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UL-Lafayette professor's research focuses on American Indian tribe living on vanishing island

BY KAILEY BROUSSARD Special to The Advocate

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Image courtesy Dawn DeDeaux New Orleans-based artist Dawn DeDeaux wants to gather at least 500 people in Isle de Jean Charles June 25 to take part of an installation to bring awareness to Louisiana's coastal land loss issues.

A shrinking island off the south Louisiana coast is serving as a laboratory of sorts for a University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor who is chronicling the history, culture and customs of the people who call it home.

Heather Stone, assistant professor in the UL-Lafayette College of Education, has visited Isle de Jean Charles periodically since April. The island is a quarter-mile-wide strip of land in Terrebonne Parish that once housed more than 300 Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians.

Stone said the tribe's existence has been under constant threat, starting with the Trail of Tears in the 1800s when American Indian tribes were driven off their land. And their descendants find themselves having to move yet again as the effects of climate change and erosion from oil drilling claim large chunks of the island — 98 percent since 1955.

"They learned how to fish, they learned to hunt on an island, they learned to grow food on an island and they were very self-sufficient," Stone said. "Now with the climate change and all of the oil tankers and drilling that's happened down there, they're losing their island, which means they're going to have to move again and reacclimate again," she said.

Settled in the early 1800s by several tribes that were hiding for their lives, the island has dwindled to little more than 86 residents. Since 1955, the area has declined from a self-sustaining habitat to one contingent on families' resources and location.

Tribal Chief Albert Naquin said areas that once could be used to farm and raise cattle are now either immersed in water or affected by the ground's changing salinity.

“Gardening is almost out. You can’t raise any livestock; you can’t raise any chickens – you can’t raise anything. All you can do is live here,” he said. “Everything has changed from us being able to survive on land to you can’t survive on the land at all.”

The denizens of the now-narrow strip of land are chiefly elderly tribal members who do not know of life beyond the island. Once 22,600 acres, the community shrank to some 320 acres over a course of 60 years.

The tiny community is one of the first places to receive aid in anticipation of climate change woes. In January, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced a \$1.3 billion grant split

among 13 states to help communities adjust to climate change. Louisiana received \$92.6 million – \$48 million of which will go to Isle de Jean Charles.

The rest of the state's funds will go toward Louisiana's Strategic Adaptations for Future Environments program, which was created to protect the state's wetlands, storm-proof coastal cities and reshape higher-ground cities.

However, these funds come after more than a decade of resettlement efforts. In 2002, the tribe began to seek refuge in higher, more stable ground; however, that process has been allayed by legal issues surrounding land. In the meantime, Naquin said, more than 25 families that were unable to wait for relocation have regrouped in and around Montegut.

Stone said she will catalog the area's oral histories as remaining residents leave, as well as their next migration. Her initial months on the island entailed building rapport with island residents before she touched her recorder.

Stone, who earned her bachelor's degree in journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before earning her doctorate at LSU, said the experience sharply contrasts from that of reporting.

"You have to build trust with your narrators, and you can't do that if they think you're just there for one day to get the interview," she said.

The difference, she said, was who was in charge of the narrative.

"I may ask a question like, 'What was life like on the island?' and I can have some narrator spend 30 minutes answering that one question. I'm not bound by time or by what I need to get the story out of it; they're telling me their story."

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