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# LOUISIANIANS OF THE YEAR

8 INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

Each year we look for fellow Louisianians who have had great success in their own worlds. As always, the greatest challenge is narrowing millions of possibilities to such a small group. Those honored here, as selected by our editorial staff, represent a small but impressive sample of the best of Louisiana.

BY KATHY FINN | PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

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“ I try to get the students excited by giving them responsibility. ”

BATON ROUGE

# JOHN GRAY

TEACHER, MUSICIAN

**THERE WAS A TIME** some years ago when getting students to join The Dunham School pep band was something of a challenge. Kids' enthusiasm for the band ran low.

But these days the band seems to have no problem filling all its slots. What has changed?

The band's repertoire, for starters. The music lineup today leans toward such student-pleasing numbers as Herbie Hancock's "Chameleon" and "Talkin' Out the Side of Your Neck" by Cameo.

The other big factor: John Gray became the school's band director and made it his mission to jazz things up.

Targets of his efforts included not only the pep band but also the school's concert band and other music groups, and the indicators are, he's succeeding.

In 2014, Gray was named Teacher of the Year by the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra. The award honors teachers who "successfully integrate music with other disciplines and showcase the value of the arts."

Gray, who is in his ninth year at The Dunham School, has been the Christian school's full-time band director for the past four years. He teaches jazz, concert, pep and praise band to students in the 6th through 12th grades.

During his tenure, he has not only doubled the size of the pep band, but also expanded the concert band, and turned an eight-piece jazz combo into a 20-piece big band.

Gray has also led his students to win a slew of local and national honors.

"I try to get the students excited by giving them responsibility," he says.

In the pep band, for instance, he asks students and the football players to name the music they want to hear, and he has students lead the band in rehearsals.

In recent years, Gray arranged the acquisition of new percussion equipment and created a drum corps, which has drawn many more students into drumming. "People love the drumline," he says.

A Baton Rouge native, Gray has been playing music ever since a minister at his family's church bought him his first trumpet. He continued the pursuit through his years at McKinley High School and his studies at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts under acclaimed jazz clarinetist Alvin Batiste.

At Southern University, Gray studied jazz and graduated with a degree in musical performance.

He says his own learning experiences have helped him become a better teacher. "You have to have multiple ways of relaying a lesson, because everybody doesn't learn in the same way," he says.

Gray also brings students the important perspective of a professional musician. In demand as a trumpeter, he plays frequent gigs with three well-established bands that he founded, and he runs his own music label, called Continuum Music.

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# CARLA JACKSON

TEACHER

**OF THE MANY TALENTS** and skills that combine to make a great teacher, some of the most important traits may be rooted in an educator's past. Carla Jackson, for instance, believes that qualities she brought from her own childhood have shaped her ability to connect with students.

Named by the state Education Department as Louisiana's Teacher of the Year in 2014, Jackson teaches third grade at Bains Elementary School in St. Francisville.

Along with schooling her students in reading, writing, math and the like, she tries to ensure that every child leaves her class feeling a sense of self-worth. It's a goal born of her own early years.

Jackson's family lived in Metairie, and her mother died when Jackson was 5 years old. Her father, plagued with alcoholism, was not able to take care of his four daughters.

The girls ended up in the care of their grandparents, and Jackson says they had a "wonderful home life." But the absence of her parents took a toll. She remembers feeling like an outsider among other kids because she did not have a mother and father.

"I was scared someone would say, 'Why don't you live with your mom,' and I'd have to say she died, and then they'd ask about my dad," she says.

Though she was a good student, Jackson became

shy and withdrawn, always protecting herself from exposure to the outside world. "School was very hard for me," she says.

As she grew to adulthood, she became more comfortable with her life and went on to Louisiana State University, where she expected to study engineering. But one day a friend invited her to visit an elementary classroom where the friend was student-teaching.

While observing the class, Jackson noticed a girl who seemed to distance herself from the other students and kept her head down as though she didn't want to be noticed. Jackson saw herself in the little girl. "That was the moment when I knew this is what I wanted to do," she says.

Jackson switched her major, and a few years later graduated with a degree in education. She taught at Zachary Elementary School for 10 years, and then after relocating to St. Francisville, she signed on at Bains Elementary.

During her 22 years of teaching, Jackson has focused on building a rapport with her students and says that gaining their trust involves getting to know their families and background.

"I feel like every child has broken parts, and I want to help fix those parts and make them feel whole," she says. "I want every child to know that there is greatness inside them no matter what their circumstances."

“  
I feel like every child has broken parts, and I want to help fix those parts.  
”

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“My greatest hope is to continue to transform the public education system...”

NEW ORLEANS

# SCOTT COWEN

EDUCATOR AND ACTIVIST

## MANY COMMUNITIES

can point to citizens who have gone the distance to improve the lives of others. But occasionally circumstances place such individuals in exactly the right place at a time when others need them most.

That's where Scott Cowen found himself in 2005, after his adopted city suffered a blow from which many thought it would never recover.

Then seven years into his tenure as president of Tulane University, Cowen was as shocked as everyone else at the devastation produced by the flood that followed Hurricane Katrina, but he quickly joined other community leaders who leapt into action.

He dived into efforts to restore the badly damaged Tulane campus and ensure that students could return, and at the same time headed the planning to repair and reform the city's public school system, which was failing academically before the storm and had few viable classrooms remaining afterward.

Cowen implemented a sweeping recovery at Tulane that strengthened core academic programs and drew nearly 90 percent of undergraduate students back to campus just months after the storm. And he travelled the country to spread the word that post-Katrina New Orleans was economically viable.

Meanwhile, he led efforts that eventually resulted in nearly all local public schools converting to charter institutions, with road maps for improving their academic performance, and he founded the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives.

The TIAA-CREF Institute in 2014 gave Cowen its Theodore M. Hesburgh Award for Leadership Excellence in Higher Education. It was one of many national accolades.

In 2009 he received the Carnegie Corporation Academic Leadership Award, and the following year he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

President Barack Obama in 2010 appointed Cowen to the White House Council for Community Solutions, to advise on ways to reconnect and empower young people who are neither employed nor in school.


Cowen retired last year after serving as Tulane's president for 16 years, and now looks back on a career during which undergraduate applications to the university quadrupled and Tulane surpassed a post-Katrina fundraising goal of \$700 million.

But his work in support of public schools goes on. "My greatest hope is to continue to transform the public education system to be one of the most respected in the country," he says.

Cowen says of all the rewards of his efforts, "by far the most important" was the comeback of Tulane University after Katrina.

"Nothing, in my mind, will ever replace what is was like to have been there at that moment in time to help the university and the city recover," he says.

In his book *The Inevitable City*, published last year, Cowen explores the resurgence of New Orleans and how other communities can learn from its dramatic comeback.



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“People who grew up in this cultural cocoon don't feel completely comfortable elsewhere.”

LAFAYETTE

# CARL BRASSEAUX

HISTORIAN, WRITER

**AMONG MANY DISTINGUISHING** traits of Louisiana's Cajun people, Carl Brasseaux believes one of the most important is their tendency to stay put.

"One reason the culture has survived is because it has been perhaps the most sedentary culture in the United States," he says, emphasizing that he is not suggesting Cajuns are "couch potatoes" but rather noting their close connection to their home.

"These are people who, when they die, are buried in the communities where they were born," he says.

Along with being one of the world's leading authorities on French people in North America, Brasseaux holds an insider's perspective. He is a descendant of Acadians who, after being forced out of Canada, made their home in Louisiana in the 1760s.

"My children are part of the ninth generation of my family here," he says.

His curiosity about his own roots is what led Brasseaux on a lifelong exploration of Cajun and Creole culture. He grew up in a rural area near Sunset, and he recalls that school books in the 1960s offered few insights about Cajun culture. He decided to rewrite the books.

In the 1970s, Brasseaux attended the University of Southwestern Louisiana, earning a bachelor's degree in political science followed by a master's degree in history. He went on to study law, and then history, at Louisiana State University.

He then seized an opportunity to enroll at

Université de Paris, where he earned a doctoral degree under the tutelage of a prominent scholar in North American studies.

On returning to Louisiana, he began his own scholarly effort to address an imbalance: "The focus (of historical research) had always been on the British seaport colonies, while the Spanish and French experiences in what's now the Mississippi Valley were largely ignored," he says.

As a professor of history at LSU, Brasseaux would eventually publish more than 30 volumes dealing with Louisiana and French North America. In the process, he became director of the Center for Louisiana Studies and the Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism at University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and director of the UL Press.

After retiring from the university in 2010, Brasseaux continued to write and publish, and now is collaborating on a study of post-Hurricane Katrina culture along the Gulf Coast. He has become a scholar in the Louisiana Sea Grant program at LSU and a Davenport Fellow at Yale University.

In July, the Foundation for a Historical Louisiana honored him with its 2014 Cultural Preservation Award.

Though research opportunities occasionally arise outside of Louisiana, Brasseaux, says he will stay close to home. "People who grew up in this cultural cocoon don't feel completely comfortable elsewhere," he says.

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# CATHI COX-BONIOL

EDUCATION ACTIVIST

**YEARS AGO, WHEN IT** came time for her to declare a major at Louisiana Tech University, student Cathi Cox wasn't ready. She recalls going through the curriculum catalog and trying to narrow her selection. On a whim, as much as anything else, she decided on education.

Decades later she says of her choice: "It has been a gift."

The Ruston native has spent her adult life not only mastering the art of teaching, but also finding ways to inspire students and put community support behind programs that can positively affect their future.

Her career took her through 17 years of teaching high school science before she went to work at Louisiana Tech. It was while she was teaching at the university that Lincoln Parish Schools Superintendent Danny Bell tapped her to head up a new public schools project.

Bell had conceived of an initiative he dubbed ACHIEVE, whose aim was to bring public schools closer to the general public.

"He wanted a person who could help get more people involved in the educational process, and he built this position around my strengths," says Cox-Boniol, who now is married to Tom Boniol.

A primary focus of her new job was to increase interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education by linking specific organizations, businesses and institutions to school programs.

"People just didn't know what exceptional things were

going on in the schools, and I started educating them and asking them to (publicly) recognize these achievements," she says.

She encouraged dozens of area organizations to identify education priorities and support them by providing resources ranging from dollars to on-site job shadowing, technical assistance and classroom visits.

She launched two programs – Volunteers in Public Schools and KEYS Champions (Keep Encouraging Youth to Succeed) – which in their first year celebrated seven public school award winners.

"Since then, we have 75 to 80 partnership activities each year, and we recognize 35 to 40 champions," she says. As a result, scores of area groups now have a larger stake in the future of local children.

"Every child has different interests and strengths," Cox-Boniol says. "We need a menu of options that allow them to reach their fullest potential, and these partnerships provide kids greater opportunities for that."

In addition to her work with schools, Cox-Boniol volunteers extensively with a host of organizations from Keep Lincoln Parish Beautiful and the Dixie Center for Arts to the Wellspring Alliance for Families and the local chamber.

Last year, the Junior Auxiliary of Ruston presented her with its Betty Robbins Volunteer of the Year Award, which honors a Lincoln Parish resident who has worked to improve the lives of local children.

“People just didn't know what exceptional things were going on in the schools.”



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“  
I decided  
it was  
time to  
start my  
dream.”

SHREVEPORT

## LISANDRA DI LIBERTO BROWN

VISUAL ARTIST AND PAINTER

**IF LOVE HAS A COLOR,** artist Lisandra Di Liberto Brown believes the color is red. For her, red represents passion and inspiration. And it reminds her of home.

A native of Puerto Rico, Brown has lived in Shreveport since moving there with her husband several years ago. The two met when both were living and working on the island of St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. After marrying, they relocated to his home.

Though she studied art in her homeland and has loved to paint throughout her life, it wasn't until she settled in north Louisiana that Brown decided to commit herself fully to her art.

"I decided it was time to start my dream," she says.

She found support for her vision from the Shreveport Regional Arts Council and the Bossier Arts Council. After participating in classes sponsored by the groups, Brown exhibited her work in shows sponsored by the organizations. She later was selected for inclusion in the Northwest Louisiana Artists Directory and, following a peer review process, was named to the state's roster of touring artists by the Louisiana Division of the Arts.

Brown has spent the past few years building a portfolio that reflects diverse interests, and red is a dominant color in many of her works. "One of my teachers in art school used the color a lot, and it

became very important to me," she says.

With subjects that reflect a mixture of reality and fantasy, her works range from still-life objects to fish that are endowed with legs.

Her stylized human figures portray women in fluid poses and muted hues that evoke a range of emotions.

In her melancholy painting of a lone dingy afloat on a dark sea, golden light filters through clouds and evokes an ethereal quality.

And then there are her cows.

Cows are a favorite subject for Brown, but they are hardly run-of-the-mill farm animals.

Brown notes that she grew up in the city of Hatillo, which is the center for Puerto Rico's milk production. "We say that we have 38,000 people and 32,000 cows," she jokes.

When she moved to Louisiana, she found herself homesick for the scene. "I was missing my town so started drawing the cows," she says.

Because she longed to visit home, "I put wings on my cows," she adds. And naturally, because she loves her home, she painted the cows red.

Red cows with wings have since become a theme in Brown's work. And her homesickness has eased as she has grown attached to Louisiana. The local traditions are as colorful as those in Puerto Rico, she says, even without red cows.

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“ I don't want what happened to me to happen to another child. ”

LAFAYETTE

# ELIJAH EVANS

VOLUNTEER ACTIVIST

## BY MOST MEASURES

of citizenship, 17-year-old Elijah Evans has already risen to impressive heights. The organizer of a nonprofit group that works to prevent child abuse and improve the lives of foster children, the Comeaux High School junior has touched the lives of scores of kids in the Lafayette area.

His efforts range from hosting parties for needy youth to publicly speaking about the needs of foster children. Adding to the poignancy of his efforts is the fact that Evans was, himself, a victim of abuse that began at an early age.

In his infancy, Evans suffered beatings by his mother, who, in her worst attack, immersed her two-year-old son in scalding water.

State authorities removed the seriously injured child from the home, and for a short time he lived with his grandmother before case workers placed him in a foster home, where Evans got his first taste of a better life.

"I was lucky to be blessed with a foster mother who loved helping kids," he says. "I had toys to play with, and I went to school."

But his greatest stroke of luck was landing in the care of a nurse name Lynore Harding, who helped see him through years of intensive medical treatments and skin grafts for the injuries inflicted by his mother. She helped him gain the strength both to endure the pain and overcome the psychological devastation of his experiences. Best of all, she adopted him.

Evans credits his adoptive mother with helping him shed his bitterness and put his experiences to use in a positive way. He began by organizing a Christmas party for children in foster care. That party turned into a year-round advocacy.

He launched a campaign he dubbed "No Use for Abuse." He wrote a rap song and designed a T-shirt to promote the campaign. Soon, his Christmas party became an annual event, and he added a back-to-school bash for the kids.

"I realized that I wanted to do this for the rest of my life," he says.

In 2012, "No Use for Abuse" won national recognition from the Family Career and Community Leaders of America. Evans also received a Louisiana Young Heroes Award from Louisiana Public Broadcasting and the Baton Rouge Rotary Club.

Last year, his story drew wider interest when he received the Prudential Community Spirit Award naming him one of the top youth volunteers in the United States.

Evans hopes the recognition will help him broaden his efforts to help kids in need of advocates.

"I hope to be able to host summer camps, youth seminars and expand into college scholarships," he says. "I don't want what happened to me to happen to another child."





“It has taken me by surprise that audiences of the 21st century are responding to a form that hasn't been used in more than 200 years.”

NEW ORLEANS

# JOHN BIGUENET

PLAYWRIGHT, NOVELIST, POET

**IN A CITY WITH A DEEP** history of creative expression, it's not easy for a contemporary writer to stand out, which gives an indication of the craftsmanship and expansive imagination that typify the writings of New Orleans native John Biguenet.

Arguably the foremost writer in contemporary Louisiana, the longtime professor and current chairman of the English department at Loyola University of the South has won acclaim in recent decades for his fiction, poetry, plays and critical works.

His storytelling skills, beautifully displayed in the short story collection *The Torturer's Apprentice*, won him the national O. Henry Award and established him as a writer who seeks his muse not just in New Orleans or the South but also across continents and generations.

Biguenet's playwriting, which took center stage with a series of works he wrote about New Orleans' struggles after Hurricane Katrina, culminated last year in a play that seemed to take audiences by surprise and left some reviewers in awe.

In the single-character play entitled *Broomstick*, a witch bares her soul about her first love affair and how she discovered and used her unusual powers. To cap off the odd and entertaining tale, the witch tells her story entirely in rhyming couplets constructed in iambic pentameter – a metrical form favored by Shakespeare and a host of 17th century poets.

*Broomstick* played not only at Southern Repertory Theatre in New Orleans, but in repertory theaters in New Jersey and Montana.

And it won an extended run in Los Angeles, where the *Los Angeles Times* dubbed it a critic's pick and one reviewer termed it "spellbindingly terrific."

Biguenet doesn't find it odd that play-goers connect with his witch. "But it has taken me by surprise that audiences of the 21st century are responding to a form that hasn't been used in more than 200 years," he says with a laugh, referring to the heroic couplet structure.

While *Broomstick* has won dramatic praise, Biguenet's stories have continued to find audiences via literary journals. His short story "Sand" was published in 2014 by Granta, "Confessions of a Werewolf" appeared in *Spolia*, and the quarterly magazine *Image* published his "Ex Cathedra."

A short film written by Biguenet won a bronze award at the 2014 International Independent Film Awards.

Meanwhile, following his first novel, *Oyster*, he's at work on his next book. "It's about New Orleans during the first year after the levees collapsed," he says.

He will no doubt refresh his memory of that period by re-reading his own series of essays, which were published by *The New York Times* in the weeks immediately following the disaster. In the series, Biguenet vented the city's collective outrage over government's slow response and seeming indifference to the tragedy.

LSU Press will publish his Katrina trilogy of plays – *Rising Water*, *Shotgun and Mold* – later this year, commemorating the 10th anniversary of the levee collapse.



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