Arnaudville Renaissance

An artists community led by George Marks is changing the face of Arnaudville — despite resistance from the mayor.

By Erin Zaunbrecher  Photos by Terri Fensel
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 AREA 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.

The market is the new gathering spot in town and also the site for Tuesday lunch meetings, where townspeople discuss local issues. These meetings have sparked the development of a monthly farmer's market at Arnaudville Feed & Seed and gallery concerts in a grassy lot next to Rust's Food Center. In the past year, more than 10 artists have either relocated their studios or moved to Arnaudville permanently, and it's only a taste of what's to come if Marks is successful in giving the town new life as an artists community.

An abstract painter who exhibits all over the United States and is a co-owner of Lafayette's Grand Contemporary Gallery, 37-year-old Marks returned home to Arnaudville from Baton Rouge three years ago to be with his family when his father died. He got hooked on the simplicity of life in the rural area and stayed. About a year after moving back, Marks and his sister, Roxanne, and nephew Jermaine Rivette, also a painter, decided to try and jumpstart development in town to bring Arnaudville back to some semblance of its earlier days as a bustling with dance clubs, hotels and two train depots. Rivette purchased the former Western Auto building for the artists' Town Market, and Marks bought the gas station next to it for his residence and studio. The original idea was to give artists a place to eat and possibly sell their work, but the market soon grew into a studio and teaching space.

Most people in town have embraced Arnaudville's new face. Melanie Robin Olivier at Rust's Food Center has provided artists with rent-free studio space, while TJ. Bergeron, owner of Arnaudville Feed & Seed, is hosting the farmers market every third Saturday morning. Betty Arnaud Roy, president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce, is compiling a local artists directory and researching how to establish a historic district. But the town's mayor, Kathy Richard, hasn't given Marks and the artists community a warm welcome. She refused artist William Jove's attractive offer to buy the town's defunct water tower and long-shuttered jail, and many citizens feel she's unwilling to participate in dialogue regarding the artists community. Some say she's holding an old grudge against resident Debbie Lagrange, but others believe she's trying to hold on to her political power. She openly attacked Marks after the March town meeting, accusing him of trying to sabotage her campaign for re-election this fall, he responded by sending her a three-page letter explaining his motives for "rebuilding" his community and requesting she put aside personal feelings and unnecessary politics.

Without the support of the mayor, Arnaudville could lose its second major resident artist and appear unwelcoming to other artists looking to move in.

ON A RECENT MONDAY AT THE MARKET, MARKS is wearing his signature green long-sleeved T-shirt and paint-splattered tennis shoes and sitting in a rocking chair in front of a picture window overlooking the bayou. "I feel like I'm a better person and a better artist [in Arnaudville]," he says. "I don't feel like I have to sell now. I can take more risks with my work, not feel guilty that I'm not painting and not just send work off anywhere."

After coming back home, he says his work became more minimal, and he realized the lines in many of his pieces were inspired by power lines running along Hwy. 31 from Arnaudville to Lafayette. He wanted other artists to experience that feeling.

The Rhode Island-based Alliance of Artists Communities defines an artists community as "places where artists can simply work on their art." According to the alliance's Web site, 60 percent of artists communities are located in rural or small-town environments. While the organization focuses mostly on artists residences and not entire communities, Executive Director Deborah O'Neill says that trend is changing. "We actually do have a number of cities attracting artists to live and work, adding that creative spark," she says. "A lot of the different research has pointed to smart communities, creative economies."

Asked what he sees in Arnaudville in five or 10 years, Marks says he'd like to have an independent bookstore and art supply shop. "I can tell you what I don't see," he notes. "I don't see a cute village. I don't see money shops. I don't see huge droves of people all the time. I do see people walking, because that's starting to happen already. I see a place where it's still genuine, real, rural. It's cleaner."

Upon first glance, it might look like Marks persuaded friends and other artists to move to Arnaudville and share his idea. But most who are investing in the community and relocating there say it was something about the town itself — with its junction of two bayous, ridges in the landscape and genuine townpeople — that brought them there.

Loti Henderson and her husband, Tom Pierce, both musicians and nyele dancers from the northeast, first started coming to Acadiana 10 years ago for the festivals. "One time Tom and I came down, and we got lost coming through Grand Coteau and went through Arnaudville," says Henderson. "It's a peaceful place." When she met Marks several years later at Grand Contemporary, she says, "He talked about the artists community I've always wanted.

Henderson, who's also a sculptor and painter, secured one of the Town Market's four studio spaces; she chose the one in back overlooking the junction of the two bayous. Eric Clark, an art and music psychotherapist, will soon move into the space next to Henderson; Alex Nunez, a silkscreen artist evacuee from New Orleans, occupies the space in the middle, and filmmaker Michele Roubet has the front spot.

Henderson and Pierce also purchased a building down the bayou on Fuselier Road for a fiddle shop, music jams and a music studio space for Lori. They partnered with Marc Taylor, a Cajun fiddler whose father was born and raised in Arnaudville. Their Cajun Fiddles sign in the shape of the instrument hangs in the wind, while Cajun music blasts from the back screened porch looking over Bayou Fuselier. Lori plans to move into her studio in May and rent out her Lafayette house to make a permanent move. "We want to be real members of Arnaudville," she says.
Fuselier Road is quickly becoming a row of development. Resident Debbie Lagrange has purchased a white and green clapboard building to be used for literary retreats, and John and Toni Daigre, owners of Cypress City Antiques in Lafayette, are working on Turtle Cove Studio next door. William Lewis' temporary residence is also on this strip, his collection of paintings and sculpture displayed for passersby on the street behind glass picture windows.

Closer to the market, a short walk across the town bridge, two women from Seattle are renovating the old Teche Club for a film and music production studio and performance venue. Across the street, Roxanne Marks has purchased a blue house for What a Woman Wants, her gift shop. Hiddenwomen of the sea jewelry maker and painter Kathleen Whitehurst is waiting on land clearance for an artists village next to Roxanne's location.

Marks always wanted to live in an artists community. "But I never thought that it would work here," he says. "I never thought that it could thrive here. You always hear that art exists in the big city. It ends up there, but you don't see the process there." When his market opened on the weekends last November, artists and local customers started showing up at the door. About 23 artists are currently members at a cost of $30 a month and 10 percent of a sale. The perception of an artists community is that it brings in artists from other parts of the country, which has happened to some degree, but for other artists it's given them an outlet close to home.

"I think there were already a lot of those people here," says Marks. "I just don't think that they had any type of venue or any type of place where they could come together." There was a certain level of desperation here for something, and it could have been Martin Mills honestly," he continues. "It just so happened that I moved back, and they started buying into the idea." Now that he's jumpstarted development, Marks says he just wants to paint. "I'll always give my two cents," he says, "but I have to be hands on? No. There's some cool stuff happening, and I had nothing to do with it other than wave the wand a little bit."
got the impression she didn’t want to sell
the building to him, even thought it hadn’t
been used in more than 27 years. “She was
all smiles,” he says, “if it seemed there
might not be much possibility. I got the
idea she wasn’t interested.”

The plot of land that the tower is on
also contains a reservoir, the old jail and
former town hall. Lewis made a proposal to
purchase all of the buildings for $30,000
and use the tower for his residence, the
town hall as a studio and open the old jail
as a bed and breakfast. Richard denied the
request, arguing that the town should not
sell its property in case it needed the space
some day. More recently, she claimed the
water rower contains mold
and
would be a
liability to the city.

“She lied from the get-go with the whole
thing,” says Mayor Pro Temp Chad Hebert.
“She goes back and forth saying she’s all for
what’s right. I just don’t see that.”

Richard did not return multiple phone
calls or respond to interview requests for
this story.

Hebert says the mold claim was just a
stalling tactic. “To be perfectly honest, I
don’t think it was really even an issue,” says
Hebert, who drafted an ordinance to sell
the building to Lewis. “I was opposed to the selling of
town property from the beginning,” he
says. “The town shouldn’t sell to certain
individuals.” (Lagrange has publicly stated
he’d be in support of a sale to Wal-Mart.)

“I’m not opposed to the art moving in,”
he continues. “The buildings aren’t worth
much. I don’t understand why the guy
wants to live in it.”

Lewis says he never asked that the
building be cleaned and was ready to pur-
chase the tower as is.

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Obalil says it's natural for towns to experience some growing pains. "It's difficult to inspire that kind of change without seeing the community change too." The local community needs to have some real frank discussions with itself about what it's willing to sacrifice, change and willing to see change, and how attempting to attract any kind of new population is going to impact that.

MARKS AND HIS MARKET GROUP say that even without the support of the mayor, the artists community is moving forward. And they plan to get the town to follow the example of Breaux Bridge and New Iberia, which have historic districts.

Arnaudville is ripe for restoring its old buildings and creating a downtown area. Dickie Breaze, known for his work in helping restore Breaux Bridge and most notably Café Des Amis, was a guest at the February town meeting. He admitted his interest is partly out of selfishness, because he'd like to invest in the town, but also praised Arnaudville for its efforts.

"You've tried to get the town to do something, the impossible," he said. "You took a very wonderful community and made it a destination. Art is economic development. I'm excited about what you're doing. I could be a potential investor." He advised the town to create a historic district for the artist community so it can compete with other towns for investor dollars.

Mayor Richard sat stone-faced during Breaze's speech, passing a note to his secretary at one point.

Arendt Henderson admits that the political tension is draining. Collectively, the group agrees the struggle needs to be involved. But while Richard publicly said the fight is tearing the town apart, Marks doesn't agree. "We have all these people that have an interest in that town that are going to these meetings. They're not even residents yet, and that kind of says something about all this." Before the mayor town issue, town meetings were packed with standing room only.

"It was just a wonderful community and made it a wonderful opportunity to turn the town around and get the children interested in something other than drugs and alcohol - art and music and wonderful, educated, intelligent people," she says. "We want to keep Arnaudville rural, we want to keep the small-town atmosphere. We don't want new, large subdivisions popping up everywhere. By taking the existing buildings that we have, they've fallen into disrepair, the artists can come in and improve the area. It's at no expense to the town, at no expense to the community." Roy was born and raised in Arnaudville and moved back 12 years ago. "It's hard for me to imagine why we're not jumping up and down and hurrying up to put this in William's hands and do anything we can to help this movement," she says. "Because it's the most exciting thing that's happened to Arnaudville in a long, long time."

She remembers when Arnaudville was just a small farming community dotted with cotton gins. "We used to be farming, but it's not the little farmers anymore, like my father was 50 years ago when we planted cotton, corn and potatoes," she says. "Now, the new seed is the artists. George has planted that. The new crop in town is artists."