AOC PUTS
ACADIANA ON TELEVISION

"Rolling black."
"Stand by."
"5,4,3,2,1"

What may sound to novice ears like the prelude to a rocket blast-off is actually a volunteer crew at Acadiana Open Channel, launching a project of a different sort.

AOC, the area's only public access television station, offers residents the chance to take camera in hand and make their own prime-time programs.

"Think of it as self-serve TV," says Bob Laroussini, director of AOC. "It's like a telephone. It's always available to the public to say what they want to say. But we offer audio and video to provide the whole picture and you can tell the whole neighborhood at once."

Nine times a year, the station offers a training course to acquaint prospective volunteers with the techniques of television production. Also available are editing workshops and individualized instruction on using the control booth in the AOC van.

Upon completion of the basic course, participants may use cameras and studio space free of charge. The staff — including operations supervisor Steve Bonin and programming director James Hebert — is available to assist and advise volunteers. But the actual production is accomplished without professional manpower.

All programs that meet basic requirements are aired on Cable Channel 5. Those requirements are simple, according to the director. No commercialism, and viewers must be able to see and hear what's going on. Programs of top quality production and general interest are often broadcasting several times.

Funding for AOC is provided by a joint agreement between the City of Lafayette and Lafayette Cable Television. Each year, the city forwards one-half of the cable company's franchise fee to AOC.

Since the station opened in 1982, some 800 to 1,000 people have completed the training workshops. An impressive number, but not enough, says Laroussini. From where he sits, the more traffic down his hall, the better.

"We're interested in being overrun by high school students," he declares, pinpointing a group with potential for what he sees as "lots of great programming...debate teams, skateboarding, music, video."

The idea of self-serve television has wonderful appeal, says Laroussini. The tough part is getting would-be volunteers to hold a camera in their bare hands.

Volunteer producer Cindy Olivier remembers her own shyness with the equipment.

"At first I was real paranoid about it," she decries. "I'd get so hysterical if one thing would go wrong. I'd think, 'Oh my God, I've broken this $3,000 camera.'"

Fortunately, she says, the AOC staff was generous in their encouragement. She has since overcome her fear sufficiently to produce a string of well-received programs.

Among her accomplishments are a series on Festival International de Louisiane, and a feature on Downtown Lafayette Unlimited, which earned her an award of excellence from that...