

#### THE "MONSTER" DWELLS ATOP

a couch most nights, not some dark, dungy, Scooby Doo cave. Her teeth are menacing, her jaw strong and fierce, though those attributes are wasted considering all this creature wants to devour is an unwrapped Kraft single or a stick of string cheese. She's more pillow than predator, often offering Amber Prejean — the tamer of this not-so-savage beast — a soft place to rest her head for naps.

Izzy, the "monster", is one of what Prejean calls her "misunderstood pit bulls." To subdue her take her outside on a sunny day and she'll roll over on her back and soak up all the rays and Vitamin D she can.

"She's my companion animal," Prejean says of Izzy.
"I've had her for almost 10 years now, and she's been there when I've gone through ups and downs. And she's got a sense about her. She knew when I was upset, knew when I had a bad day. Not only did I rescue her, but she rescued me."

That bond is the foundation on which Prejean created Cajun Paws Rescue, an independent shelter service created in 2012 for unwanted pit bull type breeds. The notfor-profit extends the stay of pit bulls about to be put down at the pound by shepherding them into a temporary foster situation while diligently and proactively finding suitable long-term owners via social media or pop-up public appearances.

"When you boil it down, I wanted to save the lives of dogs that were the most discriminated against and most neglected and the most misunderstood," Prejean says. "They have a bad stereotype. People think that they're

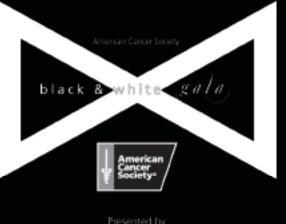
(these) big, mean, vicious, severely aggressive dogs — like they're these monsters. Really, they're just another dog like every other breed out there. There are no facts or proof that they're more aggressive than any other breed.

"They're big love bugs, basically," Prejean says. "Izzy isn't the only one. So many of these pit bull breeds are great family dogs, and so the fact that these dogs weren't being given a chance, to me that was nonsense. It had to be fixed. Too many were suffering, and it wasn't their fault, so I wanted to save the lives of as many as I could."

That Prejean remains this devoted to this particular cause isn't a shock considering her past. As a child, she cried many evenings because her father wouldn't let her dogs sleep inside the house — including Scooby, her first pit bull.

Funded entirely by private donations, Cajun Paws Rescue generally handles 10 to 12 dogs at a single time, though that number can swell to 25 when puppies are present. Though Cajun Paws does have a temporary shelter, the dogs are generally placed in a foster home when available.

This happens after the shelter contacts Prejean, informing her of pit bulls it is ready to move out. In order for Cajun Paws to "tag a pit bull for rescue," Prejean inquires with shelter officials about the dog's back story and behavior while housed there to determine whether she believes the pit bull is adoptable. Prejean, or someone else on the Cajun Paws team, then conducts a thorough in-person temperament test. The purpose is to determine whether the dog understands commands as well as to monitor the manner in



Presented by





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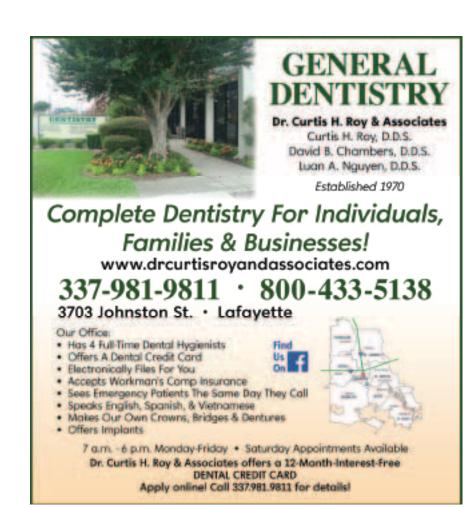
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### LES PERSONNES

which it interacts with both animals and humans and if its demeanor changes in certain environments such as feeding

Once in the Cajun Paws system, many of the dogs join Prejean and "show out" to prospective owners. All of those dogs are current on vaccinations, spayed or neutered, heartworm tested, dewormed, microchipped and receive specific medical treatments addressing any pre-existing ailments. Beyond answering frequently asked questions, Prejean tends to think of herself as a vocal advocate for all pit bulls, quick to clear up misconceptions that many out-of-the-know consider truths.

"They need boundaries and they need structure just like any other dog, and sure, without that they can get out of control just like any other dog," Prejean says. "We try to bring education out there to people about the breed. And the best way to do that is through events. We're in the public eye often. Because they're just like any other dog. They're not these crazy, horrible, want-to-eat-you dogs. They're just another dog. They're born as innocent as any other puppy."

Speaking of puppies, Prejean notes that those are usually the first to go and attract potential owners from as far away as East Texas. For the rest of the dogs, Cajun Paws actively seeks a permanent placement — partially because it's best for the canine but also because there is only so much room at the facility. Therefore, every Cajun Paws newbie is promoted tremendously on social media, links are shared on Facebook and every animal receives a profile on petfinder. com. Beyond traditional measures, the Cajun Paws crew isn't averse to getting creative putting some extra shine on a pooch's coat when necessary.

"We'll actually do photo shoots with a professional photographer," Prejean says. "It seems crazy, but professional photos definitely up the adoption rate. It softens the dogs, eliminates that stereotype when you see them in the right light and right setting. We're very proactive. Whatever it takes." ∢





















# an undaunted spirit

Little more than a year ago, breast cancer tried (and failed) to turn the world of Carencro resident LaTonya George upside-down

BY WILLIAM KALEC | PHOTO BY ROMERO & ROMERO



#### FOR A GENUINE GLIMPSE INTO

LaTonya George's soul — the one breast cancer tried to break — it's better to use your ears than your eyes. Everything there is to know about the strength of this 30-year-old single mother, dependable employee, nursing school graduate and survivor is neatly surmised in her 20-or-sosecond voicemail greeting.

Like most, it begins with the standard apology for not answering. Nothing unique. Then, however, George takes a slight detour, extending an invitation to leave a message ONLY if you intend to bring positivity into her already full life. Those looking to dump an audio dark cloud on George's phone? Don't even bother.

"I just tell them to hang up," she further explains. "I can't take your misery and make it my company."

George hopes this doesn't come off as flippant, because, trust her, she'd be the last person to downplay the severity of breast cancer, but when doctors diagnosed her roughly a year ago, she took the same approach to the disease as she does to downer dialers neither are welcomed. As the attention of the public once again turns to breast cancer this October, and everything from fashion accessories to football cleats are painted pink, George is fresh off her second reconstruction surgery and is quick to tell anyone who asks that she's cancer free.

In recognition of her attitude — equal doses optimistic and feisty during treatment — the Acadiana affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Foundation named George its 2016 Survivor Mother of The Year for the manner in which she handled cancer and her kids (Johneisha, Johntasian and Terrinashia) at the same time.

"I didn't shy away from what I had," George says. "My daughters knew the situation. But they also knew Momma was going to overcome this. And I wanted them to know that. And then from that, I wanted them to know that when someone says, 'You can't do this, you can't do that,' just know they're wrong. Think back to what your Momma could have done. She could have quit. But she didn't. She was strong."

That's not to say there weren't weak moments.

George's journey began without ceremony. She, along with her kids, lay in bed one June 2015 evening watching TV when George scratched an itch on her chest. She paused, and then touched again. Underneath her fingertip, George felt a mass. Seconds earlier, George's concerns centered on her "daily routine" — finishing nursing school at Delta College in Lafavette, figuring out how to occupy her kids now that school was out, and what to cook for dinner the next night.

In an instant, that all changed.

"I started crying," she says, "because I knew what it was." Medical professionals, though, weren't so sure initially.

On June 18, 2015, George underwent an ultrasound. During the screening, radiologists saw no indication of cancer, but because of George's family health history, medical officials fast-forwarded a follow-up exam for three months later instead of the standard six months. Between appointments, George noticed that the nodule seemed to be getting bigger, protruding out when she examined it in the mirror while raising her arm.

After another ultrasound and two biopsies, George was









### LES PERSONNES

diagnosed with stage 2 ductal carcinoma in situ (the presence of abnormal cells inside a milk duct in the breast) in September 2015. During the mastectomy, surgeons discovered another mass growing toward the breast bone behind the detected mass — a sign the cancer was set to spread.

That happened on a Wednesday. She was released from the hospital on Thursday. That Friday, George went to work.

The first coworker to spot George said, "You're really here?"

George replied, "Where else do you want me to be?"

Cancer couldn't make life stand still. George wouldn't allow it.

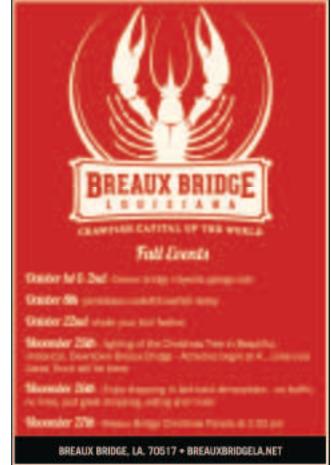
School continued, uninterrupted as well. On Oct. 22, 2015, George graduated from nursing school. A few weeks later, she underwent her initial chemotherapy session — a wicked one-two punch of Adriamycin (appropriately nicknamed "red devil") and Cytoxan that was administered biweekly for months. In time, her hair fell out.

"I threw up water — that's how bad it was," she says. "I'd leave out the house, grab an apple from the icebox, take a bite, and by the time I made it to my car it was coming up. Chemo is like you've been drinking booze for a whole week straight and you got alcohol poisoning. It's the worst feeling in the world. It doesn't back down. But neither did I and neither do a lot of other people like me."

George worked to avoid dropping massive amounts of weight despite the nauseating side effects of chemo, choosing to eat as many calories as possible during "off weeks," so she'd be healthy enough for reconstruction surgery down the line. Even in the midst of the harshest portions of treatment, George kept looking forward to a future she was certain to see. Friends have called her an inspiration. George shrugs it off.

"I overpowered it," she says of cancer.
"I had a choice: let it get me, or I'm going to get it. Even on chemo weeks, I'd still go to work and still be myself. I couldn't let it get to me, because at the end of the day, I still had three children. There was no one coming to say, 'Stay home. Don't work. I'll pay the bills.' No, I still had to fight and I still had to live. Cancer makes you battle. This was my battle."







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PRIOR TO PICKING PUNGENT

peppers, "Primo" produced popular pieces in packed places using a pick. Try saying that three times fast. Not easy, huh? Now, try saying that P-laden sentence while biting into a merciless pepper cross-bred to be 400 times hotter than a jalapeño, spice so intolerable its creator equates the sensation somewhere between "cocaine and a car wreck." No chance.

Yet, ask Lafayette musician and potent hot pepper grower Troy Primeaux (whose friends call him "Primo") and he'll tell you the line of volunteers willing to do the impossible would stretch like Gumby — to clarify, that's eat the hot pepper, not tackle the tongue twister.

"It's not unlike drugs, it's that escapism," says Primeaux, who sounds like a well-espressoed Spicoli. "I guess it's a safe drug. No one is gonna die off it from what I know of. You might think you're gonna die, but you're not gonna die. And when it's all said and done and you're done having a panic attack, it's worth the ride. It's an out of body experience. You start seeing lights and your nervous system is fully engaged.

"Just put the toilet paper in the fridge, man."

Already well-known among Indie music aficionados for playing a mean guitar in the Southern rock band Santeria, Primeaux eventually married a "good girl" and traded in groupies for a garden, growing peppers that he claims are bigger superstars than he ever was on stage. The latest legend ready to set the chili cultist circle on fire is the "Louisiana Creeper," a potentially recordsetting hot pepper Primeaux created by crossbreeding two already-hot peppers, and is gently nursing through its infant generational stage.

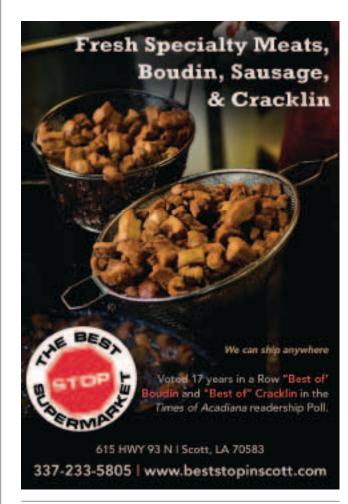
Once the plant is stabilized — meaning the pepper seeds used to grow more peppers are plucked from the sixth to eighth generation of the pepper — Primeaux thinks the "gnarly-looking" Creeper will exceed 2 million Scoville Heat Units — the measure used to quantify culinary spice.

This new creation follows Primeaux's 1.4 SHU 7-Pot Primo pepper (a cross between a Trinidad 7-Pot pepper and a Bhut Jolokia) which stirred up a tingling sensation a decade ago among the dedicated group of tongue masochists who live to eat these edible fireballs.

"The chili cultist are obsessive," says Primeaux, who sells these peppers, seeds and sauces while his better half, Kara, makes a popular line of pepper jellies. "I get emails all the time: What's your next pepper? I want it! I want it! I want it! They're the star of the show. I'm secondary. They wanna eat them, they wanna see videos of them, they want it all, man. These are rock star peppers. Their legend will live on longer than I will. I might not carry on, but my name on that pepper will carry on."

He means that literally – 7-Pot Primo is named after Primeaux, the choice of a friend and pepper expert who kept inquiring what Primeaux was going to call this thing. The details of this whole endeavor — like what he's going to name his peppers — are sort of done on the fly, considering Primeaux fell into this professional passion only after realizing that bouncing from stage to stage every night as a rocker probably wasn't conducive to a happy marriage.

With that established, though, Primeaux takes the science of breeding peppers and the quasi-art of growing them with all sorts of seriousness.



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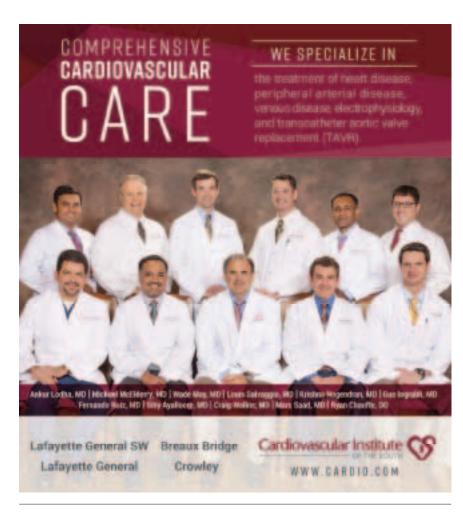
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#### LES PERSONNES

"I'm paranoid about my peppers," Primeaux says. "Are people gonna jump the fence? Who knows, man? So I bug-net the plants. It's a cutthroat business. I've heard of stories about guys stealing crossing crops, and I put too much effort into this for that to happen."

Much like a thoroughbred trainer will study the bloodlines of a horse's mother and father to determine whether it's better suited for sprints or long distances, dirt or turf tracks, Primeaux looks deep into the genealogical past of peppers when determining which to crossbreed. Then, Primeaux — part Dr. Frankenstein, part Cupid in this process — manually pollinates flowers on the parent pepper plant, thus creating the edible hybrid.

So, how does Primeaux know the peppers he crosses are gonna make you wanna dunk your mouth in a tub of Ben and Jerry's? Simple science, mostly, chased with a dash of logic.

"You know there's obviously more to it than this, but 'heat' and' heat' makes 'hot," he says. "But I've been fortunate. My buddy tells me, 'You either got really good luck or you're some sort of genius."

Whatever the secret behind Primeaux's scorching success, this much is certain: The Louisiana Creeper won't be his last manmade spicy spawn. For a while now, he's been in talks with ULL (his Monday-Friday employer) to create a bright red pepper named — what else? — the Ragin Cajun. And should the Creeper surpass the Carolina Reaper's 1.9 SHU — the current record holder for the world's hottest pepper. Primeaux knows better than anyone that sooner rather than later someone else will organically manufacture one that's more sweat-inducing.

"This is like the space program, but with peppers," Primeaux says. "Who knows how high and how far we can go? Some people say 8 million. Some say 5 million. Then there are scientists who say the pepper couldn't withstand that kind of capacitance and would just melt to mush. I don't know, man. But I'd like to find out.

"This is good for me," Primeaux says, later. "If I was growing bell peppers, I don't know if I could live with myself. It'd be like 'What happened to you?' But from rock 'n' roll to growing hot peppers, it's a little bit on the edge. So it's fitting." ◀



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