



Each year, we comb the state in search of Louisianians who are doing great things at home and, potentially, around the country or even the world. We look for individuals who stand out in their professions, give back and represent what's best about Louisiana. From teachers and artists to community activists and poets, these are the people who enhance our daily lives in more ways than one. We are thrilled to present to you our 2019 Louisianians of the Year.

NINE INDIVIDUALS WHO STAND OUT ABOVE THE CROWD

# LOUISIANIANS

OF THE YEAR



BY FRITZ ESKER (WENDELL WILSON BY JOHN KEMP)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROMERO & ROMERO



families, other educators, and businesses in the area.

Everything in the class is project-based and has real-world applications. His class has built their own functioning arcade game cabinets, among other cool gadgets. He also shows his students films like *WarGames* and *Hidden Figures* so the kids can see how people use science and engineering in different careers.

In his 8th year of teaching, the 30-year-old Kiper likes to extend the students' learning experience past the doors of Elm Grove Middle School. In the zombie apocalypse lab,

2018 LOUISIANA TEACHER OF THE YEAR SPENCER KIPER EXPOSES HIS STUDENTS TO REAL-WORLD APPLICATIONS OF STEM.

Kiper's students travel to Centenary College. There, they must investigate a zombie virus epidemic and discover which Centenary College biology student is "patient zero" (the source of the epidemic).

Kiper's collaboration with Centenary College does not end with the zombie lab. His students also ask the Centenary students about what to expect in college. The middle schoolers are also taken step by step through the university admissions process so they will have a better idea of what applying to college entails.

Even when Kiper is on his summer vacation, he is still tirelessly working to improve his teaching and educate other teachers about the value of STEM education. During most summers, he travels to Huntsville, Alabama for two months to work at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center to help teachers around the country build STEM programs at their schools. But it's all part of the fun for Kiper.

"I seriously have the best job in the world," Kiper said.

If teachers want students to think outside of the box, then teachers need to think outside of the box as well. That's why 2018 Louisiana Teacher of the Year **Spencer Kiper** of Elm Grove Middle School in Bossier Parish exposes his STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) to film festivals, college campuses, and zombie apocalypse exercises.

At first, Kiper did not plan on teaching STEM. He studied English education in

college and first taught English and math remediation at Elm Grove. But shortly after he started at Elm Grove, he helped build the STEM program from the ground up. It has gone from a single class to an entire program teaching over 100 kids a year. It has been a big hit.

"You know you're doing something right when you get so much community support," Kiper said.

The support comes from Kiper's willingness to forge relationships with his students, their



"You know you're doing something right when you get so much community support."  
— SPENCER KIPER, TEACHER OF THE YEAR

**T**o some people, art is an expression of beauty, to others angst. To self-taught folk artist **Wendell Wilson** of Chatham, La., art is an ongoing visual and poetic story of who he is, where he came from, and life in rural North Louisiana that exists now only in the shadowed memories of those who lived it. Through this self-expressive and natural art form, he hopes to give younger generations an appreciation for folk art and their shared history.

The 72-year-old Jackson Parish native, Southern University and Grambling graduate, decorated Vietnam War veteran and a former Baton Rouge Superintendent of Public Works says his art has been with him through his long career. First, as an amateur and now as a professional artist, Wilson has shown and sold his paintings in exhibitions throughout Louisiana.

“It began,” he says in his artist statement, “when my grade school teachers would get me to decorate their bulletin boards, and the

desire to deal with history and nostalgia has never left me. I grew up in a small town. I’ve picked cotton, chopped cotton and all these kind of things in my life. So I’ve experienced a lot of these things. Now, I’m trying to reflect. I’m kind of staying in my roots.”

Some of those reflections, or his “captured memories,” include paintings of scenes along the Cane River in Natchitoches Parish, plantation workers cutting sugarcane and picking cotton, men cooking cracklins’ over an open fire, a mule pulling a plow, and an old time “boucherie” on a Louisiana farm. In all, his palette is as bright as the memories he conjures.

### SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST WENDELL WILSON OF CHATHAM TEACHES CHILDREN HOW TO USE FOLK ART TO CAPTURE MEMORIES OF LONG-AGO RURAL LIFE IN NORTH LOUISIANA.

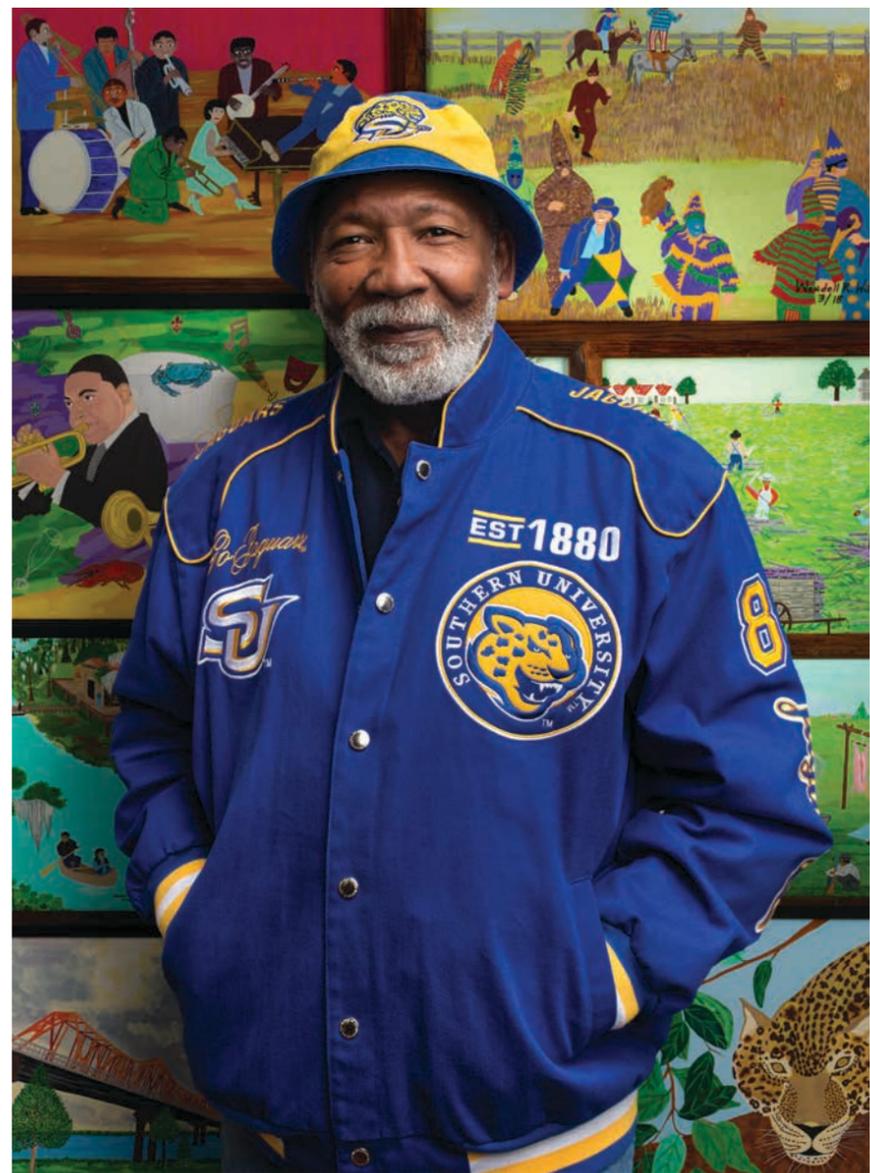
“I love my art like I love my children,” Wilson says.

Perhaps his most important contribution to folk art and North Louisiana began about the time he retired in 2007 and returned home to Chatham. There, he formed the Wendell Wilson Folk Art Academy to celebrate folk art through museum exhibitions, folk art camps, lectures, and workshops for youngsters in local churches, schools, community centers and libraries.

To reach those who need the most help, Wilson also has given folk art lessons to special needs children in schools and in childcare centers and to young inmates at the Caddo Correctional Center in Shreveport.

“If young people can get into art at an early age,” he says, “it helps them see another aspect of life and creativity in a civilized manner rather than through violence.”

Clearly, Wilson has given his art greater meaning than the old adage “Art for art’s sake.”



“It gave me the opportunity to show off what our gulf waters can provide for people.”

— RYAN TRAHAN, CHEF AT BLUE DOG CAFÉ



In August 2018, he beat out 11 top chefs from around the country to win the 15th Annual Great American Seafood Cook-Off.

The signature dish that won the event for Trahan was cracklin’ crusted red snapper. The whole fish was cooked in a manner to give the red snapper’s scales a tasty, cracklin’ quality to them. Trahan was particularly proud of the way the event brought attention to both Louisiana seafood and sustainable cooking practices.

“It gave me the opportunity to show off what our gulf waters can provide for people,” Trahan said.

While cooking delicious meals is of course important to Trahan, as it is to any chef, he is passionate about sustainability. What does that mean? For Trahan, it’s important to use every part of every animal and waste nothing. While most people throw fish bones away, Trahan keeps them to use in the creation of fish stock. Using every part of the animal is a sign of reverence and respect for what was once a living creature.

“An animal had to lose its life for you to have that whole fish,” Trahan said.

At the Blue Dog Cafe, Trahan tries to be respectful of traditional Cajun dishes like boudin balls and gumbo, while also striving for an artful presentation of the food and creative touches to old classics. There is the catfish fried in pork lard. There is also blackened redfish with braised celery hearts and roasted tomato. He views the work as a way to tell the story of Cajun culture through food.

When he is not working, Trahan spends time with his wife and 9-month old daughter. If her family lineage is any indication, the little lady will be a talented cook one day, too.

**C**ooking is in **Ryan Trahan**’s blood. His family runs Frosto Drive-In, a 50’s style diner in Crowley. He fondly remembers his grandmother cooking meals for his family. But now, the 31-year-old Trahan, executive chef for the Blue Dog Cafe in Lafayette, has made a name for himself in not just Louisiana’s competitive culinary scene, but the American culinary scene.

### IN 2018, LAFAYETTE’S RYAN TRAHAN DEFEATED MASTER CHEFS TO WIN THE GREAT AMERICAN SEAFOOD COOK-OFF.



“If young people can get into art at an early age it helps them see another aspect of life and creativity in a civilized manner rather than through violence.” — WENDELL WILSON, FOLK ARTIST

**T**hirty-seven-year-old New Iberia community activist **Phanat Xanamane** was born in a Thailand refugee camp. His family was fleeing poverty and political persecution in their native Laos after the Vietnam War. After Catholic Charities helped them resettle in New Iberia, they quickly made Cajun country their home. It's a home and a community Xanamane tirelessly works to improve with his work on the Iberia Community Garden and his non-profit Envision da Berry ("the Berry" is a nickname for New Iberia).

Xanamane first learned a love of gardening from his family. Four years ago, he received grants to develop the Iberia Community Garden. Over the ensuing years, he helped plant a thriving garden that provides fresh produce to residents and gives them an opportunity to learn about urban farming as well as meet and socialize with their neighbors. For every hour a person volunteers, they get a pound of fresh vegetables.

"It's a total win-win for everybody," Xanamane said. "It's hard work, but it's a lot of fun."

Xanamane expanded his community gardening efforts to the A.B. Simon Homes, a public housing development, and other vacant lots in the city. He also opened Da Berry Fresh Market, which provides fresh produce and job training for residents.

Xanamane's efforts have not been limited to gardening, either. Envision Da Berry worked to put Christmas art and decorations on New Iberia's Main Street during the holiday season. They also started the Brown Sugar Music Festival, which honors the tradition of the Brown Sugar Festivals of the 1950s and 60s.

When Xanamane moved back to New Iberia after earning a master of science in architecture and urban design at Columbia University in New York City in 2005, he decided he was going to devote his 30s to serving his hometown. Now that his 30s are almost over, Xanamane is confident others will step up to take his place when he is gone. He hopes to spend more time with his family in Glenmora, but is not yet sure what adventures he will pursue in his 40s. But he is certain of one thing.

"Wherever I am, I'll be gardening," Xanamane said.



**GARDENING IS JUST ONE WAY PHANAT XANAMANE BUILDS COMMUNITY IN HIS ADOPTED HOME OF NEW IBERIA.**



"It's hard work, but it's a lot of fun." — PHANAT XANAMANE, COMMUNITY ACTIVIST



"Kids need to see they can be whatever they want to be and that they will work with people who may not look like them." — DR. K. RENEE HORTON, NASA ENGINEER

**D**r. **K. Renee Horton**'s love affair with space, the stars, and the universe began when she was 9 years old and her father gave her a telescope. Her dream was to become an astronaut. After graduating high school at the age of 16, she took an Air Force ROTC physical. During the physical, Horton learned a shocking truth: she was hearing impaired. Her dreams of the Air Force and a career as an astronaut were

crushed. But Dr. Horton looked for ways to continue pursuing what she loved. Now, she is a quality engineer at NASA's Michoud facility in New Orleans East, where she helps make sure the rockets are safe.

The 47-year-old Horton has had an impressive career, which has also seen her work as the lead metallic/weld engineer for NASA and serve as the 2nd woman president of the National Society of Black Physicists. She has also published a collec-

**DR. K. RENEE HORTON HAS NOT LET A HEARING IMPAIRMENT STOP HER CAREER AS AN ENGINEER FOR NASA.**



tion of poetry and multiple series of books (Dr. H Explores the Universe, Dr. H and Her Friends, among others). She hopes to make science accessible to children, show African-American kids they can succeed in scientific fields, and teach children about diversity.

"Kids need to see they can be whatever they want to be and that they will work with people who may not look like them," Dr. Horton said.

Dr. Horton has three children: Eric, a chef; Malik, a warehouse worker; and Denise, a nursing student. She also has a hearing-impaired nephew who she mentors.

"I always tell him the world is still his," Dr. Horton said. "It's just that maybe he'll have to do things a little differently...It's okay to be different."

In her professional career, Dr. Horton is proudest of getting the Vertical Assembly Center online for NASA. It is the largest circumferential welding machine in the world.

When asked what advice she would give to aspiring scientists who are hearing impaired or have other disabilities, she said they should continue to pursue their dreams on their schedule and not succumb to negativity.

"It's about what you want for yourself," Dr. Horton said. "The intersection between your talent and your passion is where you'll find your happiness."



“People understand that the water’s coming up, the land is sinking, and that combination is bad for us.” — STEVE COCHRAN, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR COAST RESILIENCE FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND

The loss of Louisiana coastlines is one of the most serious problems its citizens face. For many local communities, it’s not an exaggeration to say that their future is at stake. But **Steve Cochran**, associate vice president for coastal resilience for the Environmental Defense Fund, has been tirelessly working to rebuild Louisiana’s coastlines.

Cochran’s career in environmental work began while he was working for then-Louisiana governor Buddy Roemer. During his tenure there, he became aware of the

importance of coastal restoration as the state began its efforts to work on the issue. Cochran was particularly impressed by the knowledge, honesty, and commitment of those who were working on environmental issues.

“I just kind of fell in love with the people,” Cochran said.

Now, Cochran works to educate and advocate for coastal restoration. He said it is a challenge to warn people of the dangers at hand without seeming defeatist. It is important for Louisiana to continue to

pass down information to communities so they can make informed choices. He is optimistic that large parts of the state can be saved, including New Orleans.

Fortunately, this is not a Republican versus Democrat issue in Louisiana. Cochran said 85 percent of the time there is a strict partisan divide on environmental issues, but that is not the case in Louisiana regarding coastal restoration.

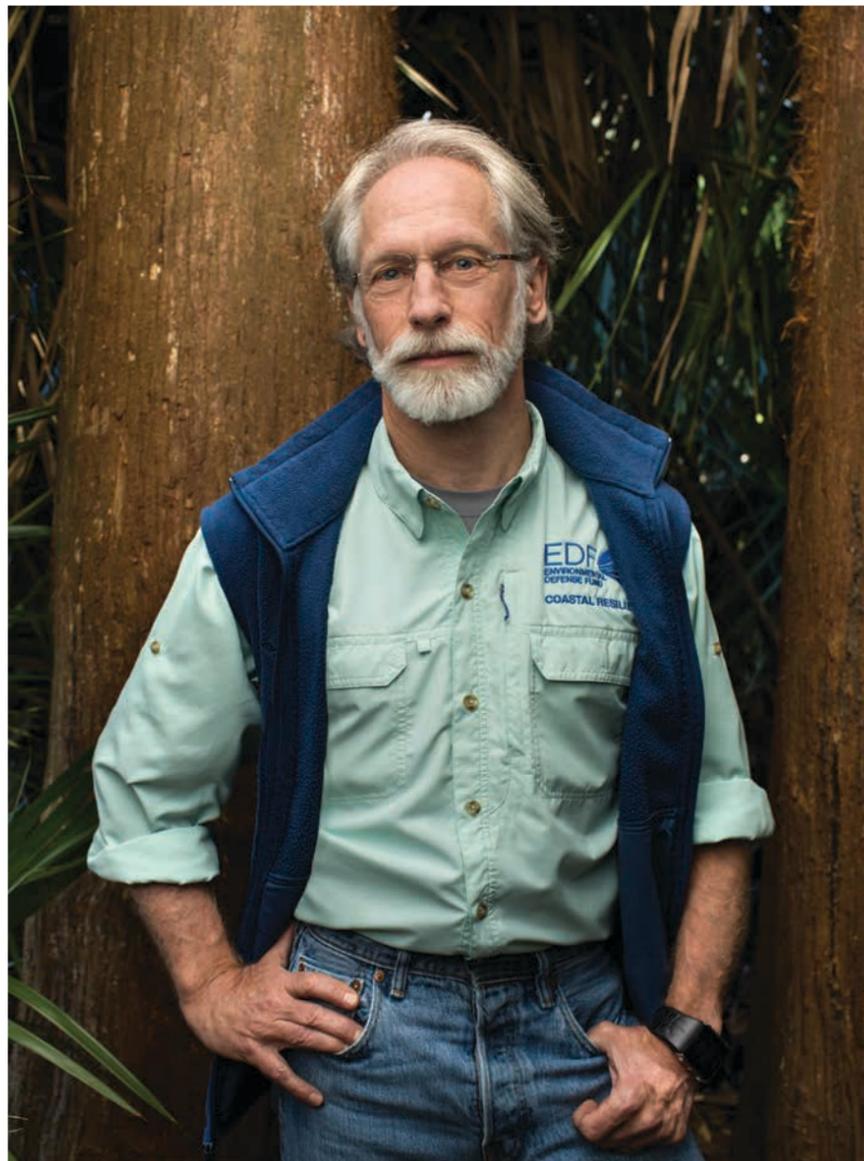
“People understand that the water’s coming up, the land is sinking, and that combination is bad for us,” Cochran said.

Looking back on his career, Cochran is particularly proud of stopping shell dredging

## NEW ORLEANS’ STEVE COCHRAN IS FIGHTING TO REBUILD LOUISIANA’S VANISHING COASTLINES WITH THE ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND.

in Lake Pontchartrain when he was the executive director of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation over 30 years ago. The clamshell reefs at the bottom of the lake served as the lungs of the lake, filtering out the toxins and cleaning the water. The dredging spewed sediment into the water and covered up grass beds that served as habitats for crabs and shrimp.

The scale of Cochran’s environmental work is much larger now, and it’s as important as ever. He said that without action, the state will lose between 2,000 and 4,000 more miles of coastline. He added that other states and countries will soon deal with similar issues. Louisiana is just the first one to face it. As a result, what Cochran and others are doing will serve as a model for coastal restoration work for years to come.



## IN TINY GRAND COTEAU, PATRICE MELNICK CREATED ONE OF THE STATE’S MOST VIBRANT LITERARY FESTIVALS.

In a state known for its festivals, the Festival of Words in Grand Coteau is a must for lovers of the written and spoken word.

It’s the brainchild of former Xavier University of Louisiana professor **Patrice Melnick**.

The 57-year-old Melnick owned a gift shop in Grand Coteau from 2005 to 2013. As a way to lure customers into her store, she hosted open mic nights. It was slow at first; on some nights, Melnick and her husband Owen would just read to each other. But slowly and surely, an audience developed. However, Melnick noticed the attendees would largely be from places like Lafayette, Baton Rouge and Alexandria. That was great, but she also wanted Grand Coteau residents to join in the fun.

As a result, Melnick started an oral history series where Grand Coteau residents could tell their stories. It was a way to bring townspeople into the mix and stealthily introduce them to some poetry. One of Melnick’s passions is to demystify literature.

“I want to make it seem like everyday life and not just an academic exercise,” Melnick said. “If people think they don’t like poetry, I want to try and convince them that they can.”

The open mic nights grew to the point where Melnick decided to create the Festival of Words, now in its 11th year of showcasing poetry, non-fiction, fiction and more. The most recent event included the famous poet Cornelius Eady, who visited from New York with a musician. It was an exciting combination of poetry and music.

There were also “drive-by poetry” events. Students from high schools in the region performed poems in unexpected locations, such as a grocery store. In 2018, 40 students participated and visiting poets got to see their works performed live by energetic local youths.

While Melnick is proud of the festival, she is quick to point out that she receives a lot of help putting on the event.

“It’s a lot easier to have a good idea than to put it into play,” Melnick said. “So many people help make this happen.”



“If people think they don’t like poetry, I want to try and convince them that they can.”

— PATRICE MELNICK, FESTIVAL OF WORDS FOUNDER

No article could adequately cover the career accomplishments of LSU Women's Gymnastics Head Coach **D-D Breaux**, now in her 42nd year at LSU. It would take a book, and a hefty one at that.

Under Breaux's leadership, LSU has captured 13 individual national titles. In a school with a formidable athletic reputation, she's known as "the Dean of Coaches" and she is showing no signs of slowing down.

Breaux, a Donaldsonville native and an accomplished collegiate gymnast in her own right, is quick to honor those at LSU who have helped her sustain such a high-quality program. She credits the university, particularly LSU athletic director Joe Alleva, in allowing her to hire the best assistants she can find. The gymnastics facility is also top-notch.

"It takes a village to enjoy the kind of success we've had here," Breaux said.

Building enthusiasm in gymnastics on campus is also a part of Breaux's job. Winning naturally attracts fan interest, but so does a basic knowledge of the sport. This is why Breaux holds a gymnastics 101 seminar on campus every year for anyone interested to learn simple facts about the sport and how it's scored.

While the prolonged success is great, it does create its own set of pressures. Once a team starts winning, the fans expect it to happen every season. But that's a challenge that Breaux relishes.

"That's why our kids come to LSU," Breaux said. "They want to compete in front of a packed house."

The kids are a large part of why Breaux still loves her job after more than four decades of doing it. The relationships she has formed with her gymnasts has been very rewarding, even if it is hard to watch them leave after four years.



## LSU WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS HEAD COACH D-D BREAUX MOLDS YOUNG WOMEN INTO CHAMPIONS AT GYMNASTICS AND LIFE.

But when they do leave, they have a strong education under their belts. Breaux emphasized that there is no professional gymnastics league, so these young women are using college to prepare themselves for careers outside of the sport. She said she has former student-athletes in medical school, physical therapy school, and nursing school, among other graduate programs. "That doesn't happen by accident," Breaux said. "It happens because the AD, the coaching staff, and the university work hard to help these student athletes succeed in school and after graduation."



"It takes a village to enjoy the kind of success we've had here." — D-D BREAUX, LSU WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS HEAD COACH



"You have to know that, in some small way, you can make a difference for somebody."

— TRACIE MAJOR, NURSE OF THE YEAR

When **Tracie Major** was growing up in Gulfport, she liked to babysit. She loved being around children. So, it was a natural fit for her to pursue a career in pediatric nursing. Now, after 30 years of helping and healing children, she has been honored with a Nightingale Award for Advanced Practice Registered Nurse of the Year from the Louisiana Nurses Foundation.

Major, who has lived in Baton Rouge since 1994, is a clinical nurse specialist at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center. She works with acute care cases in children ranging from 1 day old to 18 years old. Every day, she sees the wonderful resilience of children who have smiling faces despite being stricken by illness. She also sees the stressed-out faces of their parents. It's her job to protect and care for all of them.

## THE LOUISIANA NURSES FOUNDATION RECENTLY HONORED BATON ROUGE'S TRACIE MAJOR WITH A PRESTIGIOUS NIGHTINGALE AWARD.

But Major's work is not limited to caring for her patients. She is passionate about educating herself and helping other nurses become the best nurses they can be. She earned a DNP (doctorate of nursing practice) in 2013 from the University of South Alabama.

As much as nurses fight to return all patients to good health, the reality is that sometimes that does not happen and the patient dies. At Our Lady of the Lake, Major began an initiative where the hospital surveyed nurses on the topic of how they could help them deal with such cases. After getting good feedback from

two rounds of studies, Major helped install a program that provides classroom education and simulation experience for nurses on how to care for dying patients and deal with the aftermath. This better prepares nurses for the most difficult aspect of their jobs.

Major's love of children extends to her 22-year-old twin daughters, Sarah and Megan. Both have inherited their mother's love of education and of helping youths. They are pursuing careers in education.

At the end of the day, Major's passion for helping every child she can is what has sustained her throughout the ups and downs of 30 years of nursing. It may be hard for one person to change the world, but an individual can help other individuals.

"You have to know that, in some small way, you can make a difference for somebody," Major said. "I love being a pediatric nurse."

