THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
VOL. 02 • NO. 19 November 15, 2026, PUBLISHER: LATORRIA FREEMAN

Sheriff Wright Will Not Seek Reelection

Two candidates have announced plans to run; three Sheriff's Office officials have been mentioned as possible candidates.

NATCHITOCHES, La. — Sheriff Stuart Wright has announced he will not seek reelection in 2027, setting the stage for a leadership transition in Natchitoches Parish. Preston Durr and Steve Pezant have publicly announced plans to run. Captain Shane LaCaze, Major Chad Nelson and Chief of Corrections Roger Henson have also been mentioned as possible candidates, but none of the three has confirmed plans to seek the office.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



Sheriff Stuart Wright

Natchitoches Parish Schools Shift to Remote Learning Amid Flu and Strep Cases



Four parish schools shifted to remote learning Nov. 12–13 amid rising flu and strep cases.

PAGE 7

NCIF Settlement Funds Under Scrutiny



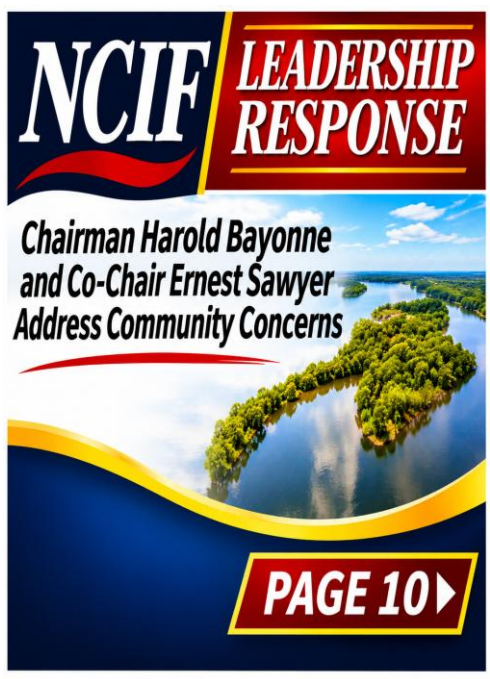
Financial reporting and oversight remain central to questions about settlement funds intended for the Natchitoches community.

PAGE 8

INSIDE THIS EDITION

- School Board District 8 Runoff — P. 4
- Sheriff Wright Will Not Seek Reelection — P. 6
- Schools Shift to Remote Learning — P. 7
- NCIF Settlement Funds & Leadership Response — P. 8, 10
- Lung Cancer Awareness — P. 9
- Why Black Voices Matter at the Ballot Box — P. 11
- 100th Christmas Festival Season — P. 17
- Artist Spotlight: Dumars & Roberson — P. 20–22
- Exchange Bank Gives Back — P. 23
- Samantha Bonnette Joins LEH Board — P. 24

AND MORE...





THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Still Smiling Through the Storm

Life has a way of testing our faith, strength, and ability to keep moving forward. Some storms come without warning, leaving us wondering how we will make it through. Yet, even in difficult moments, there is still a reason to give thanks.

We often see people smiling without knowing the battles they have fought or the tears they have cried. Their smiles remind us that God's grace and mercy can carry us through life's greatest challenges.

As Thanksgiving approaches, let us remember that gratitude is not about having a perfect life. It is about appreciating the blessings we have, the lessons we have learned, and the strength to keep going.

Latorria Freeman
Publisher, The Real News Louisiana
"A community with a voice shall be heard."



Happy Thanksgiving from The Real News Louisiana!

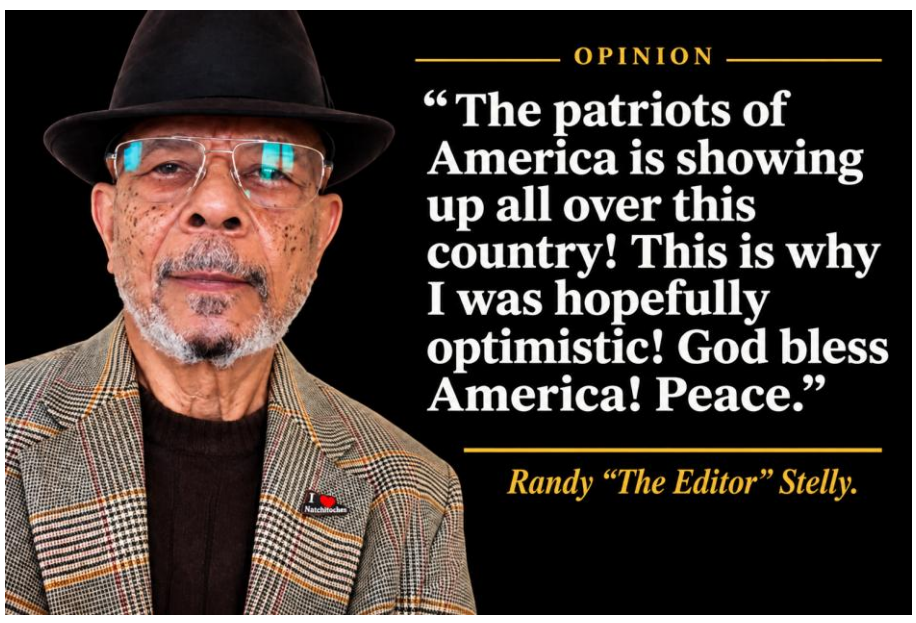
May your holiday be filled with love, peace, gratitude, and the warmth of family and friends. Remember to extend kindness to those who may be facing difficult times this season.

Why Black Voices Matter at the Ballot Box



The Black vote has long been a powerful force in shaping elections, policies and opportunities in our communities. When Black voters show up, they influence decisions on education, health care, public safety and economic growth.

Continued on Page 11.



Advertisement



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Open invitation issued to perform in 18th annual Multicultural Christmas Concert

CALL FOR PERFORMERS!

We are seeking participants to help celebrate diversity and the cheer of Christmas.

We invite performers such as singers, musicians, dancers, or readers to come celebrate this joyous time of the year with the Natchitoches community. All songs, readings, & instrumental performances, sacred or secular, which address Christmas or the Christmas season are welcome.

All participants will perform without monetary compensation.

This is a benefit concert for Cane River Children's Services.

This year's festivities are sponsored by the Louisiana Folklife Center and the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame & Northwest Louisiana History Museum.

18th annual Natchitoches-NSU
Multicultural Christmas Concert

December 1, 2026 • 6:00-8:00 pm

Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame & Northwest Louisiana History Museum
800 Front Street, Natchitoches, LA.

If you would like to participate, contact us by November 23rd 318-357-4327 or folklife@nsula.edu



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

SCHOOL BOARD RUNOFF

Bush and Davidson Head to Runoff in School Board District 8 Race

NATCHITOCHES, La. — Voters in Natchitoches Parish School Board District 8 will return to the polls Saturday, December 12, 2026, to decide the runoff election between Chris Bush and Linda Davidson.
Both candidates are Democrats seeking to represent District 8 on the Natchitoches Parish School Board.



Chris Bush



Linda Davidson

The runoff gives voters another opportunity to consider the candidates' qualifications, experience, and plans for improving public education.
The school board makes important decisions affecting district policies, school budgets, educational programs, and the learning environment for students and teachers.

Among the issues voters may want candidates to address are academic achievement, teacher recruitment and retention, school safety, parental involvement, and the responsible use of district resources.

RUNOFF ELECTION

Natchitoches Parish School Board District 8

Election Day: Saturday, December 12, 2026

NOV. 3 ELECTION RESULTS

Candidate	Votes	Percentage
Chris Bush	510	50.0%
Linda Davidson	372	36.5%
J.D. Samuel Jr.	138	13.5%

Although Bush received 50% of the votes, neither candidate received more than 50%, requiring a runoff.

EARLY VOTING
Nov. 28 – Dec. 5, excluding Nov. 29.

ELECTION DAY
Saturday, December 12, 2026
Polls Open:
7 a.m. – 8 p.m.

Only eligible voters in School Board District 8 may participate in this particular race.

Election Day is Saturday, December 12, 2026. *Only eligible voters in School Board District 8 may participate in this race.*

Residents can check their voter registration, polling location, and sample ballot at **www.GeauxVote.com**.

SCHOOL BOARD RUNOFF

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

NSU Offers Piano by Ear Class Nov. 21



NATCHITOCHES — Northwestern State University's Office of Electronic Learning and Global Engagement will offer a "Piano by Ear" class Nov. 21 from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. via Zoom. Registration is $85.

Designed for participants ages 13 and older, the class teaches students to play songs without relying on sheet music.

Topics include predicting chord progressions, learning from recordings and transposing music, with concepts explained in everyday language.

The course combines lecture and demonstration with hands-on instruction. It is an ideal follow-up to the "Instant Piano" course and is open to anyone with a basic understanding of chords on any instrument. Prior experience with chords is recommended.

The registration fee includes an online book, access to online follow-up lessons, a recording of the class and an optional monthly question-and-answer session.

To register or learn more, visit checkout.nsula.edu or call (800) 376-2422 or (318) 357-6355. Updates are also available on Facebook at facebook.com/NSULA.ece.





THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Sheriff Wright Will Not Seek Reelection

Continued from Page 1

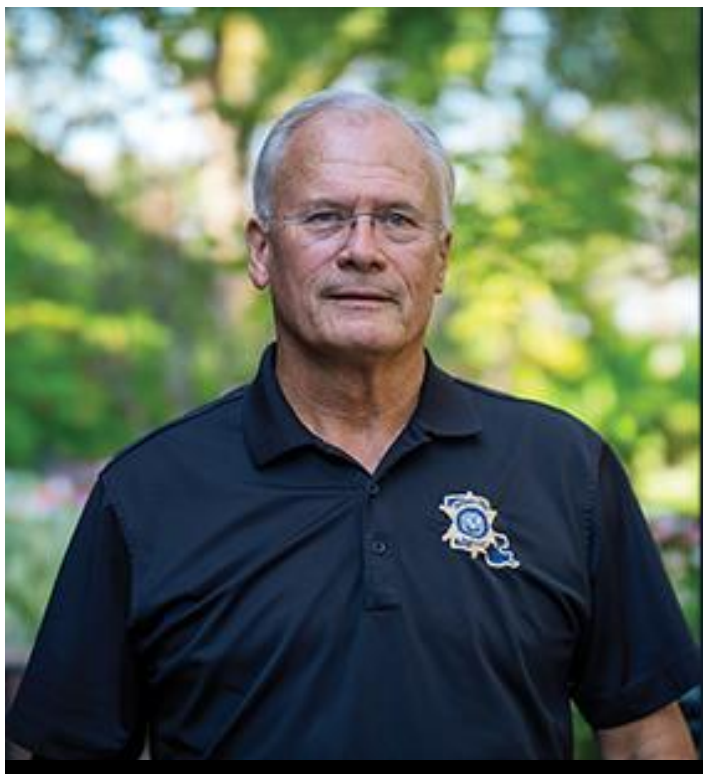
Sheriff's Race Begins to Take Shape

With Sheriff Stuart Wright's decision not to seek another term, attention is turning toward the 2027 election and who will lead the Natchitoches Parish Sheriff's Office.

Two individuals have already publicly announced their intentions to seek the position.

Preston Durr, a former police chief with more than two decades of law enforcement experience, announced his candidacy in July 2026. His stated priorities include expanding patrol coverage, strengthening criminal investigations, and increasing community involvement.

Steve Pezant, currently Chief Deputy of the Natchitoches Ward One Marshal's Office, announced his plans to run in August 2026. Pezant previously served with the Louisiana State Police and has more than three decades of law enforcement experience.



Sheriff Stuart Wright

Three Department Officials Mentioned

Meanwhile, three individuals serving within the Natchitoches Parish Sheriff's Office have been mentioned as possible candidates:

Captain Shane LaCaze, Major Chad Nelson, and Chief of Corrections Roger Henson.

As of November 15, 2026, The Real News Louisiana has not received statements from the three confirming their intentions to seek the office.

Their names being mentioned does not constitute an official announcement of candidacy.

Additional individuals may also enter the race.

Wright's Remaining Time in Office

Wright, who took office in 2020, has stated that he intends to complete his current term, which ends in July 2028.

In his November announcement, Wright emphasized that Sheriff's Office operations should continue without political distractions and that serving Natchitoches Parish residents remains the department's priority.

Public Safety and Leadership Priorities

The upcoming election will give residents an opportunity to examine how candidates plan to address public safety and department operations.

Issues may include crime prevention, deputy recruitment and retention, rural patrol coverage, criminal investigations, detention center oversight, and responsible management of public resources.

Looking Toward the 2027 Election

The next sheriff will assume responsibility for an agency providing law enforcement and community services throughout Natchitoches Parish.

As additional candidates announce their intentions, residents will have opportunities to compare their qualifications, experience, and plans for the department.

The Real News Louisiana will continue reporting verified announcements and providing candidates with opportunities to explain their positions.

Wright's decision marks an approaching leadership transition, while the responsibility of serving and protecting Natchitoches Parish continues.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Four Natchitoches Parish Schools Shift to Remote Learning Amid Flu and Strep Cases

District schedules cleaning and disinfection ahead of planned November 16 return.

NATCHITOCHES, La. — An increase in reported cases of flu and strep throat among students and staff prompted the Natchitoches Parish School Board to temporarily transition four schools to remote learning Thursday, November 12, and Friday, November 13.

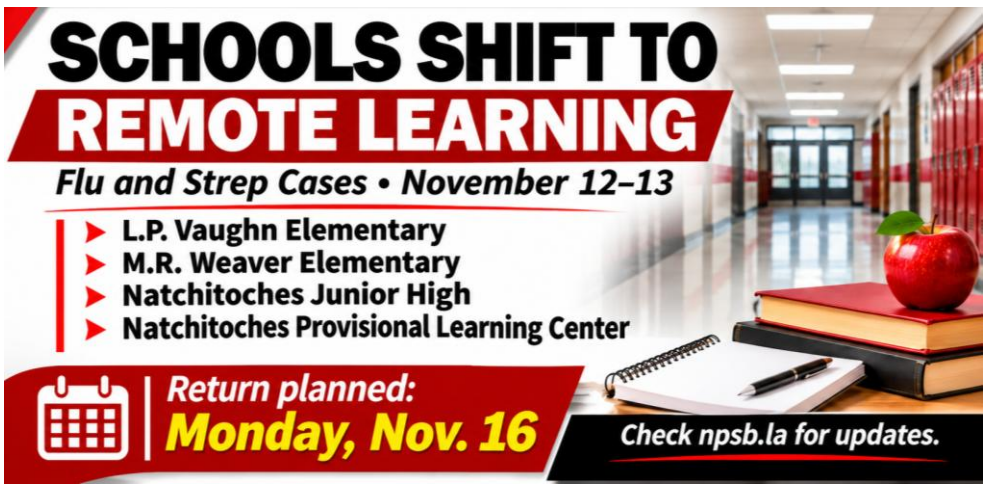
The affected schools were **L.P. Vaughn Elementary, M.R. Weaver Elementary School, Natchitoches Junior High and Natchitoches Provisional Learning Center.**

According to the district, these were the only four schools experiencing illness-related absences at levels warranting a temporary transition to remote instruction.

Cleaning and Disinfection Planned

While students and staff were away from campus, the district's Maintenance Department was scheduled to coordinate with custodial employees to thoroughly clean and disinfect school facilities.
School administrators also worked to prepare for remote instruction.

Recognizing that some students might be too ill to complete assignments, the district encouraged parents to contact their child's principal or teacher to arrange makeup work.



Return Scheduled for November 16

The school district announced plans for students and staff to return to their classrooms **Monday, November 16, 2026**.

Officials said they would continue monitoring attendance and illness-related absences across parish schools.

The temporary transition highlights the impact contagious illnesses can have on school operations and the importance of communication between families and school officials.

Parents are encouraged to monitor official district announcements for any changes to the scheduled return.

Source: Natchitoches Parish School Board public announcement.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

NCIF Settlement Funds Remain Under Community Scrutiny

Questions About Transparency, Accountability and Community Benefits Continue

NATCHITOCHES, La. —
Questions surrounding the Natchitoches Community Improvement Foundation (NCIF) and its management of settlement funds continue to draw attention from residents seeking greater transparency and accountability.
The foundation's responsibilities, financial oversight, and the intended benefits of the settlement funds have become topics of public discussion.

Community members have raised questions about how decisions involving the funds are made, what financial information is available to the public, and how the resources are being used to benefit the communities they were intended to serve.

The issue has been discussed on *Talk Back Natchitoches*, including a conversation with Edwin Crayton in which NCIF Chairman Harold Bayonne participated by telephone.
In a separate discussion, Bayonne and Ernest Sawyer addressed concerns about the foundation's finances, programs and community investments. **Their responses are featured on Page 10.**

Transparency and Public Trust

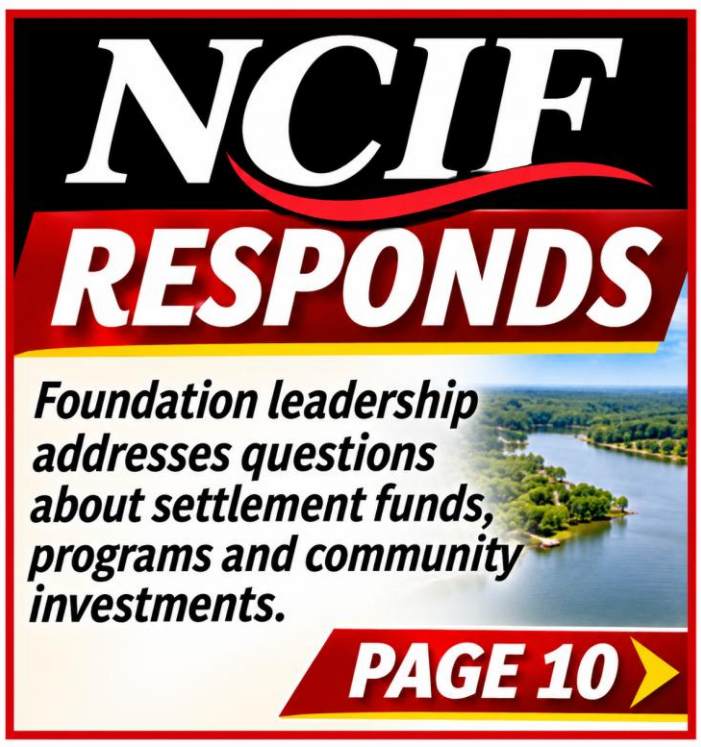
At the center of the discussion is a broader question: How can residents determine whether settlement funds are being managed in accordance with the foundation's governing documents and applicable legal requirements?
Financial records, governing documents, court filings, and statements from foundation representatives can help clarify the organization's obligations and how decisions are made.
Questions or allegations about financial management should not be treated as established wrongdoing without supporting evidence or official findings.



Community Benefits Remain a Priority

For many residents, the central concern is whether the funds are producing meaningful benefits for the community.
Clear financial reporting and communication about funded programs could help residents better understand the foundation's work and evaluate its impact.
The Real News Louisiana will continue following developments involving NCIF, reviewing available documentation, and seeking responses from individuals and organizations involved.

Public accountability begins with accurate information and a clear understanding of how community resources are managed.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

HEALTH & SAFETY

November Is Lung Cancer Awareness Month: Early Detection Matters



NATCHITOCHES, La. — November is Lung Cancer Awareness Month, a time to raise awareness about one of the leading causes of cancer-related deaths in the United States and the importance of early detection. Lung cancer can develop without noticeable symptoms in its early stages, making screening especially important for individuals at higher risk.

Smoking is the leading risk factor, but lung cancer can also affect people who have never smoked. Exposure to secondhand smoke, radon, and certain workplace substances can increase the risk.



Warning signs may include a persistent cough, chest pain, shortness of breath, coughing up blood, or unexplained weight loss. Anyone experiencing these symptoms should consult a healthcare provider.

Under U.S. Preventive Services Task Force guidelines, annual low-dose CT screening is recommended for adults ages 50 to 80 who have at least a 20-pack-year smoking history and currently smoke or quit within the past 15 years. Individuals should discuss screening eligibility with their healthcare providers. Throughout November, residents are encouraged to learn about lung cancer risks, discuss screening options, and support individuals and families affected by the disease.

The NRMC Cancer Center offers personalized cancer care, treatment options, and compassionate support for patients close to home.

For more information about NRMC Cancer Center services, residents may contact the center or visit its official website.

Early detection can save lives. Awareness is the first step toward informed decisions about lung health.

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

NCIF LEADERSHIP RESPONSE

Chairman Harold Bayonne • Ernest Sawyer

NCIF Leaders Address Concerns and Provide an Update on Settlement Funds

NATCHITOCHES, La. — NCIF Chairman Harold Bayonne and Co-Chair Ernest Sawyer responded to questions about the settlement funds, the foundation's operations, and next steps for the community. Their remarks, shared during a recent *Talk Back Natchitoches* interview, focused on the foundation's process, financial oversight, and plans for community programs.

- Operations & Process
- Financial Oversight
- Community Programs & Next Steps

Settlement Funds • Financial Oversight • Community Programs

NATCHITOCHES, La. — Leaders of the Natchitoches Community Improvement Foundation (NCIF) addressed questions surrounding the organization's finances, management and community programs during an appearance on *Talk Back Natchitoches*, hosted by Pastor Steven Harris Sr. on 95.9 The Bounce Digital.

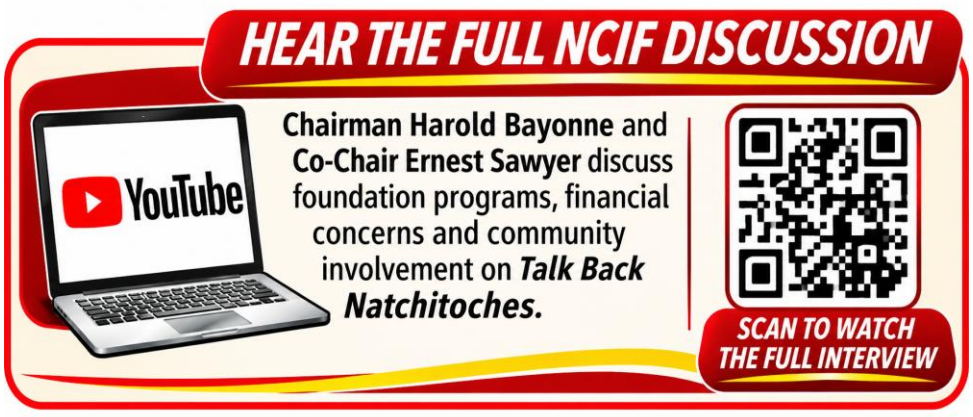
NCIF Chairman Harold Bayonne and Co-Chair Ernest Sawyer discussed the foundation's mission, community investments and concerns raised about the management of settlement funds.

Leadership Disputes Financial Allegations

During the discussion, foundation representatives rejected allegations that money was missing or improperly managed. They maintained that NCIF keeps financial records and receipts documenting its expenditures.

The representatives also encouraged residents to attend foundation meetings, ask questions and become more involved in understanding the organization's operations.

Their statements represent the foundation leadership's position and do not independently resolve questions concerning financial oversight or pending legal matters.



Youth Programs and Community Investments

Bayonne and Sawyer highlighted several programs they said NCIF has supported, including summer educational camps, ACT preparation, scholarships and career development opportunities.

According to the representatives, students have participated in activities involving mathematics, literature, financial literacy, music, coding, drone technology, self-defense and drug prevention.

They also described support for youth football and basketball teams, dance programs, swimming instruction and lifeguard certification.
The foundation's leadership emphasized that its mission includes education, recreation, cultural enrichment and community development.

Encouraging Public Participation

Throughout the discussion, NCIF representatives called for greater community cooperation and encouraged residents to participate in meetings rather than allowing disagreements to divide the community.
The interview offered foundation leadership an opportunity to respond publicly to criticism and explain how they believe NCIF resources are benefiting Natchitoches residents.
Questions surrounding financial accountability, documentation and oversight remain important matters of public interest.

The Real News Louisiana will continue following NCIF developments and reporting verified information about settlement funds and community programs.

Source: Talk Back Natchitoches, 95.9 The Bounce Digital — Interview with NCIF leadership.

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Why Black Voices Matter at the Ballot Box



The Black vote has long been a powerful force in shaping elections, policies and opportunities in our communities. From the civil rights movement to today, Black voters have used the ballot box to demand fair representation, better schools, safer neighborhoods and stronger communities.

When Black voices show up, they influence decisions on issues that directly impact our daily lives — education, health care, public safety, housing, jobs and economic growth. Our vote helps ensure that our concerns are heard, respected and addressed at the local, state and national levels.

A Legacy of Influence

The right to vote was not given freely. It was earned through sacrifice, protests and the courage of countless Black leaders and everyday citizens who believed in the power of political participation. Honoring that legacy means continuing to vote, stay informed and encourage others to do the same.

OUR VOTE MATTERS BECAUSE IT:

- ☑ **Creates representation.** It helps elect leaders who understand and support the needs of our communities.
- ☑ **Shapes policy.** It influences decisions on education, health care, housing, criminal justice and economic opportunity.
- ☑ **Protects our rights.** It keeps us at the table when important decisions are made.
- ☑ **Strengthens our community.** A strong Black voting presence can bring resources, investment and positive change to Natchitoches Parish and beyond.



When Black voices are heard at the ballot box, our communities are stronger, our families are safer, and our future is brighter.

BLACK VOTING RIGHTS: A BRIEF TIMELINE

1870 — 15th Amendment
Prohibits voting discrimination based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

1920 — 19th Amendment
Prohibits voting discrimination based on sex (gender).

1965 — Voting Rights Act
Bans literacy tests and other barriers and combats racial discrimination in voting.

1971 — 26th Amendment
Lowers the voting age to 18.

Sources: National Archives • U.S. Government

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

FAITH & INSPIRATION

Trusting God Every Single Day

By Pastor Tristen Jefferson



Trusting God is not something we should do only when life is going well. It is a daily decision, even when things do not go as planned. Anyone can praise God when everything is working out, but real faith means trusting Him when we cannot see what He is doing.

There will be days filled with questions, worries, and uncertainty. But remember, God is still in control, even when your situation feels out of control. Your circumstances may change, people may change, and doors may close, but God never changes.

Sometimes God's timing requires patience. What feels like a delay may be preparation, and what seems like a closed door may be His protection. Do not allow fear or discouragement to make decisions for your life.

Learn to trust God during the quiet seasons. Just because you cannot see Him working does not mean He is not making a way. Stop comparing your journey to someone else's. God has a different plan and purpose for every life.

When life gets difficult, pray instead of panicking. When your heart becomes heavy, worship instead of worrying. Remember the many times God has already brought you through.

Proverbs 3:5–6 reminds us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and acknowledge Him in all our ways, knowing He will direct our paths.

God has not brought you this far to abandon you now. Keep your faith strong, remain patient, and continue walking by faith.

Trust God when you are happy, hurting, waiting, or celebrating. Make trusting Him a daily decision.



Finding Strength in Gratitude

As Thanksgiving approaches, remember that gratitude is not about having everything we want. It is about recognizing the blessings we already have.

Even during difficult seasons, there are reasons to be thankful: another day of life, the love of family, the kindness of others, and the strength to keep moving forward.

Take time to encourage someone who may be struggling. A thoughtful word, a helping hand, or a simple prayer can make a difference.

Sometimes the greatest blessing is realizing how much God has already brought us through.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

BOM Bank | COMMUNITY Spotlight



BOM Celebrates Jaliyah Joseph's Five-Year Milestone

NATCHITOCHES, La. — BOM Bank is celebrating Jaliyah Joseph's five years of dedicated service with the bank.

Joseph serves as Head Teller at BOM's University Parkway location in Natchitoches. Her dedication, friendly personality and commitment to customer service have made her a valued member of the BOM team.

BOM congratulates Joseph on this milestone and recognizes her continued contributions to the bank and the customers she serves.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

CHAMBER NEWS

Chamber Breakfast Highlights State Advocacy and Community Partnerships

NATCHITOCHES, La. —

The Natchitoches Area Chamber of Commerce hosted its fourth-quarter Chamber Breakfast Club in partnership with Northwestern State University, focusing on state-level advocacy and community funding priorities.

Panelists included Mayor Ronnie Williams Jr., Parish President John Salter, Natchitoches Regional Medical Center CEO Kirk Soileau, and NSU Executive Vice President and Chief of Staff Drake Owens.

The discussion emphasized building relationships with state representatives, identifying shared funding priorities and communicating the needs of Natchitoches Parish.

According to the Chamber, one key message was that the success of one organization can benefit the entire community. Panelists encouraged collaboration among government, education, healthcare and business leaders.

Speakers also stressed that effective advocacy requires ongoing relationships with lawmakers, sharing local successes and demonstrating the impact of state investments.

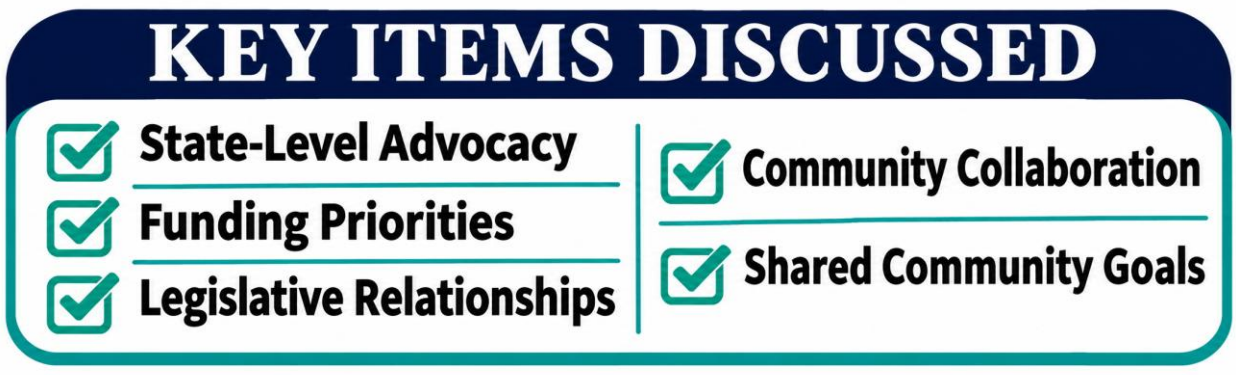
John Barr, representing U.S. Senator John Kennedy's office, also attended and participated in the discussion.

The meeting reinforced the importance of working together to advance Natchitoches Parish's future.

Source: Natchitoches Area Chamber of Commerce.



From left: NRMC CEO Kirk Soileau, Mayor Ronnie Williams Jr., NSU Executive Vice President & Chief of Staff Drake Owens, and Natchitoches Chamber of Commerce President Laura Lyles





THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Crime Victims Deserve Support, Compassion and a Voice

Community awareness, respect and access to resources can help victims and families move forward.

NATCHITOCHES, La. — Behind every crime report is a person, a family or a community affected by an experience that can leave lasting emotional, physical and financial consequences.

For crime victims and their loved ones, the impact often continues long after the incident. Fear, grief, uncertainty and the struggle to regain a sense of safety can become part of everyday life.

Supporting victims begins with compassion. Listening without judgment, respecting privacy and offering assistance can make a meaningful difference during difficult times.

Family members, churches, neighbors and community organizations can help by providing meals, transportation, emotional support or simply checking on those affected. Small acts of kindness can remind victims and their families that they are not alone.

Respecting Victims and Their Families

In today's digital world, information about crimes can spread quickly. Sharing rumors, graphic images or unverified accusations may cause additional pain for victims and their loved ones.

Community members are encouraged to share information responsibly, respect the privacy of those affected and allow families the opportunity to grieve without unnecessary public attention.

Victims deserve to be heard, treated with dignity and connected with resources that can help them recover.

Speaking Up for a Safer Community

Residents who have information about criminal activity can contact **Natchitoches Crime Stoppers at 318-238-2388** or submit tips through **P3Tips.com**.

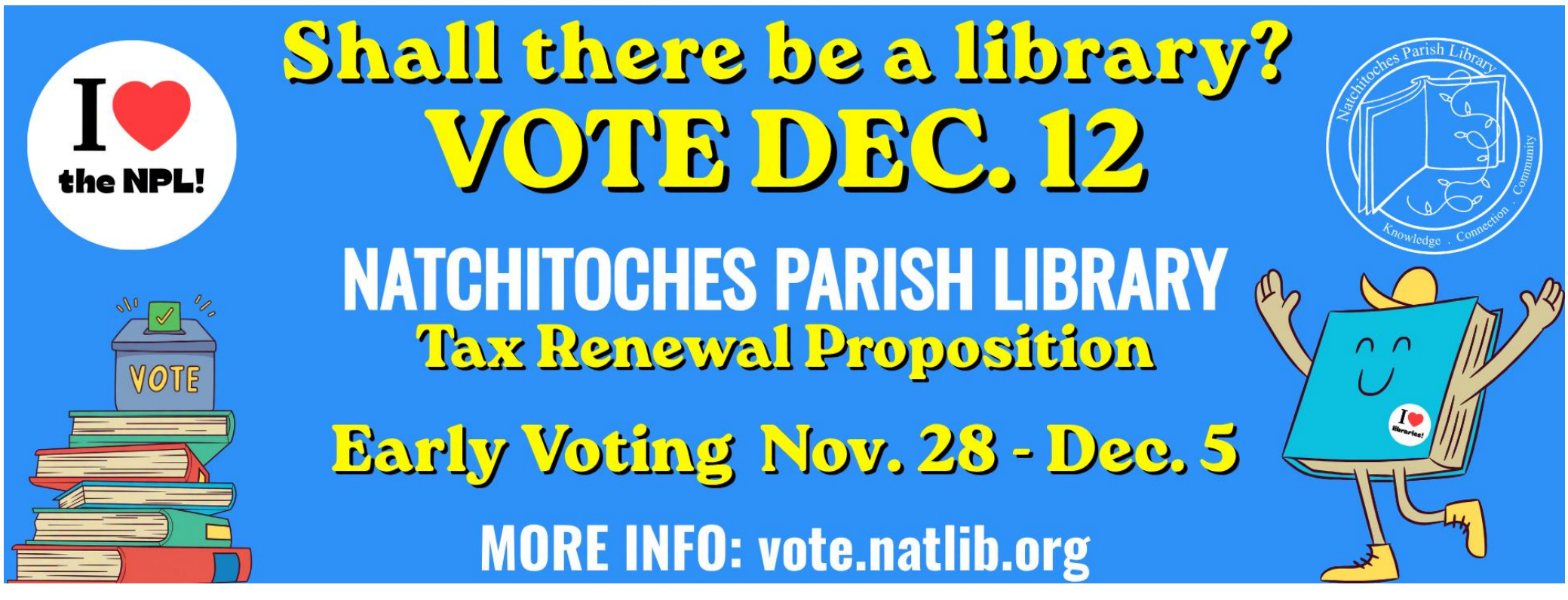
For information about crime victim assistance and available resources in Louisiana, visit **www.lcle.la.gov**.

Anyone experiencing an immediate emergency should call **911**.

Building a safer community requires more than reporting crime. It means supporting those who have been harmed, encouraging accountability and working together to prevent further violence.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026



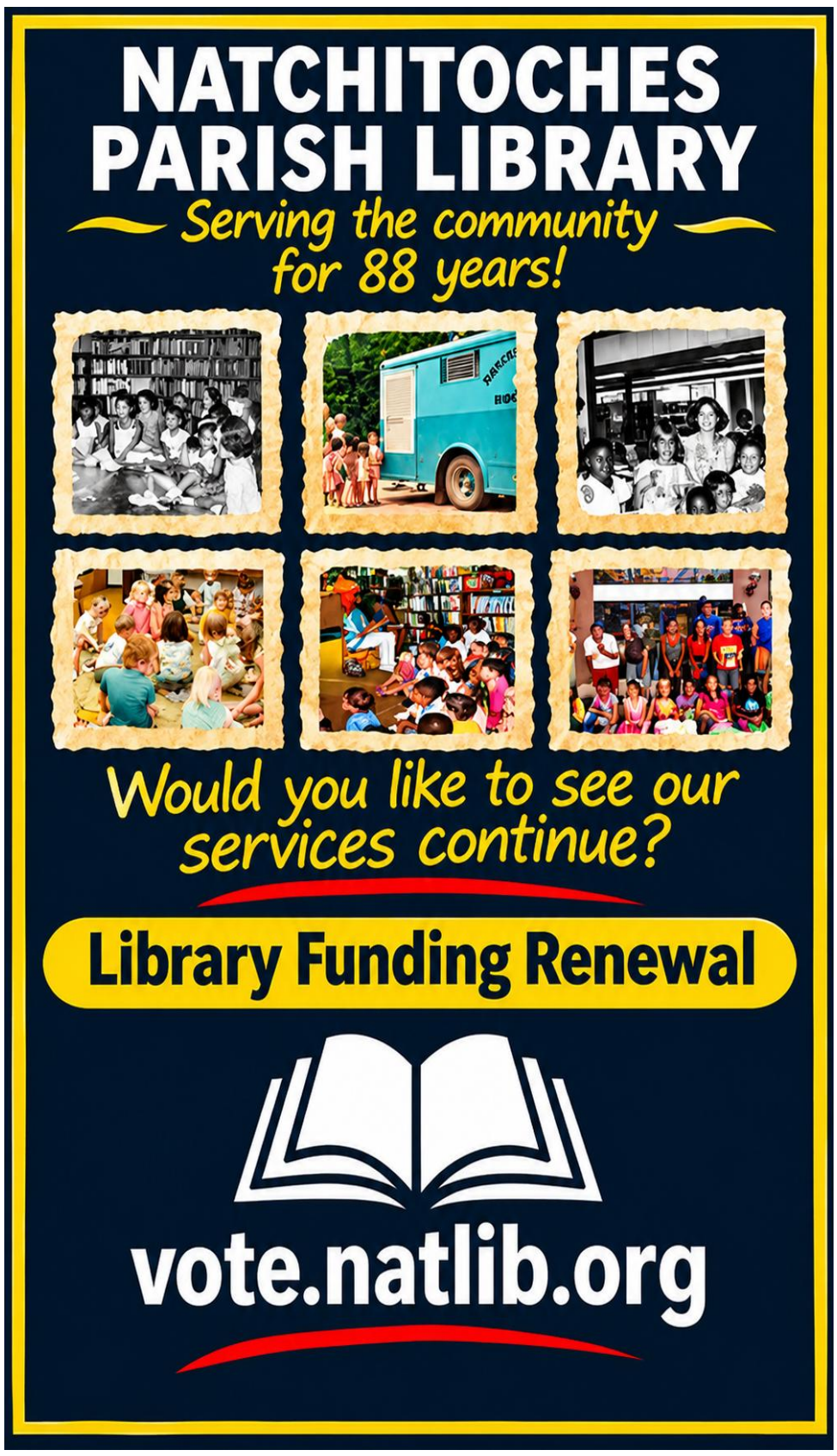
What Your Vote Means

YES

Voting **"YES"** means you support the continued funding of the Library at its existing tax rate for another 10 years. If the millage renewal passes, the Library's current and future budgeting, plans, services and expenditures would continue to be funded. The community would continue to have access to the Library's programs, events, classes, circulating items, online resources, Bookmobile and School mobile visits. The Library would be able to complete its planned Natchez and Robeline branches and provide for their ongoing operations.

NO

Voting **"NO"** means you do not support the renewal of the Library's funding at its existing tax rate. If the millage renewal fails, the Library's future budgeted expenses would need to be cut as the Library receives approximately 97% of its funding from this tax. Reduced community access to the Library would continue as the existing Library Fund is spent down, but services offered would have to be reduced, and some eliminated, to prolong library operations. The Library would abandon its planned Natchez and Robeline branches as there would be no assured ongoing funding if built.



Information provided by Natchitoches Parish Library

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Natchitoches Prepares for 100th Christmas Festival Season

Historic milestone brings holiday traditions, downtown festivities and visitors to the Cane River community.

NATCHITOCHES, La. — The City of Natchitoches is preparing to celebrate a major milestone as the community welcomes the 100th season of its beloved Christmas Festival of Lights.

For generations, the holiday celebration has transformed historic downtown Natchitoches and the Cane River Lake waterfront into a festive destination filled with Christmas lights, family activities and seasonal traditions.

The centennial celebration offers an opportunity to reflect on the festival's history while welcoming another generation of families to experience the holiday magic that has become a signature part of Natchitoches.

A Century of Holiday Traditions

Dating back to 1927, the Natchitoches Christmas Festival has grown from a community celebration into one of Louisiana's best-known holiday attractions.

The festival is recognized for its elaborate light displays along Cane River Lake, fireworks, holiday entertainment, shopping and family-friendly activities.

The 2026 season marks 100 years since the festival's founding, a milestone that reflects the community's dedication to preserving its traditions.

Supporting Local Businesses

The Christmas season is also an important time for downtown merchants, restaurants, hotels and other local businesses.

Visitors attending the festivities have opportunities to explore historic Front Street, enjoy local cuisine and support businesses throughout Natchitoches Parish.

The celebration also showcases the city's history, hospitality and cultural heritage.

Holiday Season Begins November 21

The 2026 Christmas Festival of Lights season is scheduled to begin **Saturday, November 21**, and continue through **January 6, 2027**.

Residents and visitors are encouraged to review the official festival schedule for information about activities, admission, entertainment and special events.

As Natchitoches prepares to turn on its holiday lights for the 100th season, the celebration serves as a reminder of the traditions that have connected families and communities for generations.

For festival information and updates, visit www.natchitocheschristmas.com.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

ON November 21st
WE TURN ON THE Holidays!
GET READY TO KICK OFF OUR 100TH CHRISTMAS SEASON.
NOV. 21, 2026 — THRU — JAN. 6, 2027
100th NATCHITOCHES CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS
TICKETS ON SALE NOW!
GET YOURS TODAY!
NATCHITOCHESCHRISTMAS.COM

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

COMMUNITY RESOURCES & SERVICES

Thanksgiving in Natchitoches

RESTAURANTS OPEN ON THANKSGIVING

- Hana Japanese Sushi Bar & Grill on Front Street
- Hana Japanese Sushi Bar & Grill on Keyser Avenue
- iHop
- French Market Express
- Trail Boss
- Sam's Southern Eatery

PREORDERS AVAILABLE FOR THANKSGIVING

- Sweetie's Bar-B-Q
- The Mariners
- Legacy Cafe
- SweetD's Kitchen
- Bayou Soul & Family

A SEASON OF THANKS

This Thanksgiving, The Real News Louisiana celebrates the families, businesses, educators, community organizations and neighbors who make Natchitoches Parish special.

We are thankful for our readers, advertisers and everyone who continues to support local journalism.

Happy Thanksgiving from The Real News Louisiana!

MCKINNEY-VENTO HOMELESSNESS PROGRAM

NPSB



ENSURING EDUCATIONAL STABILITY FOR STUDENTS NAVIGATING HOUSING TRANSITIONS

Stay In School
- Immediate enrollment with or without paperwork

Transportation
- Transportation provided to the student's school of origin

Student Support
- Academic services and after-school programs
- School uniforms for qualifying applicants

Family Support
- Referrals to local community services

To complete the **Louisiana Student Residency Questionnaire Form,** scan the QR code OR contact:

Alexa Bernard-Conday, Ed.S.
Coordinator of Homeless Services and Federal Programs
Alexa.Bernard@npsb.la
(318) 238-0702

YOUR BUSINESS COULD BE HERE!

Connect with readers across Natchitoches and surrounding communities.

ADVERTISE WITH US TODAY!

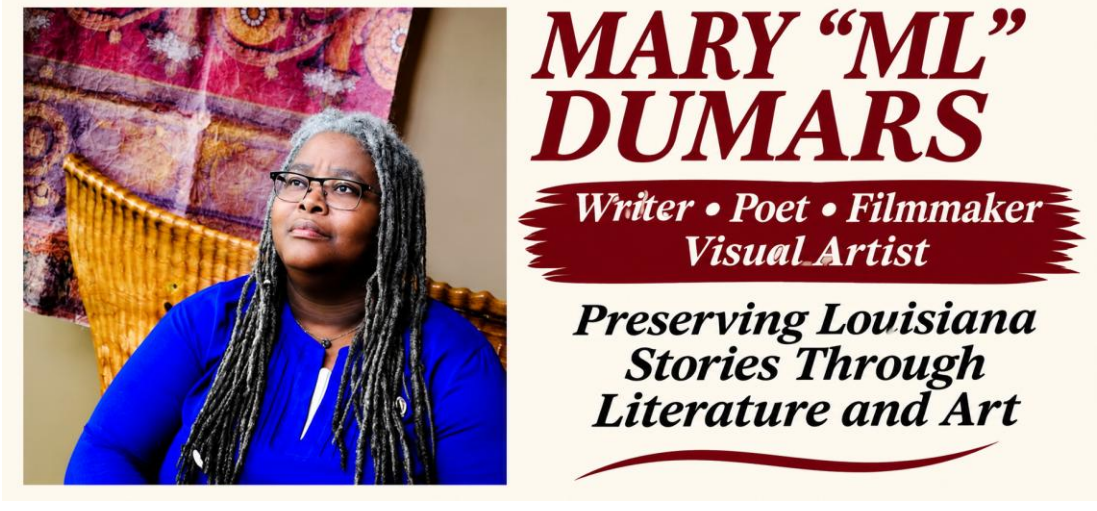
318-354-7712 support@therealnewslouisiana.com

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

FEATURE PROFILE

Mary “ML” Dumars: Louisiana Stories Beyond Borders

Writer • Poet • Documentary Storyteller • 2027 France Artist Residency



FROM NATCHEZ TO FRANCE

Dumars and photographer Debra Roberson have been accepted to a 2027 artist residency at Château d’Orquevaux in France. The residency is scheduled for July 22–August 5, 2027.

Her writing and documentary projects draw attention to the lives, histories and cultural memory of Louisiana communities.

Artist website: mldumarsartist.com

A CAREER BUILT ON STORYTELLING

NATCHITOCHES, La. — Literary artist Mary “ML” Dumars has built a creative career spanning fiction, poetry, documentary filmmaking and exhibitions. After a 20-year hiatus from school, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities from Tulane University in 2019.

Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in SB Magazine, Up All Night, Handbasket Zine, Fleur de Lit and the international Short Edition database. She published her debut novel, Any Given Tuesday, in 2020 and the poetry collection Tumbleweed in 2021.

Supported by a National Endowment for the Arts grant, Dumars produced Tell Your Story: Natchez Stories, a documentary project recording community experiences. She received the 2023 Critics’ Choice recognition for Literary Art at Critical Mass 11 and presented a 2024 solo exhibition based on her science-fiction novel A Different Way of Being.

IN CONVERSATION WITH ML DUMARS

Q: How have Natchez and Cane River family stories influenced your writing?

My family comes from Natchitoches, Louisiana. Most of my family is still there, in Natchez. It means a great deal of pride to me to know that so much of who we are comes from our French and African heritage. Free and enslaved blacks alike, contributed to the creation of this rich gumbo we call Louisiana, when it was the Wild West, No Man’s Land, and became a State. I can hardly wait to share some of our phrases and ways with the French. It will be interesting to see how current Frenchmen think about the evolution of our shared past.

Q: What do you hope to create during your residency in France?

A residency affords the artist the opportunity to study and exercise her chosen craft uninterrupted by the 101 day to day mundane activities at home. I will be able to rise and create 24/7 at my own discretion. I hope to learn discipline to fully immerse myself in creative mode when and wherever I get the chance. The attendance at a prestigious residency also elevates the value of my work.

Q: Is there anything about this opportunity that feels especially meaningful to you personally?

I have a great love of French culture and Franco-Caribbean culture. I studied French in elementary school, high school, and college. I also studied French African and French-Caribbean literature in college. I embrace my own heritage with the last name Dumars. Being accepted to an Artist Residency in France is as exciting as it gets for a kid from Louisiana who imagines what her ancestors would be like.

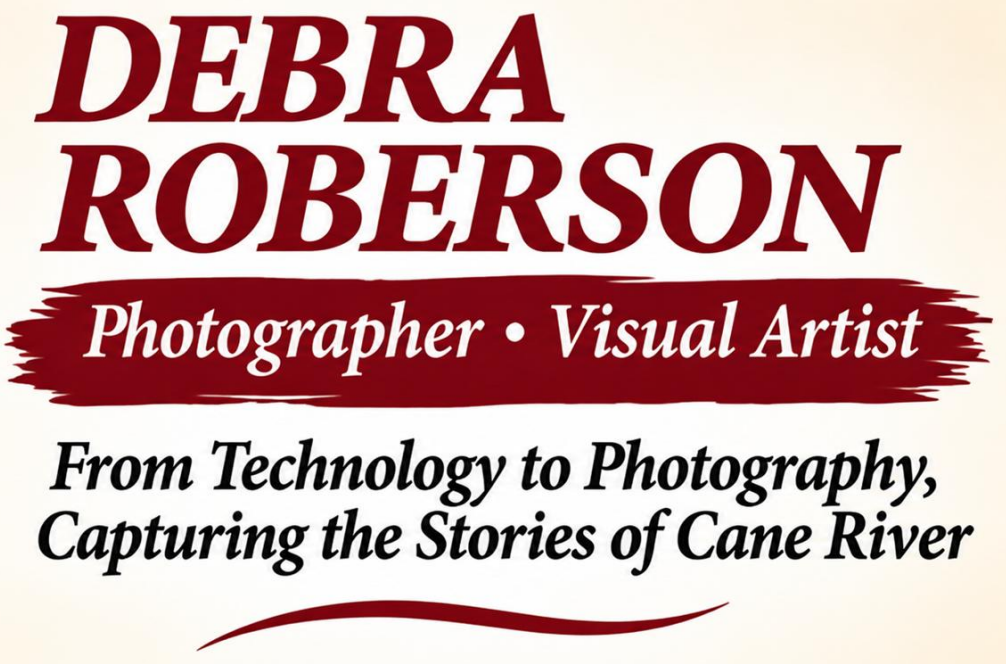
THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

FEATURE PROFILE

Debra Roberson: Preserving Heritage Through the Lens

Photographer • Visual Artist • Natchitoches Central Class of 1985





Artist website: debrarobersonartist.com • Photographs courtesy of Debra Roberson

FROM TECHNOLOGY TO AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHY

NATCHITOCHES, La. — Born in Houston, Debra Roberson spent summers and holidays in Natchitoches, where her parents and grandparents had roots. She graduated from Natchitoches Central High School in 1985, earned degrees from Dartmouth College (1989) and Wheaton College (1991), and worked as an IT analyst for about 25 years.

Returning to her first love, photography and graphic design, she earned an Associate of Applied Science in Communication Media from Bossier Parish Community College in 2021. After honorable mentions at Critical Mass 8 and 9, she received the Critics' Choice Award in Visual Arts at Critical Mass X in 2022. Her solo exhibition Cane River Chronicles: Unveiled appeared at Artspace that year.

Her work has appeared in exhibitions across Louisiana and other states, including the Irene Rosenzweig exhibition, and in a three-year Artport display at Shreveport Regional Airport beginning in 2025. Roberson and ML Dumars will attend a 2027 artist residency in France.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DEBRA ROBERSON

Q: How has Natchitoches influenced you as an artist?

Both my parents were born and raised on plantations in Natchitoches. This has given me a desire to document this history through my lens and writings.

Q: What does it mean to you to represent Louisiana and specifically Natchitoches during this residency?

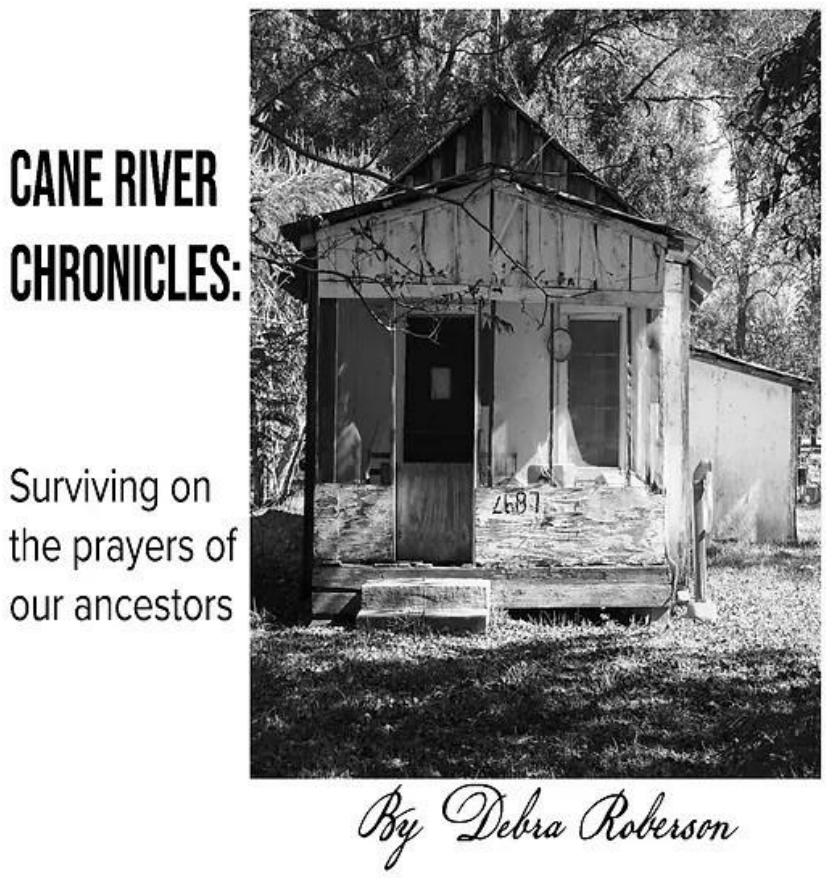
It means a lot to me. I love Natchitoches and its history. The fact that this place is the oldest town in the Louisiana Purchase is amazing. I am honored to get this opportunity to represent Natchitoches on the other side of the world!

Q: Is there anything about this opportunity that feels especially meaningful to you personally?

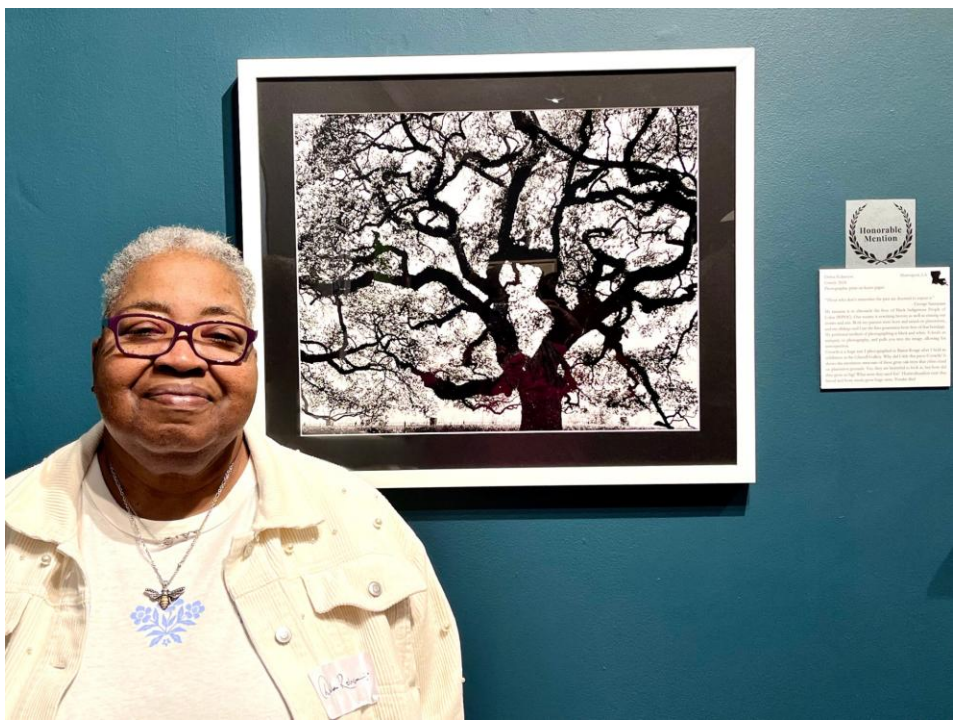
Yes, after NCHS, I attended Dartmouth College and studied in Blois, France while I stayed with a French family that did not speak English. I hope to be able to speak French again and possibly visit my French family.

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

From Cane River to France: Two Artists, One International Opportunity



By Debra Roberson



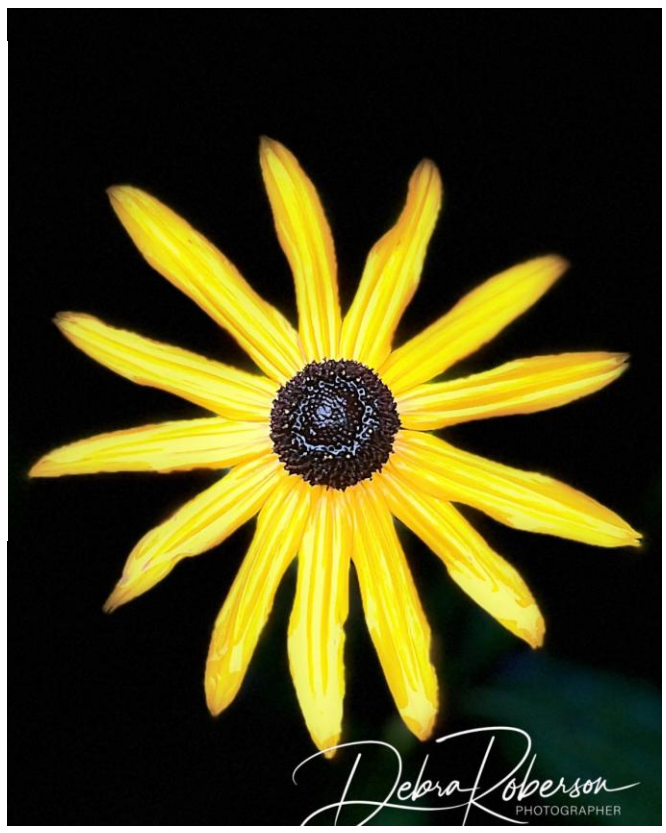
Debra Roberson, honorable mention at the Masur Museum in Monroe, LA



Old schoolhouse in Natchez, Louisiana

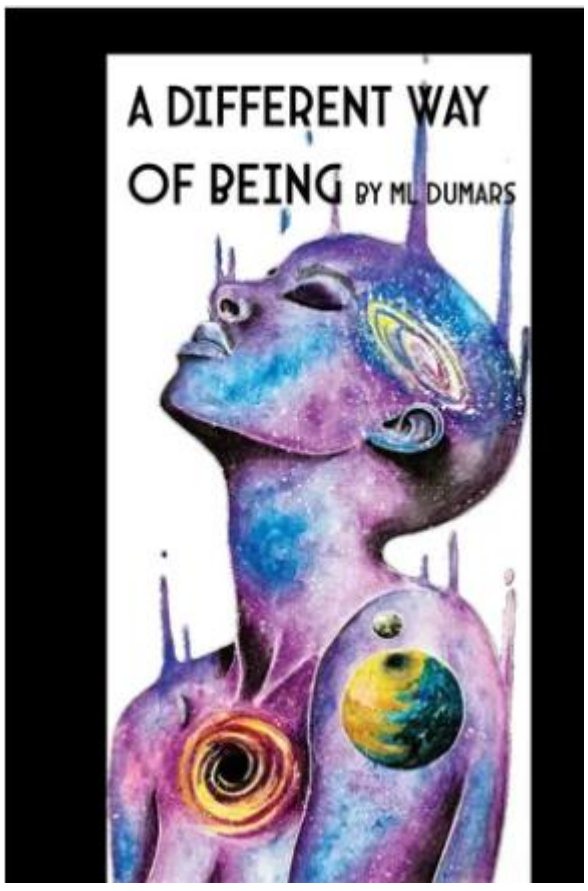
Meet the Artists

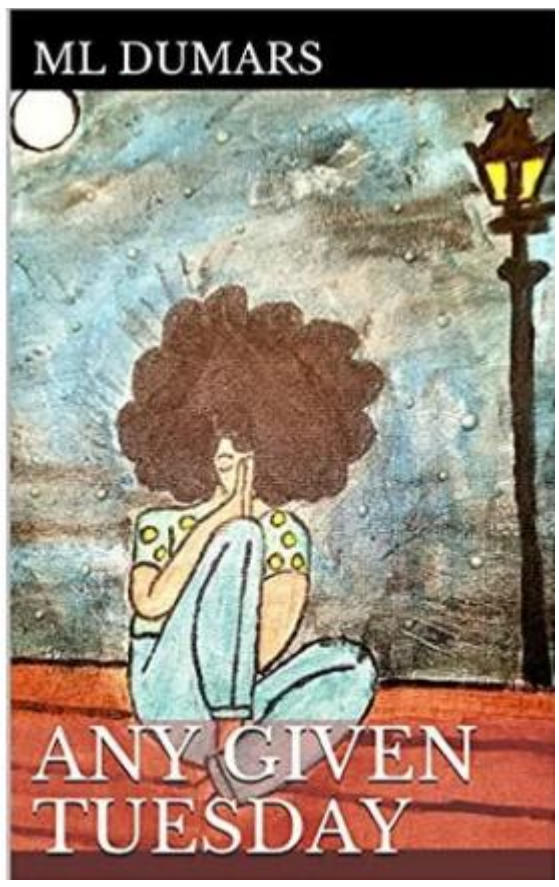
Explore the creative journeys of **Mary "ML" Dumars** and **Debra Roberson** — two Natchitoches area artists whose work preserves Louisiana's Cane River heritage and will take them to **France in 2027** for an international artist residency.



Mary "ML" Dumars Full Biography
▶ See Page 20

Debra Roberson Full Biography
▶ See Page 21







ML. Dumars, Artist

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Exchange Bank Gives Back

Exchange Bank Sponsors Brooklyn Rogers in Miss Jabberwock 2026 Competition



From left to right: Judy Kato, Brooklyn Rogers, Kaleena Pardee and Vern Guidroz
Photo Credit: Exchange Bank

NATCHITOCHES, La. —

Exchange Bank is proud to sponsor Brooklyn Rogers as she competes for the title of Miss Jabberwock 2026, presented by the Natchitoches Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Rogers is the granddaughter of Judy Kato of Exchange Bank's South Drive Branch.

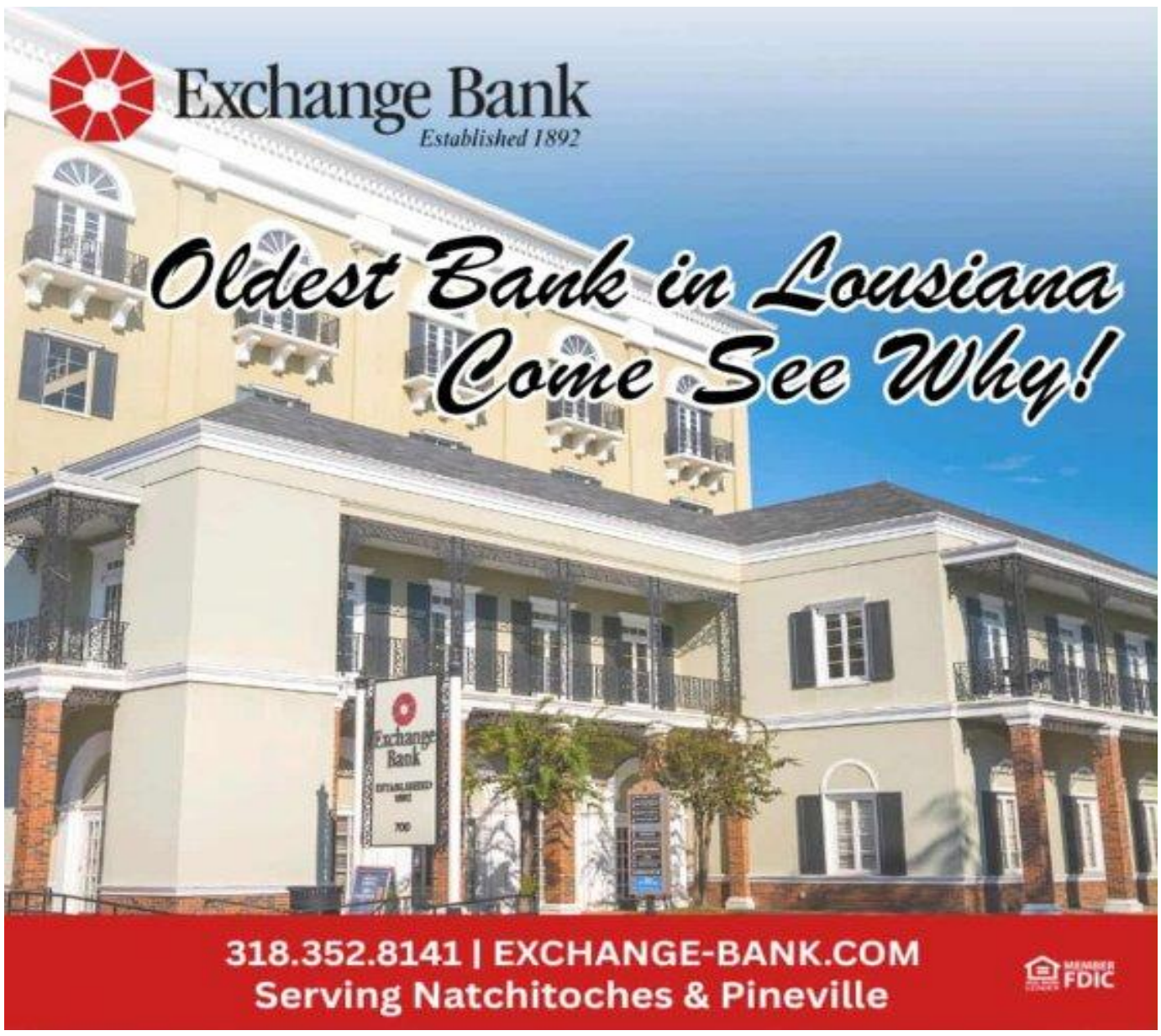
Exchange Bank extends its best wishes to Brooklyn throughout the competition and is pleased to support her participation.

About Miss Jabberwock

Jabberwock is a tradition of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., supporting scholarship, cultural enrichment, and personal development among young women.

The program celebrates participants' talents while encouraging education and community involvement.

Locally, the Miss Jabberwock 2026 competition is presented by the Natchitoches Alumnae Chapter.



THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA
LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA
November 15, 2026

Natchitoches Native Samantha Bonnette Joins Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Board

Marketing professional brings more than 20 years of experience and a love for Louisiana's history and culture.

Samantha Bonnette, a Natchitoches native and resident, has been welcomed to the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Board of Directors, bringing more than 20 years of marketing and development experience and a lifelong appreciation for Louisiana's history and culture.

Bonnette is the daughter of Michael and Daphne Bonnette. Her mother is well known locally for her work leading the Child Protection Agency before her retirement.

Growing up in Louisiana's oldest permanent settlement, Samantha developed an early appreciation for preserving history, celebrating the state's unique culture, and sharing that knowledge with others.

She earned a degree in communications from Tulane University in New Orleans and later received a Master of Library and Information Science from Louisiana State University. Her career spans more than 20 years in marketing and development, with experience in special events, casino promotions and relationship marketing, nonprofit fundraising and awareness campaigns, local government public relations, festival coordination, and advertising campaigns.

Today, Bonnette serves as marketing and development manager for Shreve Memorial Library, a 21-branch public library system serving Shreveport and surrounding Caddo Parish.

In that role, she promotes the library's many resources, encourages participation in programs and events, and helps generate support through the library's foundation. Her work connects residents with opportunities for learning, discovery, and community engagement.

With deep Natchitoches roots and a passion for marketing, Bonnette continues to put her experience to work helping people discover what Louisiana and its communities have to offer.



Samantha Bonnette, top center, joins five fellow new members of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Board of Directors. Image courtesy of LEH.

THE REAL NEWS LOUISIANA

LOCAL NEWS • COMMUNITY • LOUISIANA

A COMMUNITY WITH A VOICE SHALL BE HEARD.

The Real News Louisiana is committed to bringing you local news that matters, inspiring stories, community events, and information that empowers our communities.



DIGITAL FIRST

Read anytime, anywhere on your computer, tablet, or phone.

COMMUNITY FOCUSED

Highlighting the people, places, and events that make Louisiana strong.

TRUSTED REPORTING

Accurate, timely, and reliable news you can count on.

ALWAYS UPDATED

Stay informed with the latest news as it happens.

VISIT US ONLINE
therealnewslouisiana.com

CALL US
318-354-7712

November 15, 2026