Coastal erosion is sinking Isle de Jean Charles in Terrebonne Parish, the ancestral home of members of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe of Native Americans. About 300 residents are preparing to resettle, thanks to an almost $50 million federal grant. The relocation effort is one of the first of its kind in the U.S. for “climate refugees.” Before the island becomes only a memory, Dr. Heather Stone, an assistant professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, has begun gathering oral histories from tribal members. She’s recording and cataloguing the stories, customs, and traditions that provide a framework for the tribe’s identity.
Academic Affairs, and Hazelwood, director of simply refer to each other as sister. added the title “Dr.” Ellen Cook and Anita Cook Hazelwood have worked at UL Lafayette since 1977 and 1976, respectively. They share more than the same parents and place of employment. The sisters are the University’s first students to earn a doctorate in educational leadership, with a concentration in higher education.

Dr. Anita Hazelwood, left, and Dr. Ellen Cook stroll along the Walk of Honor on campus.

They were hooded during the Fall 2016 Commencement General Assembly. Cook, 64, and Hazelwood, 62, grew up in Houma, La., daughters of an accountant father, and an elementary schoolteacher mother. They have a younger sister, Karen, an attorney, and a younger brother, Bert, who works in public relations.

Cook earned a bachelor’s degree in accounting from the University and a master’s degree in accounting from LSU; Hazelwood holds a bachelor’s degree in medical records science from the University and a master’s degree in library science from LSU.

At one time, all three sisters were professors at UL Lafayette. Karen Cook taught criminal justice, until deciding to pursue a law degree. Ellen Cook and Hazelwood stuck with higher education. It was a wise choice. Both rose to their current positions, and attained the rank of full professor along the way, in a way uncommon in higher education — without doctoral degrees.

In 2013, the University added a higher education concentration to its doctorate in educational leadership. Until then, the doctorate had included only a concentration for K-12 teachers. Both programs are geared toward educators who are in leadership positions, or who aspire to be. The higher education concentration includes a range of courses, which cover subjects ranging from legal and public policy issues, to fiscal management and student affairs.

For Cook, the decision to enroll in the new program was a no-brainer. “Earning a doctorate was something I always wanted to do, and the educational leadership program made sense for me because, as an administrator, it was an opportunity to learn so much, and I did,” she explained. “Besides, I needed the opportunity to learn so much, and I did,” she explained. “Besides, I needed the

One or Cook’s many duties at the University is to help implement new academic programs. When she realized she could fulfill a lifelong dream, and count herself among the 14-student cohort needed to launch the new doctorate, her decision was easy.

Hazelwood, on the other hand, quips that her decision to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership was made for her by her older sister. “I only did it because I was kind of bullied into it,” Hazelwood said jokingly, “but that's OK, because I'm very glad I did. It's a great program.”

Both Cook and Hazelwood said the curriculum helped them round off skills they had developed over their 30-year careers in higher education, and enabled them to add knowledge they can weave into their current roles.

It also revealed a personality trait shared by both women: determination.

The program consists of night and weekend classes that added to their already stacked workloads. The curriculum consists of 57 hours of coursework, and six credit hours of dissertation work.

Since the sisters share a house in Lafayette with their mother, Joycelyn Cook, who is 89, neither liked leaving her alone as often as was necessary to meet the demands of work and study.

But Cook and Hazelwood persevered, and were on track to put the finishing touches on their dissertations. Cook’s delves into the state’s GRAD Act; Hazelwood’s is about university mergers.

Then, in mid-August, the Flood of 2016 saturated portions of Louisiana with days of rain. The unnamed storm claimed 13 lives and damaged hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses.

In the case of Ellen Cook, Hazelwood, Joycelyn Cook and Karen Cook, who was visiting, water flooded their neighborhood and home. They had to be rescued by boat.

They brought only what was important with them for the journey, their “two dogs, and two computers, double-wrapped in garbage bags, because they held our dissertations,” Ellen Cook said.
Maryline Naquin, a member of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe of Native Americans, has lived on Isle de Jean Charles, a tiny slice of land in Terrebonne Parish, for all of her 71 years. Since the 1960s, she has occupied a home across a bayou from a patch of land where the house in which she was born once stood.

As a child, Naquin never dreamed that the short distance between her two homes would one day almost equate the width of the entire island, which is being swallowed by coastal erosion. In 1955, Isle de Jean Charles was about 22,000 acres. It’s now about 320 acres, as narrow as a quarter-mile wide in some places.

Hurricanes and storm surges, and saltwater intrusion caused by dredging for oil and gas pipelines and canals, have gnawed at the island. Hundreds of people once lived on Isle de Jean Charles. Today, only about 25 families – 70 people – remain. That number includes some residents who aren’t members of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe. Fishermen began buying camps on Isle de Jean Charles after Island Road was built in 1953 to connect the community to nearby Montegut, La. Before that, the island had been accessible only by boat.

“Everything has changed so much,” Naquin said one recent fall day, weaving palmetto fronds into baskets and hats under a golden afternoon light as a breeze rustled banana trees in her yard.

She is referring to more than topography and population. With the land went a way of life rooted in self-sufficiency. Residents once hunted, trapped, fished, raised cattle and grew crops, such as rice and potatoes, on the island. They plucked oranges and pecans from groves of trees. They built and crafted what was needed for survival, from houses to pirogues.

Those days are long gone, said Dr. Heather Stone, an assistant professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. For about a year, she has been working on an oral history project to gather and archive the recollections of tribal members.

“I want to tell the story of a resilient people who escaped to Isle de Jean Charles and sequestered themselves there and had to figure out new ways of living,” said Stone, who became involved after the island was discussed at a Louisiana Historical Association meeting.

Tribal chief Albert Naquin has pushed for the relocation of island residents for over 15 years.

Heavy rains often strand residents

Isle de Jean Charles is believed to have been settled in the early 1800s. With little recorded history, accounts vary as to whether the Chitimacha or the Choctaw were the first inhabitants. It got a big boost in population with an influx of Native Americans who migrated there following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The law authorized President Andrew Jackson to relocate tribes from their ancestral homes in the southeast to federal lands in Oklahoma. The forced removal became known as the “Trail of Tears.” Many Native Americans balked, including a group of early Isle de Jean Charles settlers, who arrived from Alabama and Mississippi.

Over the years, marriages between members of the three tribes resulted in a consolidated Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe. The small tribe, which exists only on and around Isle de Jean Charles, lacks federal recognition. Weather and economics are the forces that have splintered it.

Many residents were shooed from the island by the constant prospect of having to rebuild or repair homes after storms; others were driven away by an inability to get to and from jobs in nearby communities. The 3-mile-long Island Road often floods during heavy rains and with storm surges. Residents can’t drive onto or off the island until the water recedes.

“People who really didn’t want to leave have had to because they felt they didn’t have a choice. It wasn’t safe for them, and they couldn’t get ahead,” Stone explained.

Tribal chief Albert Naquin, Maryline Naquin’s brother-in-law and a direct descendant of the tribe’s first
“Louisiana’s coast is losing land faster than any other coastal area in the country. Isle de Jean Charles is one of, if not the, most endangered communities on our coast. Residents have been seeking a means of relocation for years now, meaning they are likely more prepared than other coastal communities to actually make the move,” Forbes said.

The new community will ideally serve as a template for imperiled coastal communities across the nation and in Louisiana, including communities damaged by hurricanes.

“By going through this process with this community, we will learn a great deal about what works and what doesn’t work. We will discover steps that we didn’t know were necessary and we’ll have a better understanding of the costs. By documenting this process, we’ll provide at least a compass, if not a road map, for how to do it better next time,” Forbes said.

**Move offers a chance for healing**

The entire Isle de Jean Charles resettlement process could take several years. The grant money has to be obligated in 2017, or as Forbes explained, “committed to a specific purpose.” The funds must be spent by 2022. If, in the meantime, a hurricane or other large storm should wipe out Isle de Jean Charles, the state has begun putting together an interim housing plan. Such a scenario would not, however, jeopardize the resettlement project.

Albert Naquin, who has been working on relocation for more than 15 years, hopes the move offers a chance for a homecoming. He wants to reconcile as many members of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe as possible.

“It’s very important to keep our culture together, and to reunite everyone,” he said. “I would go immediately, if I could."

He’s not sure if that will be possible. “We are working with (state officials) and hopefully we’ll have a say on where we go, who will be able to go, and what we get.”

As it stands now, the chief said, the resettlement is open to any residents of the island who are members of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, and tribe members who have moved away only since 2012. He hopes, however, that all tribe members will be able to resettle in the new community.

Dr. Heather Stone’s work will show future generations what life was like on Isle de Jean Charles before the water rose.

“Put us back together is the key thing we need. Other than that, our tribe will continue to break up and eventually we won’t have one.”

**Stories to be told through multimedia**

For Stone, who teaches in the University’s College of Education, compiling the stories of residents as they prepare to leave their ancestral home dovetails with many of her professional goals and interests.

Stone is an adept interviewer who holds an undergraduate degree in journalism from the University of North Carolina. She also has experience on a large-scale oral history project. While earning her doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction at LSU, she completed an oral history about the desegregation of schools in Zachary, La.

Since she began work on the Isle de Jean Charles project, Stone has gone to great lengths to immerse herself in the community. She rented a small house near Isle de Jean Charles, where she works, hosts visitors and often stays for several days at a time while she conducts research.

“I want to not only document how the island came to be, and a sense of place, but how that changed and what has happened to the island due to the environment and how that’s affected the sense of culture and splintered the tribe,” she said.

Stone is also incorporating elements of the island’s move for use in elementary classrooms. She and colleagues at the University will record Albert Naquin and other members of the tribe for a virtual reality project. That component of her work will enable Stone’s students to build lesson plans to teach elementary students about Isle de Jean Charles. The younger students will wear a headset to navigate a virtual representation of Isle de Jean Charles. They will also see and hear the Native-Americans talk about island life, history and customs.

“Beyond the classroom, we’re thinking about using it as an archiving tool. Instead of having just oral histories that can be listened to, we want to archive 3-D oral histories, including interviews, that can be viewed,” Stone said.

**Others contribute to resettlement**

The professor isn’t the only one dedicated to preserving the history and customs of Isle de Jean Charles.

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The professor isn’t the only one dedicated to preserving the history and customs of Isle de Jean Charles.
Fishermen and others began buying camps and homes on Isle de Jean Charles after Island Road was built in 1953.

chief, Jean Baptiste Narcisse Naquin, lives in nearby Point Aux Chenes. He moved from Isle de Jean Charles in the mid-1970s, after Hurricane Carmen struck. "I had to go to work every day, and saltwater and cars don't mix," said Albert Naquin, 70, a retired inspector for the Minerals Management Service, and a U.S. Army veteran.

HUD earmarks relocation funds

Isle de Jean Charles, which is split by a narrow, winding street lined with a scattering of houses, resembles a ghost town minus tumbleweeds. Instead, it's dotted with a few gnarled, leafless oak trees deformed by saltwater, scraggly remnants of vast stretches of forest that once blanketed the island.

"To me, it's like night and day. We used to live off the land, and now, all a few can do is live on the land. It's tough," Albert Naquin said.

Soon, the fading community might actually be a ghost town. Many residents are bracing to resettle in a new, federally funded community. In early 2020, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded a $48 million grant for a relocation effort. The money was carved from a total of $92.6 million allocated to Louisiana for regions that have been declared major disaster areas.

The Lowlander Center, a nonprofit in Terrebonne Parish, helped the tribe apply for the grant. The center, as its name indicates, supports low-lying areas through a range of initiatives, including advocacy, education and research.

Dr. Kristina Peterson, director of the Lowlander Center, said she and Albert Naquin began collaborating on a resettlement about eight years ago. She describes tribal members as "heroes" for their perseverance.

This community will lead others

The state's Office of Community Development is in charge of allocating the federal grant. Many aspects of the impending move are still being decided. Details as fundamental as where the new community will be established, for example, are still being sorted out.

Pat Forbes, executive director of the Louisiana Office of Community Development, said state officials and residents have started collaborating on a master plan.

"We've begun interviewing residents to ascertain their wants and needs. Some say they would like space to be able to grow crops. Some would even like houses atop stilts, because the areas underneath their houses have become social gathering spots. The process is in its initial stages, with much planning still up in the air," Forbes said.

One thing is certain. The resettlement will be historic. The HUD grant has been termed the first in the lower 48 states allocated for communities displaced by environmental factors, such as natural disasters and habitat loss.
elsewhere – will be replanted at the new community.

So far, an initial search of the land has yielded only scant traces of what Comardelle believes was once there. There have been a few interesting finds, though, including a “toothache” tree, called a pepperwood, with leaves that numb the mouth when chewed.

“Having these types of things at our new settlement is one way we can keep a link to our ancestors and our land,” Comardelle said.

Research to expand to nation’s capital

In November, Stone’s and Comardelle’s efforts got a boost when they were awarded a Recovering Voices Community Research Program grant.

As part of the program, the Smithsonian Institution collaborates with communities and scholars from around the world to identify and share cultural heritages, information, and artifacts housed at the Smithsonian and other museums.

Stone, Comardelle and Albert Naquin will travel to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., sometime later this year. They will pore over land and genealogy records, photos, letters, manuscripts, and historical objects. They plan to record what they find by taking notes, photos and videos, and making photocopies.

They will also conduct research at the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Archives, the National Museum of American History, and the National Anthropological Archives. All are in Washington, D.C., with the latter two inside the Smithsonian.

In addition to content about the consolidated Isle de Jean tribe, they will glean material about the Biloxi, the Choctaw and the Chitimacha tribes. Stone, Comardelle and Naquin will also research records related to the Trail of Tears, in an attempt to reconstruct possible routes members of each of the three tribes might have traveled to get to the island.

“This will allow the tribe, and me as a researcher, to learn more about its origins and assemble documentation about its history,” Stone said.

The material will be shared between the tribe and the University. The tribe will keep the materials, and copies will be archived in the University’s Special Collections in Edith Garland Dupre Library.

Residents have mixed feelings

For remaining residents of Isle de Jean Charles, the pressing need to preserve its history underscores a grim reality. Despite the island’s vulnerability and imminent demise, some inhabitants, including Maryline Naquin, are ambivalent about leaving. She will miss simple things, such as calm, quiet afternoons spent sipping coffee in the yard of the home where she has lived for more than half a century. “I’m not thrilled to think about moving, but I know it’s going to happen one day.
She is working closely with Chantel Comardelle, who lives near the island in Bayou Blue, is the tribe's secretary. While Stone works on her academic project, Comardelle, who works in the Finance Department of Terrebonne Parish Consolidated Government, is studying to become the tribe's chief historian, archivist and curator. Comardelle, whose family left the island when she was 4 years old, after Hurricanes Danny and Juan in 1985, recently enrolled in an online program in indigenous museum studies offered by the Institute of American Indian Arts.

The training will help her educate visitors in a cultural center and museum that tribe members want built at a new settlement. Comardelle envisions a center that would serve as an educational hub for school groups and tourists, and a repository for relics of the tribe's past. It would house everything from oral histories and photographs, to artifacts, tools and crafts that were once integral to life on Isle de Jean Charles.

“I've kind of taken it upon myself to learn and gather as much as I can so we can start to save and rebuild our culture,” she said.

Case in point: Comardelle is working with preservation-minded groups such as Common Ground Relief, a nonprofit founded shortly after Hurricane Katrina. The organization was formed to clean up New Orleans but now oversees a range of projects, including wetlands restoration.

Tom Pepper, executive director of Common Ground Relief, will consult with members of the tribe to gather a variety of grasses, seeds, and plants used for medicinal purposes. The effort is threefold: to determine what plants once grew on the island, how certain plants were used, and to collect samples. What is retrieved from the island – and plants that no longer exist but can be found

State coastal restoration efforts have included the use of sediment to form terraces intended to slow erosion and ultimately help rebuild fragile marshes.

Imminent relocation has prompted the collection of plants that grow on Isle de Jean Charles.
The Rev. Roch Naquin celebrates Mass daily.

So what can you do?”

Wenceslaus Billiot Sr., a World War II veteran who lives with his wife, Denecia, in an elevated home across the street from Maryline Naquin, grieves for the lost land and way of life. “Lots of times, I think about how things were when I was young,” Billiot, 90, said.

He often stands on his back porch and looks out over a sweep of water that was once solid marshland. “When I was a kid, you could walk out into the marsh. No problem. Now, everything is washed away.” The view might be diminished, but it isn’t one he relishes abandoning. “I don’t think I’m ready. I would rather stay. I was born and raised here,” said Billiot, who as a boy paddled an hour and a half to and from school in a pirogue built by his father.

‘At some point, everyone will have to go.’

Two past relocation attempts have failed.

In 2008, after Hurricanes Gustav and Ike slammed the island with wind and water in a span of about two weeks, Albert Naquin led a resettlement effort with a hand from the parish. Government officials tried to help Isle de Jean Charles residents relocate to nearby Bourg, La., but the effort stalled.

A previous resettlement push, in 2002, came after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decided boundaries of a new levee system to protect communities along the Louisiana coast. The agency determined it wouldn’t be cost effective to include Isle de Jean Charles inside the levee. Instead, it offered to help find a nearby place where the community could resettle.

That effort died because a majority of Isle de Jean Charles residents didn’t want to leave.

As part of the latest relocation plan, Forbes said residents who don’t want to leave the island won’t be forced to move.

Albert Naquin, on the other hand, says that eventually, time and nature will force all residents from Isle de Jean Charles. “At some point, everyone will have to go, whether they want to or not. It’s just a matter of when,” he said.

The Rev. Roch Naquin, 84, is a first cousin of Albert Naquin. He is a retired Catholic priest who grew up on the island and left as a teenager. He was ordained in 1962 and assigned to a range of parishes in and near New Orleans and southwest Louisiana. When he retired in 1997, he wanted to return to his birthplace and minister to Native Americans there.

The island has never had a church. Before Roch Naquin moved home, a priest from nearby Montegut would visit monthly to celebrate Mass and hear confessions. Now, Roch Naquin celebrates Mass daily at his house on the island, as well as the homes of others. He admits he has “struggled” with the prospect of leaving Isle de Jean Charles.

“My first choice would really be to stay here, but I know the risks,” he said. “While there is an opportunity to relocate to higher ground, a safer place, wisdom tells me it’s better to move than be stubborn, stay here, and have something terrible destroy everything.”

Island resident Chris Brunet, 51, sums up residents’ situation this way: “It’s hard to make a change based on what’s going to happen in the future. The island is here now,” he said, although he concedes that “one direct hurricane, a bullseye, will wipe it out.”

After a pause, he added: “The relocation is something that needs to be done, but it’s not a celebration.”
More than 400 members of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette community used their bodies to express themselves during the recent Dear World College Tour.

Dear World began in 2009 when founder Robert Fogarty asked New Orleans residents to “write a love note to their city,” four years after Hurricane Katrina brought their home to its knees.

Since then, Dear World has traveled around the globe to take portraits that use ink on skin to convey what people want others to know.

To see more images taken at UL Lafayette, go on Facebook and search for “University of Louisiana at Lafayette Dear World.”