

LOUISIANIANS OF THE YEAR

MUSIC

PJ MORTON

Grammy-winning recording artist, keyboardist for Maroon 5 and New Orleans native PJ Morton released his new album, "Gospel According to PJ," in August. He said people often asked him if he would do a gospel album, in part because his father is Bishop Paul Morton. Recently, he worked on several songs for a separate project. The songs were not used, but Morton didn't want to see them go to waste, so he used them to start "Gospel According to PJ."

Much of the recording was done after the COVID-19 pandemic began, which necessitated Morton's collaborations with around 20 other artists to be done virtually. He said being in the room with other musicians is ideal, but added that the virtual recordings made scheduling easier. Pre-pandemic, the other artists would be touring and promoting their own work, so it would have been much harder to secure their participation.

In a very dark year around the world, Morton said gospel music can provide comfort to people.

"There's no genre that does love, hope and light like gospel music," Morton said.

The album also features interludes where Morton talks to his father. The idea came after Morton had already recorded the songs for the album. He said the conversations provide connective thematic material that smooths the transition between songs. They're also tribute to the impact Bishop Morton had on PJ's life.

"How did I arrive here?" Morton said. "There's no way to tell that story without my father and his influence on me." BY FRITZ ESKER



CULINARY

MELISSA MARTIN

Diners often don't consider how food reaches the plate. But Mosquito Supper Club Founder and Chef Melissa Martin wants people to think about that and to support restaurants who buy from local shrimpers and fishermen.

Located in New Orleans' Uptown neighborhood, the restaurant offers a prix fixe menu of Cajun cooking with farm-to-table ingredients. The latter is a point of pride and importance to Martin, who grew up in Chauvin.

"When you eat at Mosquito Supper Club, you will know we've gone out of our way to make sure you're getting the best quality ingredients," Martin said.

Even Martin's cookbook, "Mosquito Supper Club: Cajun Recipes from a Disappearing Bayou," isn't just a list of recipes. In it, Martin also spends time paying tribute to her "muses" as she calls them — the women in her family who shaped her as a chef — writing extensively about each ingredient.

"When you sit down to a bowl of gumbo, you need to understand all the elements," Martin said. "I want people to know where the ingredients came from and how they got here."

Running the business side of a restaurant often means training others to cook the food and trusting them with those responsibilities. But Martin still finds joy in cooking.

"Whenever I'm actually getting to cook," Martin said. "That is when I am the most peaceful." BY FRITZ ESKER



BUSINESS

KEVIN WILKINS

Sometimes an entrepreneur has a great idea for a business, but doesn't know how to implement it. They may not know how to best get their message out, how to manage employees or any other number of logistical concerns. That's where Kevin Wilkins and his growth consulting company Trepwise enters the picture.

Wilkins moved to New Orleans in 2010 with his wife, a Crescent City native. They wanted to be a part of the city's rebuilding economy post-Hurricane Katrina. The company he founded focuses on maximizing businesses' potential. Its name is a combination of the word "trep," short for entrepreneur, and his wife's maiden name "Wise." He said they focus on people, planning and process with their clients.

"You need the right people in the right chairs doing the right jobs in the right way," Wilkins said. "The best ideas poorly implemented get you nothing."

Trepwise also helps its clients create a sustainable work culture. If companies are getting a lot of stuff done and making money, they still may not be successful long term if employees are burning out or unhappy in their work.

Wilkins said Trepwise's mission isn't just good for individual entrepreneurs; it's good for the New Orleans community as a whole.

"I don't just want to do well as an organization; I want to do good work as an organization," Wilkins said. BY FRITZ ESKER





PHILANTHROPY

BOB THAMES

In mid-March, Bob Thames was seated at his desk at Great Raft Brewing in Shreveport, staring at a bottle of bourbon. Specifically, the bottle was his treasured Old Weller Bourbon 107 Antique, or “Weller Antique,” as it is known to collectors.

Thames’ role at the brewery is to maintain relationships with restaurant and bar owners, managers and waitstaff. Prior to the pandemic, most bar managers in Shreveport talked to Thames about upcoming beer releases, promotions and tastings. As Louisiana’s COVID-19 numbers climbed, those conversations turned to temporary closures, PPP loans and layoffs.

“I was looking at my bottle of Weller Antique, and I just said to myself: ‘I’m gonna use this to do a little bit of good,’” Thames said.

He figured he could raffle off the bourbon in a creative way and raise a few hundred dollars for out-of-work

bartenders. He stuffed the Bourbon into a mostly-empty box of Kleenex, snapped a photo and posted the picture to Facebook with a message: “I’d like to raffle off this box of tissue and its contents.”

“In my wildest dreams, I was thinking that I may raise \$500,” Thames said.

The post went live on the afternoon of Tuesday, March 14. By Wednesday evening Thames had received hundreds of mobile payments totaling more than \$2,000, and his Facebook inbox held dozens of messages from supporters looking to donate raffle prizes.

Thames spent April and May conducting raffles, contacting out-of-work bartenders and waitresses, and crisscrossing town handing out \$100 bills and PPE. Raffle benefactors ranged from the tattooed barkeep at a contemporary eatery to a single mom waitressing at Buffalo Wild Wings. He met them in parking lots, at the brewery or outside of their home. He frequently met someone for the first time while dropping off a \$100 bill. When the fundraiser ended in June, Thames had distributed more than \$27,000. **BY CHRIS JAY**



CULTURE

HERMAN FUSELIER

Herman Fuselier of Opelousas worked as a sports writer for the Tuscaloosa News and enjoyed traveling the country covering Alabama sports. But he missed his early years in radio. While pitching a Louisiana radio show to WUAL on the University of Alabama campus, Fuselier related how he attended zydeco great Clifton Chenier’s wake in Opelousas. The station manager’s eyes grew large at Fuselier’s story.

“I might have gotten the job because of that,” Fuselier said. “People are fascinated with Louisiana.”

Coupled with being homesick, the epiphany brought Fuselier home.

“Looking back at Tuscaloosa, it made me appreciate Louisiana a lot more. I saw what I was missing.”

Fuselier returned to Acadiana but kept broadcasting “Bayou Boogie” in Tuscaloosa and on KRVS in Lafayette. Fuselier has also worked as feature writer and editor at Lafayette’s Daily Advertiser newspaper and contributes to music publications such as OffBeat. He has interviewed practically every living zydeco and Cajun musician through his jobs and as guest host at Festivals Acadiens et Créole and the New Orleans Jazz Festival. Twice, Fuselier has covered the Grammys.

Though his work has taken him nationwide, Fuselier happily calls Opelousas home. He currently works as executive director of the St. Landry Parish Tourist Commission, in which he promotes the parish known for the birthing of zydeco and swamp pop. He hopes to bring his musical expertise to develop a music heritage trail throughout St. Landry and surrounding parishes.

Check out Fuselier and “Zydeco Stomp” from noon to 3 p.m. Saturdays on KRVS in Lafayette or online at krvs.org/programs/zydeco-stomp-krvs.

BY CHERÉ COEN

EDUCATION

NATHALIE ROY

How do you teach kids about the ancient world in an immersive, hands-on way? Nathalie Roy, a teacher at Glasgow Middle School, does just that with her Roman Technology class.

Some of Roy’s projects for this class have included building sundials, catapults and mini kilns. Like any STEM class, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the way Roy handles the material. Every day, she teaches a set of children who are physically in the classroom with her and another group that’s learning virtually. She now cannot assign anything that doesn’t fit into a kit the kids can take home. It’s a challenge, but not an insurmountable one.

“I had to think of it as an engineer would,” Roy said. “I had to ask myself ‘What are my constraints?’”

Roy, who is in her 27th year of teaching, came to her Roman Technology class by way of being a Latin teacher. When schools emphasized integrating STEM into different disciplines, she asked herself “How can I bring STEM into a Latin class?”

The end result has been a big hit with students. She now teaches three sections of Roman Technology, and she loves it.

“I’m a student at heart,” Roy said. “This has allowed me to continue my study of the classical world and share it with my students.”

Teaching can be a difficult, mentally and emotionally demanding profession even in a year without 2020’s gauntlet of setbacks and challenges. Roy said she has carried on because of her love of her students and of learning itself. She said if teachers let their students see how much they care, the job becomes easier.

“When a child knows that you care about them, they’re more willing to do something they might otherwise not do,” Roy said. “We need people who care.” **BY FRITZ ESKER**



CONSERVATION

JOHN M. BARRY

It may not seem natural that a Rhode Island native would develop such close ties to Louisiana and its vanishing coastline, but that is what happened for John M. Barry, author of the award-winning “Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America” and recent recipient of the 21st annual Louisiana Writer Award.

Barry first visited New Orleans for Mardi Gras as a young man and thought he’d like the city more outside of carnival. He returned at another time, and fell in love with it. While Barry has now spent decades living near the Mississippi River, he said the river is a topic that should interest all Americans.

“It’s such a mythic force in American culture and our history that if you have the slightest interest in either, you have to be interested in the Mississippi River,” Barry said.

Barry is passionate about coastal restoration and environmental causes. He served on both the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East and the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. He said the state faces three major challenges: the technical problem, the money problem and the rising sea level problem. He said scientists can solve the technical problem and have made great strides in that regard. But he said Louisiana will need \$85 billion more to implement the Coastal Master Plan entirely.

Barry, who has written about a book on the Spanish Flu pandemic and several articles in both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on COVID-19, said the current pandemic will leave governments even more cash-strapped.

However, Barry, a former football coach, believes that just because the challenge is daunting doesn’t mean it’s impossible.

“As a football coach, I don’t believe I ever went into a game if I didn’t think I was going to win it,” Barry said.” BY FRITZ ESKER



ART

MORRIS TAFT THOMAS

Morris Taft Thomas of Alexandria is a nationally celebrated painter and sculptor, poet and writer. He’s a retired school-teacher, principal and university professor. But equally important, he’s a daydreamer who finds peace alone among the trees while reflecting upon an unfinished painting or verses for a new poem.

Born in 1935 in New Orleans, Thomas has been on a long journey since his early days in New Orleans and later in Baton Rouge where he attended Southern University Lab School. There he met the famed sculptor and Southern University art professor Frank Hayden, who greatly influenced him. Thomas holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in art and education from Southern and a master’s in art history from Northwestern State University in Natchitoches.

Young Thomas dreamed of being a professional artist but doubted he could

make a living at it. In 1960 he moved to Alexandria where during the next 37 years he taught school, served as a principal in the Rapides Parish school system and taught art history at LSU Alexandria. Retiring in 1997, he turned full-time to his first love — art.

Though Thomas explored various subjects, his most recent paintings are portraits of local homeless people, living under overpasses and in makeshift camps.

Thomas says, “Maybe people will look at them in a different way and have compassion.”

Thomas’ dream has come true. His artwork is featured in public spaces and institutions nationwide and in private collections, including among others B.B. King and the late Nelson Mandela. In 2001 he created a Christmas tree ornament for the White House, which he and his wife Willola visited at the invitation of President George W. Bush. In 2008 Thomas received the Louisiana Governor’s Arts Award, and in 2020 the Alexandria Museum of Art presented him the People’s Choice Award. “I had a lot of people help me get where I am,” says Thomas. “I’ve been blessed.” BY JOHN R. KEMP



HEALTHCARE

JENN GARNAND

In the fight against COVID-19, nurses around the world have been on the front lines, selflessly risking their own health and care for others. This year, the Louisiana State Nurses Association chose to honor Jenn Garnand as its 2020 Louisiana Registered Nurse of the Year.

Garnand decided to become a nurse shortly after Hurricane Katrina, when she suffered the miscarriage of her first child.

“I remember feeling so vulnerable and defeated, but at the same time looking up to these strong individuals who worked hard, advocated for me as their patient and quietly inspired me to change my life without even knowing the impact they were having at the time,” Garnand said.

She graduated from the Charity School of Nursing in May of 2011. She has spent her entire career connected to emergency medicine in some capacity: staff nurse, charge nurse, preceptor, clinical educator, mentor, flight nurse, chief flight nurse and operations coordinator. She is about to start a new journey as the director of oncology at University Medical Center in New Orleans.

Throughout her career in all of her different capacities, Garland has been driven by empathy for her patients.

“You can always choose kindness,” Garnand said. “The fast-paced environment (in a hospital) can often lend to the mindless completion of tasks, but patients are human beings with real feelings and needs. The easiest thing we can do as a fellow human is greet them with a smile and a caring concern that eases their fears and insecurities in a vulnerable condition.”

Garnand said 2020 has been a challenging year for nurses, but an enlightening one.

“Witnessing the sheer resiliency of my colleagues has made me a better person and a better nurse,” Garnand said. “I will never forget the way nurses came together for each other and the world.” BY FRITZ ESKER

