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Louisianians are a diverse bunch, but we have a few common traits. For example, many Louisianians, no matter how close we are to our family, have an independent streak. Strength and persistence also come to mind when you consider people who are descended from some of the country's earliest settlers, who fought through the most horrendous conditions, lived through the reigns of multiple countries' monarchs or who immigrated here looking for a better way of life. Each year, we comb the state in search of

LOUISIANIANS

OF THE

YEAR

Louisianians who exemplify these traits. We look for people who stand out in their professions, give back and represent what's best about the Pelican State. From teachers and artists to healthcare professionals and philanthropists, these are the individuals who enhance our daily lives in more ways than one. We are thrilled to present to you our 2022 Louisianians of the Year.



Born in Monroe in 1978, Shell, who has taught art at the University of Louisiana Monroe, Louisiana Tech University and Grambling State University, holds a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Memphis College of Art where he and other artists formed a collective that launched his career and those of other African-American artists.

“My paintings,” says Shell, “are geared toward the Black experience, giving agency to people from this community through powerful image deconstruction, sampling and remixing identity, civil rights and contemporary Black culture. My artistic goal is to exude the hip-hop lifestyle with a Southern vernacular.”

That “Southern vernacular,” he says, takes on images that are “apt to pair depictions of grizzled hustlers, veterans of the street, with images of angelic school girls.” That imagery and what he describes as an “undeniable sense of coolness” are key elements in all of his work. So is the influence of hip-hop music. To Shell, hip-hop musicians are the “philosophers of a certain community” who are speaking out and documenting today’s social and political issues.

“In my art,” Shell says, “I’m trying to understand myself through community, through history, through family, through other people’s stories and through broader conversations within my black culture.”

New Orleans writer and photographer (and former *Louisiana Life* Louisianian of the Year) L. Kasimu Harris has likened Shell’s paintings to the poems of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes and to the writings of the early 20th-century Pan-African civil rights activist W.E.B Du Bois.

Over the last two decades, Shell’s self-reflective journey through his art has brought him national success and exposure. His paintings have appeared in exhibitions across the nation, including high-visibility shows at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art’s 2017 Louisiana Contemporary and the Joan Mitchell Foundation’s 2008 show in New York City.

The honors continue. In 2007 the Joan Mitchell Foundation awarded him a grant to attend the University of Mississippi where he received a master of fine arts degree. He spent the following summer at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. In addition, Shell held prestigious artist residencies at the Joan Mitchell Foundation in New Orleans in 2016, another in 2018 at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, and most recently at the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation for the Arts in New Berlin, New York.

In describing his career, Shell says it has been “awesome” and “a beautiful experience and journey.” He hopes that one day his work will be considered important in the “canon of Black art” that “opened doors for other kids who grew up like me.” — *By John R. Kemp*

ARTIST

VITUS SHELL

Monroe artist Vitus Shell is a remarkable artist who explores the African-American experience through strong, compelling and often unsettling images of Black contemporary life in America. It is art driven by irony, activism and his notion of Black “coolness.”

EDUCATION

ANNELISE CASSAR TEDESCO

The word Chalmette native Annelise Cassar Tedesco, the 2022 Louisiana Teacher of the Year, most frequently mentioned in her interview was “community.” She strongly believes in the importance of forming a community at Chalmette High School with both her students and her fellow faculty members while serving the community as a whole.

“I’m so excited to return and invest in the community that invested so much in me,” Tedesco said.

The 37-year-old Tedesco, music director for CHS Voices and a vocal music teacher, has been teaching for 14 years. She is the daughter of two educators. While Tedesco initially went into marketing after graduating from Loyola University of New Orleans, she quickly felt a calling to try education. So she started teaching at her alma mater of CHS.

Tedesco said her goal as a teacher is to provide an academically rigorous classroom experience for her students while also providing opportunities for experiences where students can put their learned skills to use. Students participate in both solo and group vocal competitions, sometimes traveling to places like New York and Florida. They perform in musical theater productions

like “Beauty and the Beast,” “Guys and Dolls,” and “Into the Woods.” They also sing in the community at events like Relay 4 Life.

For classroom procedures, Tedesco said she uses a combination of setting high standards for her students and working with them individually. Part of working with them as individuals is remembering that many things are going on in the students’ lives outside of the classroom, both at home and on social media. She also said leading by example is important, not just in teaching students the material but teaching the students how to act.

“Shakespeare once wrote that all the world’s a stage. We’re teaching kids how to perform on the stage of life,” Tedesco said. “We’re not only teaching content.”

For new teachers, Tedesco recommended collaborating with coworkers to avoid burnout or feeling overwhelmed. She said she has greatly benefited from the time, insight, and assistance of her colleagues at CHS.

“Remember that you’re not alone,” Tedesco said.

While she is proud to receive the 2022 Louisiana Teacher of the Year award, she said she is far from the only Louisiana educator doing exemplary work day in and day out at schools across the state.

“I am one of many who should be celebrated,” Tedesco said. – *By Fritz Esker*





JAMES CLESI

CULINARY

Even though he worked in catering and restaurants throughout his youth and early adulthood, Clesi, now 41, didn't always have the goal of running his own business. But after working for Heads and Tails Catering (a job he still refers to as a favorite) and after successfully catered a few events for his adult kickball league (Kickball of Crescent City) on a volunteer basis, he thought he might enjoy running his own company.

"It gave me the confidence to go for it," Clesi said.

In 2013, Clesi started doing pop-ups in front of local bars. On Jan. 1, 2015, he opened a brick and mortar in the Mid-City neighborhood on Banks Street. It has since moved to a larger location on nearby Bienville. He is proud to be a part of Mid-City, the neighborhood his father grew up in.

In the past two years, Clesi has also done extensive work during the onslaught of hurricanes that struck Louisiana. His own company caters WDSU-TV when the station starts 24-hours-a-day broadcasting. But he has also worked for his former employers at Heads and Tails helping out after the many hurricanes of the past two years.

Last year, Clesi worked 53 days in a row in Lake Charles and New Orleans after Laura, Delta and Zeta struck. This year, he worked 29 days in a row in Houma after Ida. All of those workdays were 20-hours long. He would get a 2-hour nap after serving breakfast and another 2-hour nap after serving dinner. Clesi said this is exhausting, but his body acclimates to the schedule after a couple of days.

In these gigs, Heads and Tails is providing food for utilities workers who are toiling nonstop to restore power to devastated areas. Whatever food isn't used in a day is donated to churches and charities to help feed local residents.

Clesi said he is only able to do this work thanks to the help of his siblings, who handle operations at Clesi's Restaurant and Catering while he's gone.

"I wouldn't be able to do any of this without my brother and sister," Clesi said.

— By Fritz Esker

James Clesi's restaurant career began as a teenager at the Copeland's on Veterans Boulevard in New Orleans. He bused tables, then moved to dishwashing. Clesi fell in love with the atmosphere in the kitchen — the smells, the sounds, the camaraderie. Now, he owns Clesi's Restaurant and Catering in Mid-City.

Retired biology professor Malcolm F. Vidrine enjoyed a career ripe with accomplishments: author or coauthor of 20 books and numerous scientific articles, the discovery of leprosy in wild armadillos, and important work with mussels at the Watson Brake archaeological site in northeast Louisiana. Vidrine's role in the latter was to identify mussels in the Watson Brake middens, food commonly eaten by Native Americans.

"At Frenchman's Bend and Watson Brake, the mussels must have been eaten raw," Vidrine explained. "The shells were intact and easy to identify — many of them appear very similar to shells found on the banks of streams today. I was able to generate good inventories of species and their compositions in the middens, which allowed me to make some general observations about the streams from which the mussels were collected. These findings combined with information from other members of the team made their way into two major publications, one in 'Science' and the other in 'American Antiquity'."

Vidrine's findings helped date Watson Brake to 3,500–2,800 BCE, one of the oldest in the country.

Vidrine insists much of his research and accomplishments have been part of a team, including creating the Cajun Prairie Restoration Project in Eunice with Charles Allen. The two had been searching for surviving prairie remnants in Southwest Louisiana in the late 1980s and found a prime spot on a railroad right-of-way.

"I was impressed by the variety of flowering plants in the July sun on that fortunate afternoon," Vidrine remembered. "I told Charles that I had seen many stretches of such plants in Jefferson Davis Parish when I worked as the research director and mosquito biologist there. The next week we were driving around and searching for prairie remnants along railroads throughout the region. We found many of them, but only a few were of any significant size. The next five summers were spent inventorying the plants, butterflies and dragonflies of the prairie remnants. These searches culminated in papers, books and restoration projects."

The two convinced Eunice Mayor Curtis Joubert to lease a piece of railroad property as a city park and the Cajun Prairie Restoration Project was born. Today, visitors may walk through native plants within its 10 acres, currently owned by the Cajun Prairie Habitat Preservation Society.

Vidrine continues the restoration work on three acres outside his Eunice home, a stretch of prairie called the Cajun Prairie Gardens. He and his wife, Gail, have

published articles and books on their restoration efforts, plus they host groups to introduce others to a Louisiana environment they helped preserve and hope to propagate.— *By Chéré Coen*

CONSERVATION

MALCOLM VIDRINE





AUTHORITY

Helping People, Changing Lives

Serving the parishes of Assumption, Lafourche,
St. Charles, St. John the Baptist,
St. Martin, and Terrebonne



HEALTHCARE

ANNIE BARAHONA

Growing up in Houma, Annie Barahona dreamed of working in the medical field. When it came time to decide on a career path, Barahona chose nursing. Sixteen years after starting her nursing journey, the Louisiana State Nurses Association named Barahona the Advanced Practice Registered Nurse of the Year.

Barahona, 39, is a nurse practitioner with the South Central Louisiana Human Services Authority. While she has been a nurse for 16 years, she has been a nurse practitioner for eight. A nurse practitioner can prescribe medicine, perform physicals and provide a number of other basic healthcare services. Barahona provides primary care services in an integrated facility. What does that mean? She sees mental health patients, many of whom have never received primary care of any kind. She's able to diagnose and help treat common problems like diabetes that these patients never knew they had.

Barahona also spearheaded a medical assisted treatment program. This program helps her clients free themselves from opiate and alcohol addiction in an outpatient setting. The results are often rewarding.

"When they get clean, it's the most amazing thing," Barahona said. "It's nice to see the hope they have in their eyes."

It has been a challenging couple of years for nurses in general, but particularly for Barahona. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person contact was discouraged, she had to learn how to do televisits with her patients. This proved to be an even more useful skill in 2021 when Hurricane Ida devastated South Central Louisiana. Barahona's home clinic is in Houma, but she works in multiple parishes in South Central Louisiana. Many of her clients have been displaced, but through telemedicine she is able to help them even if they have not yet been able to come home.

Nursing can be a burnout profession even in normal times. But given the events of the past two years, even more nurses have felt the mental strain. Barahona said it's her

connection to her patients that keeps her from burning out.

"I still love nursing. I still love talking to clients, getting to know them and their families," Barahona said. "People notice when you truly care. You have to want to be there for your patients, to be an advocate for them."

When she's not practicing medicine, Barahona spends time with her husband and 5-year-old daughter. They love traveling, especially road trips to Florida's beaches. —
By Fritz Esker