's regular meetings in which adoptive parents who have found the open adoption model successful share their stories with prospective adoptive families.

At just such a gathering recently, three couples shared their experiences. One met their birth mother for the first time in prison. Another keeps a picture of their child's biological mother taped to the fridge. The third explained they were chosen by their birth mother because they had a garden, a dog and traveled a lot.

Everyone brought their babies, whom the prospective parents stared at longingly. The hopeful asked questions:

"Does he feel like your baby?"All "yeses."

"Will knowing the birth mother confuse the child?"

A "maybe," but then discussion about how it will be less confusing than having no information at all. One couple added that they hoped the biological parent would eventually be viewed as a "distant relative."

"If it's closed, you won't have anything," warned Jill Mason, the birth mother counselor at St. Elizabeth, who likes to refer to herself as the tough, no-nonsense "older sister" figure to the woman whom she guides through the open adoption process.

"These are smart girls who just got in trouble," said Mason to the meeting's attendees. "But they got in trouble for a reason - so you can have a child."

The Campagnas were placed on St. Elizabeth's waiting list. Three months went by. Then the phone rang. It was the agency. A birth mother liked their profile and wanted to meet them. If the meeting went well, they would be parents of a baby girl, due in five months.

Tyra remembers being nervous at just the thought of the encounter. They would arrive with a gift, they decided. But what do you give a woman who plans on eventually giving you her baby?

They brought her flowers.

On the drive to the adoption agency, the Campagnas held each other's sweaty hands. Their minds raced: What if she thinks we're too young? What if she just doesn't like us? Why did she choose us?

Maybe the birth mother was swayed by the elaborate scrapbook of photos Tyra gave to the young mother-to-be during that first nervous meeting. The handmade album, which she spent 14 hours making, was crammed with snapshots of Tyra and Brad, their love for one another broadcast in wide smiles and warm embraces. It may have been their ages, not much older than the biological mother and father. Whatever the reason, their wait was over. The meeting and the lunch that followed went off without a hitch. Tyra said they felt "a click" with the younger couple. Everyone exchanged phone numbers.

Too close for comfort?

Twice a month, Brad, 31, and Tyra, 29, would go on a double date with the birth mother and father. Sometimes to a movie, or out to eat, or both. "You don't just fall in love with the baby; you fall in love with the people, too," said Tyra, who early on spent many phone conversations convincing jittery relatives that the birth mother would not eventually try to "steal" the baby back.

"You don't want to leave them. You start thinking, 'She's carrying our baby.' And from then on you worry every day about them ... you see there is a baby there, and it's 'ticktock' from then on," Tyra added.

Not everybody feels such intertwinement is a good thing. Anne Hughes, the executive director of Beacon House, another Baton Rouge adoption agency specializing in mostly closed or "semiclosed" adoptions, says many adoptive parents feel "pushed" into open adoptions without understanding just how emotional a relationship with the birth mother can become.

"You have to have special adoptive parents to do this right," said Hughes, who also worries that overly open adoptions "prey on a birth mother's emotions," because she remains in the adoptive family's life and cannot move on with her own. "Somebody decided this was a good idea, and as fads go, it mushroomed and became sort of trendy, without looking at the longitudinal effects (on the adoptive parents)."

Mary Ann Abel, the director of St. Elizabeth Foundation, said the key to an open adoption's success is making sure everyone's boundaries and limitations are respected and that relationships are never forced. "Lots of agencies insist on everyone being fully disclosed from the beginning," she said, at her office off of Essen Lane. "But maybe a birth mother would rather not participate in raising the baby, and that's all right ... We give couples our educated guess on how (the adoption) will turn out, and I encourage them to take a chance."

Baby brings betrayal

The chance the Campagnas were taking became brutally apparent when the phone started ringing at 2 a.m. the day after their daughter's birth. It was the biological father. There was a sudden change of plans. The birth mother wanted the baby brought to her room. (It had been agreed upon that she would stay on a nonmaternity floor and only visit the baby in the nursery.) It was an ominous sign - something they hadn't seen coming.

"It was hard," recalled Tyra Campagna from the living room of the her sprawling, suburban home. "I was mad at the agency. We had become so close to the birth parents, that I just felt so comfortable."

It got worse.

Khyli was born on a Thursday.

That Sunday was Mother's Day. Tyra Campagna invited members of her family to come see the baby, now staying in the birth mother's room. It was an awkward meeting, remembered Tyra. Her family was festive and celebratory, passing the baby from one person to another. The birth mother looked sad and pensive. Then the birth father asked to speak to the Campagnas privately.

As Tyra left the room, she peeked through the door and caught a glimpse of the birth mother, crying, cradling Khyli in her arms. "I could tell something was not right," said Tyra.

Outside, the birth father told them he wasn't sure what his girlfriend would do, that there was a good chance she would keep Khyli. Tyra burst into tears. "At that point our lives were turned upside down," she said. "I thought, 'Why did we get to know these people? Why did I bond with this baby?' "

Signing over Khyli

The Campagnas grieved on the long car ride home from the hospital. Tyra felt betrayed. They felt that a trust they had worked so hard to establish with the birth parents had been broken. They seriously doubted if the empty car seat glimpsed in their rearview mirror would ever be filled.

The phone rang again that night. It was Khyli's birth mother. She apologized. She was "having a hard time with the situation."

"At that point, we said, 'That's it. No more interaction until they tell us to come get the baby,' " said Tyra. "We were very upset."

The call to come get Khyli did come. But plans continued to change under the strain of unexpected emotions. The birth mother, once sure that she wanted to hand the baby to Tyra, couldn't bear it. Mason, the birth mother counselor, served as the go-between and also counseled the mother through those final hours. "I tell mothers, 'Nothing has changed, except that the baby is here,' " said Mason.

With the papers finally signed, however, everything had changed. Khyli became Khyli Campagna. Forever.

Reconnection

Three months later, the couples met at a coffee shop. The meeting was tense. The Campagnas immediately noticed Khyli's birth mother couldn't look at the baby. When Brad suggested she hold Khyli, passing the infant to her, only a few seconds went by before the birth mother handed the baby back. With tears in her eyes, she excused herself and walked out of the cafe.

"At that point, I really had wished the adoption wasn't open," said Tyra Campagna. "It seemed like our relationship was dwindling."

Closer to the holidays, three months later, the Campagnas brought Khyli by the birth parents' apartment. Her biological parents had bought her a Christmas present. The Campagnas remember the visit fondly. The birth mother played with the baby. Nobody cried.

Khyli is now 18 months old. Tyra says the two couples agree she looks a little like everyone. She is gregarious with visitors to the Campagnas home, eager to show them the toys in her room. She is mesmerized by her Barney videos, to which she sometimes falls asleep.

Recently the Campagnas invited the birthparents over to their house for a barbecue. It seems natural now, they say. They are, after all, still friends with the couple. "If our families were more up to it, we would have them over for Thanksgiving and Christmas," said Tyra.

Tyra managed to get pregnant after all and had a baby girl, Kharsyn, by C-section four and a half months ago. After the surgery, she was not allowed to see her newborn, who was sent to the neonatal ICU. Eventually she was sent home without Kharsyn, who remained hospitalized for a few more days. Tyra remembers crying on her way home from the hospital - and, only then, truly understanding what "a hero" their birth mother had been to them.

"You sleep with this baby under your heart for nine months and then you're suddenly alone," said Tyra. "At least I could say 'In another couple of days I'll be with my baby.' She went through the same thing but couldn't say, 'I will be with her again.' "

Photo: Color photos of Brad Campagna kissing Khyli Campagna; New parents Brad Campagna and Tyra Campagna spending time with their daughters, Khyli Campagna, foreground who is adopted, and Kharsyn Campagna, their biological child; Khyli Campagna as a baby; B.W. photo of Tyra Campagna taking her daughters Kharsyn Campagna, left, and Khyli for a routine visit to their pediatrician (By Kerry Maloney); B.W. photo of Tyra Campagna and Brad Campagna posing with their adopted daughter, Khyli Campagna (PP); B.W. g raphic is an adoption explainer which explains the different types of adoptions

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People
Adoption options Private, "closed" adoptions are often faster, but risks remain

J.D. VENTURA
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Had they wanted to, the Campagnas could have opted for a closed adoption. Local adoption agencies such as Beacon House do them, as do some attorneys. Most international adoptions, for example, are closed.

Private, closed adoptions, handled by lawyers, are sometimes faster than agency adoptions because the matching process isn't generally as involved, some experts contend. "Agencies have more stringent guidelines," said Paula Davis, a social worker who does "home studies" (a mandatory evaluation of the adoptive couple) for attorneys in adoption cases. "They can be stricter because they have so many people waiting."

Another local licensed clinical social worker, Linda Weinstein, who has worked on mostly attorney-coordinated closed adoption cases for 15 years, said there is a "risk factor" to open adoptions that simply isn't present in the closed model. The greatest risk? That after months of emotional bonding with the adoptive family, the birth mother will decide to keep the baby in the 11th hour.

"It can be like a death for these adoptive couples," said Weinstein. "In an ideal world adoptive parents and birth mothers would make plans on how to handle the child and would emotionally agree on the (adoption) plan together, and everyone would be emotionally healthy about this. Unfortunately, not all people are constituted to be so emotionally healthy."

Still, researchers at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Minnesota did publish a widely cited 2002 longitudinal study on birth mother satisfaction that basically concluded birth mothers were simply happier under the open model.

But the open adoption experience is not always a happy one for adoptive parents. Area residents Don Paul and Frankie Day went on an emotional roller coaster ride when, after eight grueling years of in vitro fertilization treatments, they tried to adopt a baby from St. Elizabeth Foundation, a local adoption agency that specializes in open adoptions. They took the child home for eight days before honoring the birth mother's request to give the baby back. It was a devastating turn of events for the Days.

"People think that (adoption) is happiness all the time," said Davis. "But there is a lot of grief."

The Days' grief soon turned to desperation. They hired a local attorney who, in under a week, allegedly found them a willing birth mother in Maryland. In the months that followed, they proceeded to pay more than $19,000 of the woman's expenses, despite doubting whether she even existed. Their repeated attempts to make contact with her failed.

Louisiana's adoption laws allow for many of the birth mother's routine expenses to be paid by either the adoption agency, or, in closed adoptions done by attorneys, directly by the adoptive parents. Such expenses include the obvious (doctors' bills) and the less obvious (rent, groceries, utilities).

The Days never recovered their money when the Maryland birth mother allegedly changed her mind and decided to keep her baby, a move that left the adoptive couple "devastated and helpless."

"You know the risks going in, but you are so desperate for a child," explained Frankie at a recent National Adoption Day picnic organized by St. Elizabeth Foundation. "You are on a mission."

Noel Vargas describes the intersection of desperate adoptive couples and laws that allow birth mothers to be financially supported as the "difficult underbelly" of adoption. He should know. Vargas is the Louisiana representative of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys and, aside from serving as the general counsel for an independent adoption agency, runs a law firm devoted to private adoption cases.

"Unfortunately, there is a tremendous potential for abuse," said Vargas, who added that birth mothers "scamming" for support seems to be on the rise. "Sometimes we don't even know if they are pregnant because they give us forged pregnancy tests."

Vargas noted that while private attorney-coordinated adoptions can avoid some of the red tape inherent in agency adoptions, it is important to understand some risks are mitigated when an agency works hard to carefully screen and match birth mothers with adoptive parents.

His law practice in some sense emulates an adoption agency because, in addition to hiring social workers to perform the state- required home study on the adoptive parents, he also urges adoptive parents to pay for as much counseling as the birth mother needs. It's that readily available support that those in the agency world say is critical for a birth mother to come as close as possible to peace of mind.

What many experts seem to agree on is there simply is no one right way to adopt a child. Success is relative and satisfaction is measured case by case.

"Attaining closure is an individual thing," said Davis, who advises couples and birth mothers not to push their comfort level with regard to the degree of openness. "The way one person copes with loss may be to collect mementos, whereas another person may choose to get rid of everything."

The Days coped through perseverance. St. Elizabeth eventually connected them with another birth mother. The agency's counselor just showed up at their doorstep one night with a baby girl. The mother had already signed the paperwork. This adoption would be airtight.

"She said to us, 'Ten fingers, ten toes, two signatures and she is yours,' " remembered Frankie.

They uncorked a bottle of champagne and drank it from the baby bottles they had purchased but never used.

The Days paid $25,000 for Faith, and then adopted her brother, Christian, after their birth mother - who chose to have no contact with the couple - became pregnant again. (The Days asked that their children's middle names be used for this story.) Their son's adoption cost another $25,000, a fee the agency says can fluctuate based on the birth mother's expenses and the adoptive couple's income.. Despite what they went through, they contend it was worth the outcome.

"We look at them now, and we know these are our babies," said Frankie Day, as Faith toddled around them and Don Paul pushed his infant son on the swing set. "All the pain has gone away.

Photo: B.W. photo of Don Paul Day and Frankie Day with their two adopted children, Christian Day and Faith Day (By Kerry Maloney)

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News
Road worrier DOTD archaelogist gets to dig for history before it gets paved over by progress

J.D. VENTURA
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Many people think that when the state or federal governments decide they want to build a new road or construct a bridge, it's simply a matter of budgets and bulldozers. But before even a spoonful of dirt is moved, developers have to answer to a woman who sits in a cubicle on the second floor of the Department of Transportation and Development's building downtown.

That's because, as the DOTD's chief archaeologist, Elizabeth Davoli is responsible for making sure that construction projects promising a better tomorrow don't do so at the expense of yesterday's buried treasures. Simply put, before the heavy equipment is rolled in, Davoli and her team engage in a far more hands-on attempt at historic preservation - usually on their knees, sifting through dirt, bucket by bucket, looking for anything that's worth saving.

"If it's at all possible we try to avoid (construction) on certain sites," said Davoli. " But if we cannot, then we are interested in data recovery."

Her desk is strewn with things she has recovered, sealed in plastic bags, bits of evidence that the past actually happened, a trail of bread crumbs down the dirt road of history.

The "curb straightening" project she worked on recently in Lafourche Parish, for example, yielded such clues of yesteryear. The new road, as proposed, would have cut right through a sugar cane field that was originally occupied by Cajun settlers. Davoli's team deployed.

Just below the surface came immediate proof that, long before the nearby road ever came to be, people had inhabited the place. There was the tiny perfume bottle, and the jar of cold cream; whiskey bottles and plates; and the little porcelain pitcher from a child's tea set.

Davoli explained that it isn't always what they find at a particular site that is important or valuable, but rather what kinds of information these uncovered things can tell researchers about that period of history. Some artifacts create mysterious gaps in historical timelines, like when a construction project on U.S. 171 produced Caddo Indian artifacts similar to others found in Louisiana - only the items were found inside building structures seen mostly in Texas and Arkansas.

"Artifacts are really only one part of the whole picture," said David Kelley, a Baton Rouge-based archeologist with Coastal Environments, a firm regularly contracted by the DOTD to help determine what "cultural resources" may be affected by proposed construction. "How they are associated with a structure or how the artifacts are themselves associated within a deposit often tells you about the behavior (of past inhabitants) of the site."

Stopping or delaying multimillion dollar construction projects to save arrowheads and porcelain knickknacks isn't always an easy sell to ambitious engineers working on taxpayer-funded initiatives tied to tight timelines. Davoli has learned to firmly finesse.

"Much of what we do is shortly in advance of construction, so there is constant pressure," she said. "A lot of the time it's like, 'We have to get this built yesterday.' But archaeology doesn't work that way. Every bucket of dirt has to be screened. We stop and look at soil stains and do soil profiles. And we photograph everything."

That kind of preservation is the best case scenario, but it doesn't always happen. The work Davoli and Kelley do is, in large part, mandated by federal law (they are guided chiefly by the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Protection Act). But Kelley said that while federal legislation protects historically valuable sites on public land, private land remains largely unprotected. "There are no laws protecting cultural resources from private development," said Kelley. "If you own property and there is an Indian mound on it, you could bulldoze it."

Unregulated private property excavation can pose a threat to cultural treasures on both a large and small

scale. Kelley points to the Poverty Point prehistoric earth works site near Epps. Much of the find there was largely preserved as a state park, but a small portion of it was eventually destroyed by a private property owner, said Kelley.

Even smaller backyard digs can obliterate important archeological information, noted Jill Yakubik, of New Orleans-based Earth Search Inc., a "cultural resources management" firm that also works on projects with Davoli. For example, "bottle hunters" persuade private land owners to allow their property to be dug up, often with no safeguards in place to preserve unintended finds or to ensure that telling data is captured and analyzed.

"If the Ark of the Covenant is in your back yard, you can dig it up and sell it, so long as you are not doing it with federal funds," said Yukubik, who added that having archeologists like Davoli working for the state is "nice" because they understand the pace of a dig and can appreciate the demanding nature of the work.

But, in Louisiana, when it comes to federally funded development (or projects involving federal permits), it's ultimately Davoli and her team who have the final say in whether a project can proceed on land that her office, or the agencies she hires, has determined to be of historic value. Putting the brakes on requires her to often "be blunt."

"I usually just tell them, when we are done, we are done," said the 36-year-old Davoli.

She hopes that such caution at the construction site helps to break down the perception that the DOTD doesn't care about the environment, or, in her case, the historical significance of the land the department seeks to develop. Davoli said such concern has even prompted her to jump in her car to investigate complaints of bulldozers digging up bones, only to get to the site and discover that what the caller saw was nothing but tree roots.

Saving a few bones doesn't seem like the kind of thing to get that excited over, but as technology improves, the work that Davoli and archeologists like her do becomes more important, added Kelley, because artifacts and information recovered today may undergo more advanced analysis in the future, using techniques that do not yet exist.

These days when Davoli is not analyzing she's educating. She spends much of her time explaining to engineers why the archaeological value of a site matters. Sometimes developers will cry foul, assuming that the entire project must come to a halt because Davoli's team has stepped in. But, as she is quick to tell them, they can usually begin the project around the tract of land in question. It is simply a matter of better planning, she insists.

After 14 years in the industry, working first for a consultant and then for the state, Davoli's experience leaves her more than capable of dealing with over-eager engineers and demanding developers. And, experience aside, she is a passionate historian, clearly fascinated by what the past can tell us about today.

On a recent project, in which trees were being cut back from a roadside to improve the line-of-site for drivers, Davoli and a colleague strayed off the site and into the woods, only to discover an abandoned, dilapidated house from the 1800s.

"I just stood there looking at it, with its crumbling porch, just dying, and I thought, 'Somebody used to live here.'"

Photo: Color photos of Department of Transportation and Development archaelogist Elizabeth Davoli (By Travis Spradling); Archaeologists from Coastal Environments, a private company do preliminary excavations at a site (DOTD); B.W. photo of a shard of pottery, a miniature toy pitcher and a button recovered by DOTD in Lafourche Parish (By Travis Spradling)

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People
Show & Tail Baton Rouge woman has high hopes for her puppy competing in dogs shows

J.D. Ventura
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Kelly Randow's baby boy cost $2,000, but he still requires a bit of behavioral modification. For example, sometimes when he's nervous, he pees on her blouse or pants leg.

Errant urination is not good. At least not at dog shows, where Randow hopes to make a name for her 13-month-old Cavalier King Charles Spaniel puppy, Wil, a bossy (he barks whenever he wants something), playful canine with fluffy feet, bushy ears and a tail that wags whenever he meets new people or particularly foxy, eh, female dogs.

But making Wil into a champion ribbon winner isn't so simple. Randow is learning that buying a purebred is only the first step for owners interested in competing on the dog show circuit, a vast and complex industry marked by confusing scoring systems, decidedly subjective judges and fiercely competitive dog enthusiasts who are willing to invest huge amounts of time, money or both to ensure their animal's success.

Randow's interest in showing dogs started as it does for many: she fell in love with a particular breed. And what's not to love? The American Kennel Club (AKC) describes Wil's kind as an "active, graceful, well-balanced toy spaniel, very gay and free in action." On a trip to England in 1987, Randow and her mother, Suzie Randow, of Alexandria, spotted some of the spaniels in a parked car. Through the glass of the closed window a pair of puppy-dog eyes won them over.

Enter Wil. Randow describes him as "Mr. Congeniality" because he always puts his best paw forward with strangers, his happiness at meeting them underscored by a tail that continuously moves back and forth, like a furry metronome. His chipper personality made him an instant momma's boy.

"It was hard not to spoil him," admitted Randow, who added that her coddling resulted in a less than optimal personality for training class.

She countered that with bribery, buying lots of liver-flavored dog treats. Then, for an hour every week in the parking lot of Greco Pet Supplies on Greenwell Springs Road, Wil was taught to walk the walk, not to bark and to stand perfectly still at even the suggestion of a forthcoming doggie snack. Nobody since Rocky had trained so hard. And before anyone knew it, the big day had arrived. Wil was headed for his first dog show.

And he had no idea whatsoever.

Wil makes his debut

These days when many people think of dog shows, they think of Christopher Guest's wildly popular independent mockumentary "Best in Show," which shadowed several doggie parents and their pooches at the Westminster Kennel Club's annual competition, the canine equivalent of the Miss America pageant. In the film, the event's pomp and pageantry are spoofed - but how the flaky, obsessive owners made it to the most prestigious dog show in the country isn't quite clear.

Not all dog shows are as lavish as Westminster's, however. And the road to champion-level events is a long one. Along the way, dog owners, or their hired handlers, must earn "points" at decidedly unglamorous competitions, like the recent show held at the Lamar- Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales, where Wil was fated to make his debut.

Wil would show twice, once on Saturday and again on Sunday. The Saturday showing was nerve-racking for Randow and friend Laura Struck, who arrived flustered from a morning that included a frantic blow-drying session of Wil's dew-soaked coat, wet from his walk.

His first show was a "confirmation" event, meaning he would be judged on his physical structure and appearance, as determined by the judge's interpretation of the breed. (Other shows evaluate the animal's agility or obedience.)

Judge Roger Pritchard, a sedate-looking man in a jacket and tie, quickly evaluated Wil and other Cavaliers competing against him. In one category, Wil had no competition because of his young age, so he took a blue ribbon.

It seemed like a victory.

It's the points that count

But ribbons aren't what it's all about. Dog owners want points, and points are not easy to get. To become a champion, Wil would need to acquire 15 points, meaning he would have to beat "five dogs at a time twice," Pritchard explained. (Someone boldy suggested Wil was only in it for the doggie snacks.)

Pritchard said he can spot inexperienced owners like Randow "because they have some novice skills, and their dogs don't act right in the ring." Having an aesthetically pretty dog does not guarantee you'll impress a judge like Pritchard, who follows strict guidelines on exactly how a certain breed should look.

"You win by learning what judges like," said Pritchard. "Handlers know what to bring me and what not to bring me."

Handlers. Blue ribbon in her "breed category" aside, Randow lost to a handler on the first day. (Wil did not advance to compete for the best in his "group.") They are perhaps the most formidable competitors everyday people like Randow must face in the ring.

Handlers have advantage

That's not to say those who show dogs as a weekend hobby cannot attain that coveted champion status. However, professional handlers, who make a living showing dogs and spend all their time learning the ins and outs of judges like Pritchard, have an obvious advantage over people like Randow, who haven't the faintest clue about who is evaluating their animal.

If Wil had been a Pekingese, his loss Saturday would have been even more decided. That's because Kenner-based handler Hiram Stewart, who has been showing dogs for 30 years, showed up with Les, who has won the best in the "toy" dog group two years in a row at Westminster. (Les' arrival at a lower-tier dog show is equivalent to Madonna showing up to an "American Idol" audition.)

Career handlers like Stewart, who look the part in a tweed jacket and tie, often attend smaller shows to easily collect the points they need on their way to championship competitions. Stewart said it isn't all that easy.

"It's no walk in the park," said Stewart, clutching a fist full of freshly won ribbons. "And you don't know what other top competitive dogs will show up to these smaller shows. Nothing is guaranteed in this sport because there is always a risk with animals. "

Just a few feet from Stewart, Wil and a female Cavalier were getting into some risky business of their own. "Did you see him scratching?" the female's owner asked Randow, pointing to Wil. "He was showing her what a man he is."

At that moment, he also showed Randow just how exciting he thinks dog shows are by tinkling on her slacks and entering into a barking match with the female - who just happened to be in heat. The other owner took Wil's overtures in stride. "Wouldn't you just love to know what they are saying?" she asked Randow before walking away.

Wil's love interest might as well have said, "Good luck tomorrow, because you're going to need it." Her owner, while not earning a living as a handler, is representative of another show class that people like Randow go up against: someone with simply more time, financial resources and sheer interest in the sport who achieves near professional skills and status.

The world of handlers

Reece Avants, the handler who beat Wil the first day with a male Cavalier named Dibley, was showing six of his clients' dogs on the second day of the show. As he blow-dried and groomed the spaniel (who has six of his 15 points), his other dogs, many of them German shepherds, sat waiting in animal carriers for their showings. Avants explained that dogs are shipped to and from handlers by owners all over the country, and that the handler community is a tight-knit network that poses a considerable threat to amateur owners.

"You have a better shot of winning with a handler," Avants said flatly. "We know how to train dogs better."

Avants' colleague, Jeremy Mouch of Addis, agreed: "Handlers know that different judges look for different types of dogs. They watch how he places different classes, and if he places three different dogs, they make it a point to see what those dogs have in common."

Most handlers, Mouch added, know judges on a first-name basis.

It's time for round two

An hour before Wil is set to make his second-day appearance in the show ring, Mr. Cool is being groomed by his owner, Claire Yates. Yates, who lives near Houston, has been showing her Afghan hound for only six months and has already acquired eight points. She and Mr. Cool will attend about 50 shows a year, which translates into long road trips and hotel rentals almost every weekend.

Yates said show novices, like Randow, need to have realistic expectations.

"It is discouraging at times," said Yates, as Mr. Cool pawed her for attention. "The key is to recognize going into these shows what level you are capable of competing on."

Expectation management is one factor, agreed Betty Cline, a member of the Baton Rouge Kennel Club, but amateurs need to also be open to "the learning process" that should be inherent to the dog show experience. "Instant experts" are just setting themselves up for frustration and quick burn-out, said Cline, who has shown dogs for more than 30 years.

"You need to put a great deal of time and energy into that learning process," cautioned Cline, "because it's very obvious to judges who the new people are."

There is also an element of gambling to the sport, she added. Sometimes judges will like your dog, and sometimes they will not.

But there are things new owners can do to better their chances of winning: like covering up their dog's weaknesses and accentuating their animal's positive traits. Even simple tricks help, like showing up to show well in advance of when you are scheduled to go in the ring. (It helps the dog get used to the environment, calming it down before it's judged.)

Wil makes his arrival

Randow arrived Sunday at 9:45 a.m. for a 10 a.m. showing. Her friend, Struck, looked rattled, quickly brushing a wide-eyed, barking Wil. Like the day before, the morning was not crisis free. Wil's hairbrush had been misplaced back at the house. Nobody, including Wil, knew where it had gone.

As Struck groomed Wil, Avants, wearing a suit, stood nearby prepping a jaded-looking Dibley. Wil barked at the dog in a futile attempt to gain his attention. And then the female from the day before appeared. Wil's attention shifted.

The Cavaliers were called before the judge - a woman this time. Randow led Wil around the ring, then placed him on a table where the judge ran her hands up and down his tiny frame. Within minutes, Wil's first dog show came to an unceremonious end.

Results were available immediately. Randow received a "reserve winner" ribbon, beating Dibley, Avants' dog. The female Cavalier beat them both and was advanced to the next round.

"I don't know what that means," said Struck. Neither did Randow until she asked a friend more familiar with the scoring system.

"It means if the female dog had been disqualified for whatever reason, Wil would have won," said Randow later. "The judge on Sunday made me feel better about the whole thing. There have to be other judges like her out there."

After beating a handler, Randow said she has no plans to hire one. She was told by her instructor that Wil has what it takes to be a champion, and she believes that wholeheartedly. She plans on attending dog shows in the region in an attempt to gain the points she needs.

And what does Wil get if he becomes champion? "He gets to become a sire." said Randow. "I'll breed him."

Undoubtedly no objections from Wil on that point.

Photo: Color photos of Kelly Randow putting Wil through his paces at his first dog show; Kelly Randow with Wil, her Cavalier King Charles Spaniel puppy, at a recent dog show; Wil on a judging platform; B.W. photo of Kelly Randow and Wil getting reading for the ring at the dog show (By Eric Wright)

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People
Cast has fun with LSU production of "The Illusion"

J.D. VENTURA
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A woman in the audience told a newcomer to the Reilly Theatre the floors used to be dirt, which, when kicked-up by the actors, made her sneeze. Thankfully a proper stage was built, because to pause for even a quick "gesundheit" during the LSU Theatre's production of "The Illusion" would have been a regrettable courtesy.

For starters, the acting talent on display Wednesday night was far from illusory (more on that in a moment). Equally refreshing was the ambitiousness of the material. Deciding to interpret Tony Kushner's adaptation of a rather complex 17th-century French farce (by Pierre Corneille) could have been a cataclysmic case of chewing more than your average audience can swallow. Shakespeareanesque dialogue is as stimulating as NyQuil if a modern audience can't readily grasp the plot.

But whether the brilliance of "The Illusion" resides in Corneille's philosophy or in Kushner's digestible rendering of it, director Steven Young managed to add a bit of his own magic to a comedic cauldron that at times bubbled over, kept at a nice boil with speedy scenes and, presumably, a well-received directive to his cast: have fun with this.

(Although too much fun was had in the beginning of the third act when someone decided to soundtrack the show to Robert Palmer. Boo.)

It was probably hard for a group of actors not to make merry with such a saucy, ribald script, its diabolical twists and turns comparable to something as naughty as de Laclos' "Les Liaisons Dangereuses." A distraught father, Pridamant, consults a sorceress to find the son he disowned. Like Scrooge's ghosts, she reveals the boy's fate through a series of visions, three loosely related stories full of love, lust, betrayal, murder, deception, poetry and foolhardy folly.

With simple but effective special effects and a minimalist set, Young smartly relied on the strength of the acting to tell the tale.

As magician Alcandre, Tara MacMullen nicely contrasted her character's omnipotent, Ozlike aura with funny humanistic asides. Although her emotional range at the very end of the production offered a better view of her capabilities. (As her enslaved, tongueless sidekick, Amanuensis, Eric Little held his own. When he was able to speak again, however, he did so too rapidly.)

Brace Harris, who plays Pridamant, had his dramatic volume turned up too high at times (evidence: his spittle), and may do well to know that yelling is not an emotion. His tender moments needed tenderizing.

The effeminate ninny - forgive this reference - that Chris Tucker attempted with little success in the silly sci-fi flick "The Fifth Element" was mastered by Preston Davis with his pompous, androgynous and embarrassingly emasculated Calisto. Chaney Tullos intensified the silliness with his equally effeminate Pleribo. The cat fight between the two girl-crazed pimpernels, complete with hair flips and a glove across Tullos' miffed face, was worth the price of admission.

Davis and Tullos also have turns at more serious roles in "The Illusion," which were solid, but their comedy burned brighter.

Brighter still was Shawn Halliday. On par with Steve Martin's wild-and-crazy-guy "SNL" character ("interfered" is pronounced "inter-furr-ed"), his self-perceived studliness resulted in belly laughs. His comedic timing was impressive, perhaps even show- stealing.

While the men guaranteed laughs, the women delivered the drama. Michelle McCoy's Isabelle seethed with a sultry fury that was an intimidating blend of sexy and scary. In all of her three parts, the assignment of feeling to her dialogue was diligent and cleverly contemplated. Sarah Jane Johnson: dynamic. Her bawdy flirtation as Elicia with one of Davis' other characters, Clindor, was delectable. And the conniving duplicity she installed in her three roles made her a villainous heroine for whom to root.

Without giving the ending entirely away, it could be argued that Hollywood has adapted Corneille's work, too ("The Game" with Michael Douglas). Both are stories of hardened, emotionless men who, through the extremes of fantasy, find a more heartfelt reality. The power of "The Illusion" is shown in the way it can accurately reflect fact. And the fact is, audiences will find LSU's "The Illusion" a real hit.

Photo: Color photo is Calisto (Preston Davis), left, dueling with Pierbo (Chaney Tullos) afer the two realize they love the same woman; B.W. photo is Melibea Michelle McCoy), left, being courted by Calisto (Preston Davis) (By Rachel Mourot); B.W. graphic is the announcement for the production of "The Illusion"

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