



PHOTO BY JANICE SCRIBNER

The middle of here

A CONVENIENT REST STOP ALONG HIGHWAY 90, MORGAN CITY-ACADIANA PROFILE'S CITY OF THE YEAR-HAS PROVEN TIME & TIME AGAIN IT'S MUCH MORE THAN A PLACE TO STRETCH YOUR LEGS.

by Will Kalec

Though accurate, it's somewhat peculiar that Morgan City's own website prominently displays how far (or close) it is to other towns in Louisiana, trumpeting that the feisty Acadiana hamlet is, "Right in the Middle of Everywhere."

Check the map. Technically it's true. Seventy miles to New Orleans, a scenic, pretty and at moments Instagram-worthy drive. Sixty miles west to Lafayette, and about the same distance to Baton Rouge, as well. Morgan City's geographic convenience is undeniable, but before you rush off to leave, take a second to talk to the locals. They'll be quick to share that most everything we're seeking can be found without filling up the gas tank.

Need a community with affordable housing and a sound educational system? Look no further than Morgan City's mix of old neighborhoods and newer subdivisions that sprung up during the last decade thanks to a flourishing energy and shipping sector.

Looking for a decent-paying career? Until recently, Morgan City's unemployment rate was a positive outlier compared to the rest of the country, immune to the perils of elsewhere thanks to the aforementioned happy days in the oilfield. Even today, with the price of oil only now finally getting off the mat after a wicked freefall, Morgan City and St. Mary Parish are labor importers. At the beginning of 2015, Morgan City's nonfarm jobs increased by 120 to around 23,600.

And lastly, say you want to treat your man or spoil the little lady with a night on the town. Well, how about this town? Yes, Morgan City. Ambitious and loyal entrepreneurs have breathed new life into downtown, as bars, restaurants and regular live music events provide even more options for residents besides the standard festivals, outdoor activities and historic landmarks.

"You know how they say they wish it was like the old days? Well, it's like that here," says Morgan City restaurateur Brian Blanchard. "You know your neighbor and you pull together when

you need to. Everyone looks out for everyone else. They know you, but they care about you, too."

That All-For-One philosophy – along with everything else mentioned above – is the reason why Morgan City is Acadiana Profile's City of The Year, joining Houma, Lake Charles and Lafayette as recent winners. Like many areas of Acadiana, Morgan City's economic health is partially tied to the fortunes of the oil and gas industry, and therefore has felt the effects of the drop in price per barrel. Civic leaders painted a realistic picture of the area's current state, but even in doing so, found the romance in a community that's been tested many times before.

"This is a town built on perseverance," says Frank Fink, Director of Economic Development in St. Mary Parish. "Hard work is respected, and for those who do work hard, they get a quality of life that you don't find everywhere, with the many leisure activities all around us... We've experienced the good times and we've experience soft times in the oilfield and we've handled both situations."



PHOTO BY ALYSHA JORDAN



PHOTO BY WILL NOBLE



PHOTO BY JANICE SCRIBNER

With a population of about 12,000, Morgan City is a place that's gaining momentum as more and more people realize how nice it is to live there. With historic architecture, nature hikes, waterfront views and a thriving arts scene, the city has a small-town feel with some cosmopolitan elements.



PHOTO BY WILL NOBLE



PHOTO BY ALYSHA JORDAN



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PHOTO BY GLENN MILLS

Morgan City's Shrimp and Petroleum Fest (pictured above), is the oldest state-chartered harvest event in the state! Taking place over Labor Day weekend, it draws in tens of thousands of visitors to celebrate these two industries with food, parades and live music.

MORGAN CITY IS BUILT FOR BUSINESS

The town of 12,000 is ideally located, sandwiched near the Atchafalaya River and the International Waterway. Morgan City is the home of the Port of Morgan City, offers easy 4-lane road transit to the east and west, and features a Class I rail system. According to the Louisiana Workforce Commission, one in nine St. Mary Parish jobs was in the natural resource and mining operations field (translation: energy/oil and gas), which explains why the unemployment rate inflated by 1.6 percent during the year. "From 2008 to really 2013 and 2014 – until the recent collapse of oil – we've seen a growth in our labor force here, which is a good thing," Fink says. "And it's still above what it was in 2008. But there is a softness in the market now, and some people are losing jobs. But the shipyards are still doing well and there's a lot of economic progress going on."

The Morgan City Young Memorial campus of the South Central Louisiana Technical College trains students to immediately enter the workforce upon graduation, supplying local industry with the skilled employees needed to fill positions when the price of oil escalates. The roughly 5,000 Young Memorial students can earn certificates, diplomas or associate degrees in Air Conditioning and Refrigeration, Business Office Administration, Industrial Marine Electronics Technology, Information Technology, Marine Operations, Practical Nursing, and Welding. SCLTC also proudly offers a Commercial Diving concentration that is annually ranked as one of the Top 5 diving programs in the United States. "These students are taking courses that are needed by the industries that fill this community," Fink says. "These are students looking to learn a skill that will land them a good job and allow them to be a positive part of Morgan City and the parish."

Because of swelling enrollment, the SCLTC Young Memorial campus, school officials have OK'd several expansion projects – one of several examples of growth in the Morgan City area. Late last year, construction finished on a \$120 million, 64-megawatt natural gas power plant on Youngs Road. The facility serves Morgan City, Houma, Jonesville, Plaquemine, Rayne and Vidalia. The Port of Morgan City also just completed an Operations Emergency Center, housing Coast Guard officials, Port administration and the St. Mary Levee District. Retail/lodging giants like Wal-Mart Super Center and Holiday Inn Express have also taken up residence in Morgan City within the last couple of years.

"The construction business has been a shining light over the recent year," Fink says. "With everything going on in the oilfield, things are still being built, so it mitigates some of the pain and provides jobs. Projects are still moving forward. And that's necessary, because we know oil and gas is cyclical and when times are good in the oilfield, you have to have the infrastructure and everyday necessities – places to live, places to eat, ways to get around, things to do."

GATHERING MOMENTUM

Brian Blanchard would be lying if he said he wasn't scared. Blank canvases/unchartered waters/undefined paths do that to entrepreneurs. They also inspire them.

Where others saw plight and dilapidated buildings along Front Street in 2001 – a place so rough Blanchard wasn't even allowed to venture down it as a teenager – Blanchard saw opportunity. The restaurateur who grew up in Morgan City just cut his business teeth in Lafayette by opening up Imonelli in Lafayette in the late 1980s, envisioned an upscale eatery perfect for dates, a nice place to start a memorable evening out, the kind of place you used to have to drive out of town to find.

What Blanchard envisioned was Café JoJo's – a Cajun Grill and Bar that served as the first breath blown into the resuscitation of downtown Morgan City.

"The community support from Day 1 was truly amazing and a real reflection of how special and how passionate the people of Morgan City are and continue to be," Blanchard says. "Their enthusiasm makes it easy to want to find other ventures to do here – plate lunch restaurants, a dinner theater – there's just so much potential all around us. Gets me excited just talking about it."

On weekends now downtown, Blanchard describes a scene of soccer moms jogging along the seawall, young couples walking their dogs, and people congregating to listen to live music at Morgan City's weekly Rhythms on the River series on the banks of the Atchafalaya.



PHOTO BY WILL NOBLE



PHOTO BY FANG GUO

Morgan City is exceptionally enticing to fishermen. Carrie Stansbury of the Louisiana Tourism Coastal Coalition notes that it's conveniently close to the the Atchafalaya Basin. Fishermen can cast reels in both fresh and salt water thanks to the numerous charter services in the area.



PHOTO BY WILL NOBLE

“Really and truly my goal is to make downtown an area that on any night of the week you see people. Go on a Monday night and it looks like a Friday night with the folks walking on. That’s the dream. And really, as far as industry like oil and gas and the entertainment and service business, one hand washes the other. To lure those large employers, to lure the young professionals and have the educated types, you need a thriving nightlife – things to do downtown.

“And when I saw downtown before Café JoJo’s, I thought, ‘That’s what Morgan City is missing.’ Now look at us: Morgan City is picking up steam.”

For all that is new and hip, the highlight of the Morgan City social calendar remains the annual Shrimp and Petroleum Festival, the oldest state-chartered harvest event in Louisiana. Every Labor Day weekend, visitors in the tens of thousands descend crowd Highway 90 to partake in the raucous music, exciting parades on both land and sea, the blessing of the fleet and enough good food to fill you up forever.

this is a town built on perseverance

“It’s a weird combination for a festival to everyone except Louisianans,” says Carrie Stansbury of the Louisiana Tourism Coastal Coalition. “We know the fishing opportunities that exist by oil platforms. But it’s just a fun time. It’s a chance for us to celebrate the people that work in those two industries and a chance for us as a town to show the rest of the state the class, the welcoming nature and that there’s always something memorable to do down here.

“And that’s not an accident,” Stansbury continues. “We want people to come. There’s so much to offer here. We’ve always been the southern-most gateway to the Atchafalaya Basin, so that beauty is all around us and it’s something we want to share.”

Morgan City is a popular destination for outdoorsmen, particularly fishermen who can cast reels in both fresh water and salt water in the same day thanks to the numerous charter services around the area.

“No matter how long I’m gone, no matter what’s happening with me, every time I show up at home, it’s like I never left, you know?” Blanchard says. “The people are so kind and warm. Morgan City did a lot for me. You get your personality from this place, your work ethic, your drive, your ability to take tough times and handle them and rally back. The community is responsible for all of this, and all I can really say is, ‘Thank you.’”

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if you build it, they will rum

What began as a wild idea concocted while hunting is now a dream come true for Bayou Rum Distillery president and co-founder Trey Litel and his business partners.

BY WILL KALEC | PHOTO BY ROMERO & ROMERO

Bayou Rum has been recognized not only for its taste, but also bottle presentation and marketing



TREY LITEL ONCE WAS blind, but now he sees.

More to the point, he was once in a duck blind – waiting for the birds to swoop down and flirt with the decoys – quietly yammering away about this unquenchable desire to escape cubicle life and do something cool to pay the bills. Maybe, like, make rum. Litel's brother, Tim, also fending off the morning winter chill and patiently waiting for some action, nodded in agreement. Yeah, that would be cool.

And now, Litel sees those words manifest into a brick-and-mortar, 80-proof dream come true everyday as the president of Bayou Rum Distillery – the happiest place on earth ... or at least the happiest place in Jeff Davis Parish. The largest privately owned distillery in the country shines like a boozy beacon just off I-10, serving as a must-stop destination for tourists in a state full of them, and as an escape from the fog of corporate minutia for Litel and Co.

"It's fantastic," Litel says. "I jump out of bed every day; I don't get out of bed. It's a passion, and it's exciting. And really, this all started because my brother and I were trying to figure out how Louisiana produces all this world-class sugar cane but doesn't produce any rum. How come there isn't any rum here?"

"We answered that by talking to our friend, Skip Cortese, and I put together a PowerPoint presentation, and the rest is history."

History in the making, actually.

In five short years, Bayou Rum has grown exponentially from

shovels-in-the-ground to a budding powerhouse in the crowded and competitive world of alcohol production. Using their combined and complementary business acumen, the brass at Bayou Rum have fostered a product that's become widely distributed and also critically acclaimed. Draped in 72 total awards (and counting), the four variations of Bayou Rum (Select, Satsuma, Silver and Spiced) have been handed shiny hardware from prestigious organizations such as the American Distilling Institute, the Miami Rum Renaissance Festival, the American Craft Distillers Association and the Sip Awards.

Bayou Rum has been recognized not only for its taste, but also bottle presentation and marketing – a strong suit of Litel who worked for Bacardi for years in between stints with a couple computer and technology companies.

"We've used every bit of every experience we've ever had in our life and poured it into this business to build it," Litel says. "It's all been used to try and learn and try to grow. It humbles you. I worked for multi-billion-dollar companies and then you come to owning your own small business and it's all about cash flow. 'Gosh, if we spend a dollar on that, we can't spend a dollar on this.' It was tenuous at the beginning, but we learned teamwork, the technicalities of distilling, and if we were going to make a world-class rum, we were going to need help."

So they hired Jeff Murphy, an up-and-coming distiller from Privateer Rum in Massachusetts. Prior stops for Murphy included

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PROFILE MAGAZINE

LES PERSONNES

working for a beer brewer in Singapore and a vodka distiller in Texas. Using raw sugar and molasses grown locally and processed in New Iberia, Murphy credits the indigenous staple as the source of Bayou Rum's particular taste. Murphy's recipe is implemented on a 22-acre plot of land and a facility that serves as the gold standard for all other distilleries to follow and surpass in the future. According to Litel, the distillery itself is as big a part of the Bayou Rum brand as the liquor itself.

"There were three ways we could have gone with this idea," Litel says. "First, you can create a bottle and buy the juice from someone else and put it on the market. No. 2, you can buy an existing building. Or three, you can build from the ground out. It's the hardest task, so of course Tim, Skip and I said, 'Let's take that path.' But we took in a way that would make Louisiana proud. So our place is modeled off the way they do it in Kentucky, but it's Louisiana's. And we wanted it to be a Louisiana destination."

Blessed with a silver tongue, Litel affectionately calls the beverage business the "entertainment industry," and therefore wanted to create a hub that brought the sizzle to complement Bayou Rum's substance. Well, it seems he's accomplished just that. In February 2016, Bayou Rum Distillery was honored with the Louey Award - given to the tourism attraction of the year - from the Louisiana Travel Promotion Association.

The distiller tour begins in a room with 24-foot ceiling covered in reclaimed timber. "It's impressive," Litel says. "People walk in with their mouths open even though they aren't saying a word." From there, tour guide Josh Thibodeaux takes visitors through the viewing room. One wall contains old pictures that showcase the history of rum production in Louisiana while another wall diagrams the sugarcane growing and harvesting process. Through windows, visitors view the copper distilling equipment as a five-minute video plays containing interviews with sugar growers and scenes inside the sugar mill showing the cane being crushed and crystalized. Guests are also taken through the bottling room, the test lab, the ever-popular tasting room and conclude the trip at the gift shop.

"We hope that they pick up a little memento of their time here, that it's an experience they want to remember," Litel says. "Because for us, it's been an incredible journey. We're off to a good start, but we have a long way to go. Because we have a big goal. We want to be America's rum. We want to be the Tito's Vodka of the rum business. Of course, we're proud, but we're gonna keep on truckin' because there's a lot to still do." ◀

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IN order to grasp the seriousness of diabetes in Acadiana, unfortunately, all one has to do is look at the numbers.

Throughout the United States, nearly 10 percent of the American population has diabetes. In Louisiana, though, that number rises to 13.9 percent or 521,294 citizens according to the American Diabetes Association, making the disease the fifth leading cause of death according to the state Department of Health. In addition to that group, it's estimated that approximately 100,000 more Louisiana residents have undiagnosed diabetes, costing the state \$4.1 billion four years ago in direct medical expenses.

If recent diabetes trends continue to escalate at their current rate, by 2030



HEALTHY OUTLOOK

Diabetes leads as most pressing health concern facing residents of Acadiana

BY WILLIAM KALEC

BY THE NUMBERS

DIABETES



About 1 in 10 people have diabetes



About 1 in 4 people don't know they have diabetes



About 1 in 3 people will develop diabetes in their lifetime

PREDIABETES



About 1 in 3 adults have prediabetes

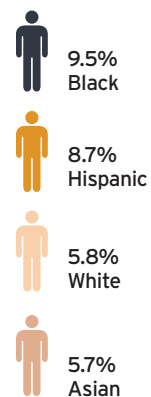


About 9 out of 10 don't know they have prediabetes

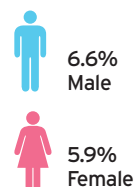
DEMOGRAPHICS

The rates of diagnosed diabetes by:

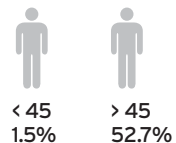
RACE



GENDER

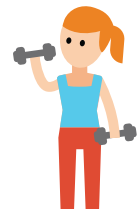


AGE



SOURCE: CDC.GOV/DIABETES/STATISTICS

PREVENTION



Exercise



Eat a healthy diet



Maintain a healthy weight



Don't smoke

more than 600,000 Louisianans will have the condition. "I've been doing this for 40 years, and diabetes has been, and remains a huge issue in Acadiana, in particular with the Cajun population," says Dr. Weston Miller, Chief Officer of Abbeville General Hospital. "Many diabetic-condition patients and many laypeople think that the diabetic condition is all about high blood sugar. But in actuality, the diabetic condition is about blocked arteries. If you look at what happens under the microscope to the tissue that is

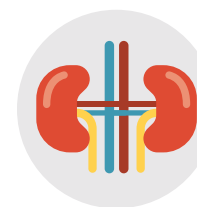
ill-affected by diabetes, it's all about microcirculation clogging – it's about the diabetic condition leading to hardening of the microscopic arteries." "I don't think the public is misinformed about what causes diabetes," Dr. Miller says. "The public understands that obesity can lead and often does lead to diabetes in a high percentage of cases. However, obesity is not the only factor. So the cause of diabetes is still an area of discovery and research." The consequences and medical

RISKS

People who have diabetes are at a higher risk of serious health complications:



BLINDNESS



KIDNEY FAILURE



HEART DISEASE



STROKE



LOSS OF LIMB

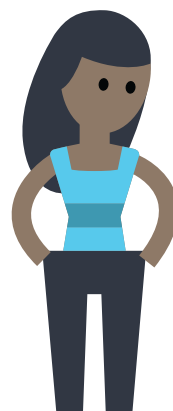
complications that can arise from diabetes are well established. According to the Mayo Clinic, diabetes is often an accelerant in cardiovascular disease, neuropathy, kidney damage, serious vision conditions, wound healing and infection after surgery, hearing impairment, Alzheimer's disease, along with difficulty in other parts of the body. "As a shoulder specialist, one of the things I see in my practice that seems to be more prevalent in patients with diabetes

is something called Frozen Shoulder – the technical term being adhesive capsulitis," says Dr. Malcolm Stubbs of Lafayette Bone and Joint. "It's a condition where the shoulder becomes extremely stiff and starts out extremely painful, as well. And really, upper extremities and shoulder complaints aren't something you normally associate with diabetes." For adults at high risk of diabetes, research shows that moderate weight loss (5 to 7 percent of current body

weight) and regular exercise (30 minutes, five times a week according to the Centers for Disease and Prevention) can prevent or severely delay the condition. For those already diagnosed with diabetes, the side effects of the disease can be minimized as long as it's detected and then treated accordingly. "Most of our studies show that if a person is good at controlling their diabetes – as in they are already being treated, following diet

restrictions and compliant with their medication – it can be managed," Stubbs says. "Where we see the issues is when people lapse off their medication, or don't lose weight or don't handle their diet. But if you keep it under control, the risks are a lot less. That's the main thing."

SYMPTOMS



Unexplained weight loss



Feeling very hungry and weight gain



Increased thirst



Increased urination



Numb or tingling hands/feet



Extreme fatigue and increased weakness

CULTURE

JOIE DE VIVRE

LES ARTISTES

portraits on all fours

After failing to find her niche painting people, Breaux Bridge artist Logan Berard focused her efforts on furrier subjects — pets

BY WILLIAM KALEC | PHOTOS
BY ROMERO & ROMERO

IF LOGAN BERARD WAS A revisionist, much of the story of her artistic journey might be stricken from the record and the record might be tossed into the bayou. Berard's wonky self-portraits; how she proclaims to be "the worst" at painting people; and the part about a nameless cow in a glossy magazine who serves as the North Star to this distinctive Acadiana artist — these details would vanish. Thank goodness she's not a revisionist, because when asked how she got into painting dogs and cats and horses and llamas and ostriches, what emerges is a self-deprecating tale of persistence — and maybe also a pinch of luck.

On average, it takes Logan Berard two to three weeks to complete one of her signature pet portraits.





To see more of Logan Berard's work, visit lbpaintings.com

After deciding that interior design — her major at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette — wasn't her thing, Berard transitioned into becoming a portrait artist. There was just one hiccup: painting people, Berard realized, is extremely difficult. Undeterred, Berard enrolled in a local art class headed by local legend Darryl "Demo" Demourelle, a bit of a portrait whisperer in art circles. Berard's assignment from Demo was simple, paint a self-portrait.

"After five weeks, I'm like, 'Oh, I'm done with this,'" Berard says. "The eyelashes are what got me."

With more than a month's worth of work essentially on the scrap heap, Berard flipped through the pages of a magazine and saw an advertisement featuring a cow shot with a wide-angle lens. It looked cool, so Berard painted it.

"It came so easy, and really, I have no idea why," Berard says. "It took me five weeks to not even finish that self-portrait, and this thing took me an hour. And that pretty much began my accidental career."

Well, sort of. Not long after that, while working as a waitress at brunch mecca Cafe Des

Amis, which decorates its walls monthly with the work of a selected local artist, the head chef approached Berard and invited her to hang her animal paintings. Most of the pieces were purchased before the calendar turned over, leading Berard to believe she finally found her artistic niche.

"People asked the other waiters and staff, 'Oh, who's the artist?' And then they'd point to me," Berard says. "They talked to me and ask me about my work and a few went on to wonder if I did pet portraits, and I said sure, even though I

had never done it. So this lady from Lafayette wanted me to do a portrait of her pugs, and it just went from there.

"I'm a pet lover just like my clients, so I get why they'd want their cat or dog captured in this manner," Berard says. "I don't think it's too much to say that for a lot of us, our pets are our children. So I get it — they wanted to have someone they love immortalized."

Berard receives commission work from across the country, some from clients wishing to capture their canine's spirit while they're still scurrying



around the backyard while others want a posthumous keepsake of their pet. Because the option of painting in person usually requires more than a tank of gas (plus, dogs and cats aren't as good as humans at holding a pose) Berard does portraits exclusively from photographs, though she doesn't necessarily mimic the pose from a singular photo.

In addition, Berard asks for a brief description of the pet, specifically its temperament and personality. For some, this is a sentence or two. For other owners, it's their opus

— a chance to wax poetic for paragraphs or even pages about their furry friend.

"It's like I've known their dogs for years because they go on and on about them," Berard says. "No detail is left out. Like, my cat loves saltine crackers, and those are the types of details people share with me. I mean, I'd share that if my cat was getting painted."

"I don't know how this happens, but a lot of clients comment how the pet's personality shines through in my portraits," Berard says. "When I paint animals, I get to know

them. If you tell me you've got a happy, energetic dog, well then he's gonna look happy and energetic in the painting. Or if you have a laid-back basset hound that is kind of lazy, you'd want them to be portrayed that way."

On average, it takes Berard two to three weeks to complete a portrait. Along the way, pictures are sent to the buyer to update progress and confirm that the spirit and presentation of the pet are on point. Typically, any asked-for adjustments are minor details — slightly changing the color of fur or length of the coat, those sorts of

things. With that established, though, Berard remains her harshest critic, which might explain why she's never painted her own pets.

In a couple weeks, however, that will change once Maude, Ethel, Agnes, Gladys and Louise — Berard's group of baby chicks — are captured on canvas.

"They're going to be model chickens," Berard says. "Trust me, they're going to be painted...once they get their big-girl feathers." ◀



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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

"I had a choice: let it get me, or I'm going to get it," says LaTonya George.



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-so-second 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 Lafayette, 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



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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 Cytosan 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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