napshot: “It’s Friday night in Arnaudville, and artist George Marks’ Town Market is hopping. Painters, sculptors, town leaders and families mingle among crafts, handmade jewelry and sculpture, and New Orleans guitarist Marc Stone’s music fills the air along Bayou Teche. Mama Marks’ old dining room table in the market’s kitchen is covered with crab stew, potato salad, sausage, fried chicken and jambalaya. Miss Betty, president of the Chamber of Commerce, hands out her stuffed bread from a basket. Out in front, five musicians jam on handcrafted furniture for sale.”

It was the slice of small town life detailed in the Independent Weekly’s April 5, 2006, cover story, “Arnaudville Renaissance.”

And until fire raced through the developing arts community in early July, this was still pretty much how life went about at NuNu’s Town Market, located at the junction of highways 31 and 93. The dining room table filled with food had expanded into a small restaurant, a stage for live jazz and a community center. Painters, sculptors, and town leaders and families mingle among crafts, handmade jewelry and sculpture, and New Orleans guitarist Marc Stone’s music fills the air along Bayou Teche. Mama Marks’ old dining room table in the market’s kitchen is covered with crab stew, potato salad, sausage, fried chicken and jambalaya. Miss Betty, president of the Chamber of Commerce, hands out her stuffed bread from a basket. Out in front, five musicians jam on handcrafted furniture for sale.

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A fire that destroyed NuNu’s Town Market in Arnaudville has ignited plans for a green rebuild.

By Erin Zunbrecher Bass
Photos by Robin May

News that NuNu’s was on fire began to spread almost as fast as the flames on the morning of July 11. George Marks’ sister, Roxanne, was opening up the market around 8 a.m. to prepare for a jam session later that day. She smelled what she thought was cigarette smoke, but couldn’t identify where it was coming from. By the time she looked around, the roof was on fire. By the time Marks got there, fire trucks had arrived and the windows were blowing out.

Almost immediately, people began driving over from as far as New Orleans and comments came in on the Facebook page from people sharing their condolences with art lovers and wanting to know what they could do to help. Mayor Richard showed up with an ice chest of water. Marks and his family knew their market had made an impact on people, but they found out just how much after the fire.

“It was incredible to see so many people coming in,” he says. “Following that, people just started calling, emailing, texting and driving in. Calls were coming from Canada, France, just all over.”

“I went to NuNu’s thinking I would try to pump up George and his family, but I got there and I completely broke down,” says Toby Rodriguez, who was doing some construction work in town and had been eating lunch at NuNu’s every day. “It hit home for me to see all that effort, all that work, all completely destroyed. I right away called up Mark Falgout [owner of Blue Moon Saloon in Lafayette], and he felt the same way and we figured we’d pool together and do something.”

Marks knew it was important to make people up on their offers to help and keep NuNu’s name in their minds as rebuilding began. Upcoming programming was immediately moved to new venues, and messages like this one began to go out to Facebook fans a week later: “The Frederick Stage offers to help and keep NuNu’s name in their minds as rebuilding began. Upcoming programming was immediately moved to new venues, and messages like this one began to go out to Facebook fans a week later: “The Frederick Stage

A campaign called “Phoenix Rising” was created to keep supporters informed about planned fundraisers, like the one on Aug. 29 at Blue Moon, and tell them how they can support artists impacted by the fire. Not much was salvageable from the building, and all of the original art for sale was burned. Marks estimates the value at around $120,000, not including his own works in progress in his studio. Art is cost-prohibitive to insure, he says, and NuNu’s had a “show at your own risk” policy. The building was insured, and an insurance claim is already being processed as no signs of arson were found, but the artists are who Marks is most worried about.

“We want to take care of the artists that were involved first,” he says. “They’re the ones that have a chance to lose everything, whereas we have insurance that would at least pay for the building. What’s the point of having the center if you don’t have the artists. Really, they’re the foundation.”

An abstract painter who exhibits all over the country, Marks moved back to his hometown of Arnaudville in 2003 with the idea of giving artists a place to store and possibly sell their work. But the artistic pull of Arnaudville became

RISING FROM THE ASHES

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much greater, and artists began flocking, and relocating, there. The market housed 36 visual artists, about 10 of whom live within a few miles of the building. Almost as quickly as programming was relocated, plans started coming together for a “new NuNu.” With the idea of keeping the momentum going, Marks and his family will be opening a temporary location across from the original one this month. (For now, residents are hanging out at the new Women of Culture beauty salon, where Owner Twahna Harris’ facials have become the thing to do in town.)

“We have great volunteers, and we have a great support system so we want to make sure that the name NuNu’s stays in the public eye a lot,” Marks says. “So we decided to open a 'T-NuNu’s,' which is basically a scaled down version of NuNu’s and Town Market, and we’re going to offer all the same things except on a smaller scale.”

But T-NuNu’s is only temporary, and much grander plans are already developing for the rebuilding. While the fire was traumatic for the community and Marks family, it’s also given them a chance to start over and build something that can meet all of their needs.

“It’s going to really allow us to look at all of our programming, really evaluate everything and keep what works and maybe change what doesn’t,” says Marks. “The same thing with the space. Whereas, before we kind of had a building that we had to deal with, the [new] building can actually mirror the kind of programming that we offer.”

Marks also sees the rebuilding as an opportunity to help the community take ownership of the project. “It goes past just something that we created, but something that they actually helped create from the ground up, which is what we always wanted,” he says. “I think that this is going to allow them to do that.”

Local architects and those with ties to the area began to step up immediately and offer to put their mark on the rebuilding pro bono, resulting in plans for a design charette. Being organized by Melissa Deshotels of DDX Design Group in Baton Rouge, the charette will bring together architects with various backgrounds, including Hector Lasala from UL Lafayette, Joel Breaux, who designed the 9/11 memorial at LAX Airport and has since returned home to Loreauville, and Brian Watson, a graduate of LSU’s School of Architecture who met Marks in college and flew down from Washington, D.C., when he heard about the fire.

Deshotels is looking to set an initial meeting date in the next few weeks. “I’d like to bring everybody to the table all at once,” she says. “The first thing will be a general meeting, and after the first or second charette, we’ll pull in the community to get involved.” Marks and Deshotels also hope to partner with state universities to get students involved in the rebuilding. Nicholls State had already agreed to help with branding before the fire, and students in Assistant Professor of Art and Graphic Design Trisha Dubina’s service learning class this semester will create a logo and color palette to be used during the rebuild.

The students were really excited to learn about the project before the fire,” says Dubina, “but now they are more invested and excited to be able to help. It’s a non-traditional situation where you have an organization that doesn’t have a physical building to identify with, so we’re starting from scratch.”

Watson drew some preliminary plans for the new building based on conversations he and Marks had in the past. “We both agree that this is a huge opportunity for the area to embark on a green and LEED-accredited project (LEED is an acronym for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), and we are actively exploring sustainable and environmentally sensitive design approaches for the overall design.

“We also are drawing from the local vernacular for inspiration and pulling from the established scale and proportion of Armaudville’s structures and neighboring communities’ historic architecture. We believe that the design approach should reflect the ideals and attitude of the community at large. Basically, the new project will be a physical and sculptural embodiment of what has been happening at NuNu’s and the region over the years, providing the music, food, art and the culture with a fitting and sophisticated home.”

LEED-accredited projects are those that meet the standards of the green building certification system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council. Lasala and Breaux are also proponents of green design, and Breaux says he sees the new NuNu’s as having a strong cultural connection between the building and the landscape. He also wants to ensure that the new structure enhances the social and cultural aspects NuNu’s already embodies.

“What I find interesting about NuNu’s is it’s one of the few places around town or in south Louisiana where you have food, music and art on equal footing,” says Breaux. “It really is a cultural center.”

It was the culture that drew Hamilton in to Armaudville, and she says NuNu’s has “official support from the state because it’s a cultural district. George is on the state arts council, and the Frederick School has been a beneficiary of a number of the Division of the Arts grants, so it’s definitely one of the strong, visible cultural programming assets in the state.”

Since the fire, she has researched grant opportunities and ways to get compensation for affected artists, as well as had conversations with Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism Secretary Pam Breaux about other ways the department can be of assistance.

Marks was already in the process of applying for a grant
from the Ford Foundation that will award up to $100,000 in support of an arts organization’s development of an artistic space. He’d begun the paperwork with renovation in mind and has until Sept. 17 to now rewrite the grant as a rebuild. Both Hamilton and Community Development Director for the Louisiana Division of the Arts’ Office of Cultural Development Kelly Pepper met with Marks the day after the fire to discuss the new focus of the grant and help ensure it gets turned in on time.

“We’ve met with him and pulled in another person who can help rework it and direct it to the criteria that the grant’s designed for,” Hamilton says. “It’s a sizeable one that’s definitely worth getting your act together for, and I still think he has a really good shot at it.”

Marks says additional funds for the rebuild, which will happen in stages over a series of up to five years, will come from fundraising efforts and hopefully other foundation grants. NuNu’s fundraising got under way Aug. 22, with photographer Philip Gould shooting a group of beauty queens in locations around Arnaudville for a benefit calendar. A benefit dance, dubbed “New-Nu’s is better than No-Nu’s” followed at Blue Moon Saloon Aug. 29. Future fundraisers include an “Out of the Ashes” benefit at The Alamo on Sept. 25, where artists will create one-of-a-kind works for auction using charred pieces from the burned building. Future events through 2011 include a “Dream of the Marionettes” performance at the Delta Grand in Opelousas, fine art auction in Baton Rouge and cabaret show at Casa Azul in Grand Coteau.

While Marks is still his usual cheerful self, his creative juices flowing with the prospect of a new project, he has his moments of sadness. “It was tough, still is tough,” he says. “It’s a terrible thing, but I think with all these folks coming together, the end result’s going to be. I don’t want to say bigger, it’s going to be better.”

**HOW TO HELP**

Become a member of the nonprofit Frederick School by filling out an application at frederick-arts.org, calling Jill Hackney at 225-205-3987 or emailing her at jill_hackney@yahoo.com.

Purchase a “New-Nu’s is better than No-Nu’s” T-shirt by calling 706-7391 or attending a fundraiser.

Donate to a fundraiser by checking the list of what’s needed on phoenixrisingnunu.homestead.com/.

Sponsor an event or plan your own by calling or emailing Hackney (at contact info above).

Submit your name and phone number and the area you specialize in if you want to volunteer to Twahna Harris by emailing mharris59@cox.net.

Support or donate to one of the organizations, like the Acadiana Center for the Arts, Louisiana Partnership for the Arts and National Endowment for the Arts, as they in turn support NuNu’s and the Frederick School.