Pat Cravins of Lafayette stands in front of the Creole flag that hangs inside her restaurant, Pat's Cafe Creole. She is a member of an advisory council that is helping to establish the Louisiana Creole Cultural Center in Natchitoches.

Advisory panel wants to showcase Creole life

By RUTH FOOTE
Special to The Advocate

LAFAYETTE — Businesswoman Pat Cravins can remember being ridiculed when she started school because she spoke Creole and only a little English. "I remember starting nursery school and not speaking a lot because I wasn’t sure of myself," said Cravins, the owner of Pat's Cafe Creole in Lafayette.

She was teased throughout her early school years. And then some. But today, she can look back without bitterness because she has learned over the years to embrace her Creole heritage and to be proud of both her African and French roots.

Cravins now has the opportunity to preserve and share her culture with others.

She and Lafayette businessman James Billeaudeau were appointed to the 11-member advisory council for the Louisiana Creole Cultural Center in Natchitoches. Although the center, which recently held dedication ceremonies, is housed at Northwestern State University, its purpose is to preserve and promote the Creole culture across the state.

"I think the time has come for us to show that pride and claim our rightful place without having to look over our shoulders when we claim what is rightfully ours," said Cravins, who is the wife of state Sen. Don Cravins, D-Arnaudville.

"Certainly, I don’t condemn those others who benefited from their culture, but I reserve the right to be able to do the same for mine," she said.

Billeaudeau, who was part of the younger generation that did not grow up speaking Creole like his parents and grandparents, agreed. "We have to establish a social identity. If we can establish a social identity, it makes it a whole lot easier to live as a group," Billeaudeau said.

According to Cravins and Billeaudeau, being Creole is not about race or color because Creoles come in all shades. It is the mixture of all races that the two say they believe makes the culture distinct — including African, French, Spanish and Native American.

"We should not deny any of our lineage, and we should be able to profess all of it," Billeaudeau said.

According to Cravins, the culture is unique because of its language, cuisine, music, traditions and religion.

The Louisiana Creole Cultural Center originated as part of the St. Augustine Historical Society’s goal to resurrect the Creole culture. According to society president Terrell A. Delphin, when it formed 20 years ago the group was first interested in preserving and restoring the structures, including antebellum homes, along the Cane River.

However, over the years, Delphin said members incorporated cultural preservation into their objectives.

The society began sponsoring the annual Creole Heritage Day, which includes both a Mass and a cultural celebration. Festivities are set this year for Jan. 24.

Other members on the advisory council include Barbara DeCuir of Baton Rouge; Gwendyn Bordenave and Gregory Osborn, both of New Orleans; Pam Breaux of Lake Charles; Dr. Kathleen Byrd, Dr. Hiram F. Gregory and Lillie Delphin, all of Natchitoches; and the Rev. James Moran of Mansura.