Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, the firstborn of Louis and Lucille Babineaux’s seven children, assumed responsibilities at an early age. Alcee Babineaux, a local farmer and store owner, entrusted his 12-year-old granddaughter, along with one other cousin, to help with the inventory at his country store. It likely honed her organizational skills and business sense. Noting that her grandfather was tall in stature compared to most of the men in the community and spoke with a “gruff” voice, Kathleen indicated that he could be somewhat intimidating and test the sensitivities of the children. To be “the ones” who could work with and for Grandfather in the store represented a position of honor and pride.

This same store became the locale of a refugee tent city, down the road from the well-documented Camp Roy, established in the aftermath of the “1927 Flood in Acadia” for thousands of refugees. Two roads define the airport boundaries: Hwy 182 and the Coteau Road. According to the Governor, Camp Roy was on the airport property, possibly spilling over from the “Doremus farm,” noted as the site of the “white-refugee camp” in the June 11, 1927 edition of The Enterprise (and referenced in Glenn and Carl Brasseaux’s book titled “Crevasse!”). Her grandfather’s store was situated two miles down Coteau Road from the camp. The Babineaux house and store were across the street from each other at the end of that two-mile stretch in that first 45-degree curve. One still could see the airport property from Coteau Road. Located on high ground, many people gathered there. Kathleen’s grandmother actually welcomed Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, on the steps and porch of his store. Told that Hoover would eventually be elected President of the United States, Alcee politely invited the man to “take a chair.” Governor Blanco muses at the reserved manner of her grandfather in the company of the “Recovery Czar.”

Kathleen’s grandmother, Aline, kept things running smoothly in the home while other duties demanded Alcee’s attention. Kathleen describes her as “a large woman with a large heart.” She spoke mostly French—very little English. She loved to cook (especially for large family reunions). She played little tunes on the piano; she taught these to the children and tried to teach little ditties to her pet parrot (who spoke only English, having been “well traveled” from an English home). Mother to 10 children, she had plenty of
for the postal service, Sentney found other children in tow, had to look for new work. Her parents always worked side-by-side, recalls Governor Blanco. In Maringouin, when she was very young, they ran a restaurant east of the Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge. Before she was school aged, Louis purchased land from his father and moved back to the country. They started a carpet cleaning business; Louis did the labor while Lucille ran the dispatch and administration. After Alceee passed away, the store shut down, the lot was sold, and Kathleen’s parents built a new grocery store nearby with the cypress wood from the old one.

Lucille kept the store and her father continued to clean carpets and sometimes cut hair, for he was a licensed barber. All this provided them a good enough life with a modest income.

Louis loved to travel – a trait characteristic of the Babineaux family. Her dad made a point of taking the family on a road trip every year to vast destinations that included Mexico, California, Canada, and Washington DC. Any place that could be reached by car was fair game. The wife and all seven kids would pack into their station wagon with a travel trailer, and away they would go. “Father always had a list of highlights to see along the way,” says Kathleen and for each excursion, they would make a point of visiting those places. Kathleen recalls the trip to New York City as her favorite. At that time, visitors

experience at keeping things under control.

Kathleen’s father, Louis, was the fifth child and youngest boy, with two brothers and seven sisters. “He was spoiled, and he liked to spoil.” As a young man, he wedded Lucille, the daughter of Sentney and Ella Fremin.

Sentney Fremin had been Avery Island’s postmaster and did the mail route. Additionally, he helped manage the Avery Island general store before moving the family to Burke Station, a train stop at the crossing of Coteau Road and the railroad track. Consequently, the Fremins lived fairly close to the Babineauxs. While continuing to deliver mail ways to earn income for his family (for instance, he operated scales to weigh sugar cane in the fields, raised some poultry and ran a dairy that provided some milk to Pelican Creamery).

WWII was raging by the time Louis and Lucille married. A boyhood bout with blood-poisoning, and the after-effects to his knee, made him ineligible for the military. Louis took a job in Lake Charles that supported the war effort and liked his job, but when the war ended in 1945, so did his employment. “First rights” for jobs at home were given to the returning servicemen, and the Babineauxs, already with

Kathleen Blanco poses for a graduation photo. At 19 she began her second year at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (USL, now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette).
could go all the way to the top of the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, the tallest building in the world when she visited, starry eyed, at age 18. The World Trade Center north tower surpassed the record in 1972. Now the Empire State Building is again the tallest skyscraper in New York, but not the world.

Of all the places Governor Blanco has traveled, Louisiana will always hold her heart. Governor Blanco reflects, “What I really love is the culture that is defined by the people of Louisiana. The people are wonderful. [The state culture offers] a very textured environment ... to anyone who wants to live here or visit here. If you like ‘bland,’ you will not enjoy Louisiana,” she warns. “If you like an exciting kind of life, then Louisiana is a place that is exciting AND interesting.” She goes on to explain the richness of character of different areas and cities within the State.

Interesting and exciting, indeed! Kathleen recalls that after her family returned to the farm, she was continuously surrounded by a crowd of cousins and family members who were full of vitality and curiosity about the world.

As Kathleen remembers another gathering,
were engaged. She has told her daughters, “Dating can be fluid; marriage is forever ... When you get married, it will hopefully be your final decision.”

Kathleen and Ray Blanco married in 1964. She was teaching at Breaux Bridge High in St. Martin Parish when her first child was on its way. Once it became obvious that a teacher was going to have a baby, the ethics code of the day required that she take a leave of absence. With six children all born between two and three years apart, it became evident that she might as well stay at home. That, she did. Coach Blanco had become a popular football coach at the University. They lived and enjoyed the traditional family life. Ray was always the educator, while Kathleen managed the household and kept strict budgetary oversight of the finances.

As Kathleen reached age 40, she felt the drive to get out more and explore some of her own creativity. Secondarily, with that many children and impending costs of college tuition, she and Ray began considering ways to bring in some extra income. They started a political polling company and dabbled in marketing research. Eventually, Kathleen applied for a position with the Census Bureau. She explains, “I didn’t know what I was getting into when I went out for the interview. I didn’t know I would have to take a test.” She may have been serious, but one might laugh. How many have been in those same shoes? As it was, the person scoring the highest on this test would go on to be hired as the District Manager for the upcoming census.

Kathleen landed that position. “I thought that was pretty brave on their part to hire someone who had been out of the workforce for 15 years.”

As it turned out, the human resources department bravery was well rewarded. At a time when unemployment in Lafayette was hovering around 2% with the average receptionist in the petroleum industry bringing home $12 per hour, Kathleen was faced with the task of employing, in a short timeframe, a workforce of 1,200 who would earn hourly wages of only $6. While that was double the minimum wage of the time, the competition was fierce. With essentially no budget earmarked for recruitment, she (and the core team she had hired) resorted to some innovative means to stimulate interest in the census job opportunities. Kathleen and Barbara Roy, her good friend whom she had hired as a recruiter, did radio, television and newspaper promotions that
targeted an unconventional workforce of retirees and teachers and students. Her district was charged with gathering the 1980 census information for an area that encompassed 11 parishes. They accomplished their goal. She lauds the work, coordination, and talent of her top ranks with helping make the operation run smoothly and without any significant internal trouble.

Her success with the 1980 Decennial Census highlighted her ability to identify and attract talent and continue her service to the public sector. In 1984, Governor Blanco was elected to the State Legislature. Five years later, she became the first woman elected to the Public Service Commission, and then the first woman elected by her peers to chair the Commission. She went on to serve for eight years as Lieutenant Governor before she was elected as Governor of the State of Louisiana.

Somewhere along the road, Kathleen became friends with Lindy Boggs (then, Louisiana's Congresswoman), who took Kathleen under her wing along the road to the Capitol. The Governor has said that she feels like she has always known Lindy. According to her staff, "Lindy used to overnight with the Blanco's whenever she had speaking engagements in Lafayette. She saw Lindy as the ultimate woman, very feminine, effective and respected by all who knew her. Lindy was always supportive, and she made herself extremely available to Kathleen Blanco and to other women."

Governor Blanco's 24-year service record shines with impressive strides of improvement for the State of Louisiana and its citizens. She made significant reforms and improvements in quality, accountability and funding in the education sector. Reforms to help children, the juvenile justice system, healthcare and infrastructure were brought to the table. She championed economic development for the State, attracting billions of dollars in capital investment and new jobs from the private sector. She helped create the Louisiana Optical Network Initiative (LONI) whereby colleges and universities are connected, "at the speed of light," to the fastest and largest supercomputers in the world, enhancing the broad spectrum of research capabilities.

Thanks to Governor Blanco, all property tax records should be available to the public via the Internet - a step taken to bring honesty and fairness in tax assessments. Ethics reform was no stranger to Blanco's administration, having enacted legislation forbidding all fundraising for both the
governor and legislators during legislative sessions and requiring Executive Branch lobbying registration and reporting. Also, while in office, the Governor pushed for and secured Congressional approval for a share of off-shore revenues generated by oil and gas drilling. These touch only the tip of the iceberg.

At the same time, Kathleen remained the devoted mother. While in the legislature, even after late sessions and the hour-long commute from Baton Rouge, she would return home to help with homework. On weekends, she would have multiple meals cooking on the stove in preparation of the week ahead. She would have pots or pans on all four burners, cooking an assortment that might include chili, spaghetti sauce, six round steaks and a soup or gumbo (like her shrimp and egg gumbo recipe shared in this issue), in addition to chickens roasting in the oven. The food would be packaged for upcoming meals for her family and the constant contingency of friends and visitors.

Asked about her other hobbies, she recalled earlier times when she would paint or “tinker” on the piano. She likes to read and plans to start bike-riding again. She lavishes opportunities to go duck hunting in Vermilion or Cameron Parishes or visit favorite fishing holes in Vermilion Bay and troll the Southwest Pass into the Gulf of Mexico. If you see her, ask her to tell you about that

50-pound drum fish!

She has more time for this life, now. Like so many mothers before her and so many who will follow, she is adjusting to changes associated with a downsized household. Smaller meals, more quiet, more reflection. She, like so many, has had to experience the dreaded heartache of losing a child. Yet in all this, Kathleen Blanco will not ever be idle or without a cause. She has joined the research taking place at UL’s Abdalla Hall and makes public appearances with a new mission of encouraging community involvement. “I would like to encourage young men and women who don’t

perceive themselves as the political types to consider public office or public service, because our country and our communities need clear-thinking men and women who can “think with their heads and lead with their hearts” — a phrase that has been attributed to Montana’s Governor Brian Schweitzer’s address to the Job Corps graduation exercise in March, 2006.

The Governor had more to say: “I would also like to focus on women, because so few women feel that they can function in the political arena. I would tell them that if they don’t — if they all reject election — the political landscape will always be a place where others will be making life decisions, and that we should, as women, be sharing in those decision-making opportunities with our men.”
As for her history-making time as the first female Governor of Louisiana, Kathleen was faced with incredible challenges; namely, some of the worst natural disasters we have ever experienced. An unforgettable storm named Katrina brought a rude awakening that rocked the foundations of New Orleans and revealed the cost of neglect to the levy system’s fortification and years of damage to the coastal wetlands. Her sister storm, Hurricane Rita, showed us nature’s wrath expand to the west. To her credit, Governor Blanco directed the creation of the evacuation plan that moved an unprecedented 1.3 million people to safety in the 36-hour notification window before Katrina’s arrival. She thought with her head and led with her heart. Attention continued throughout her governorship to fix aspects of state-wide emergency preparedness that needed improvement. Planning and action items included logistics for base camps and supply distribution, incorporating broader access to transportation, warehousing emergency supplies for times of need, improving evacuation plans, equipping the state with portable structures to support communications throughout an emergency – including first response phases, and coordinating the communication systems of public safety officers and agencies to make it an interoperative network. While we may never forget that Governor Blanco’s term of office crossed the paths of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Governor’s focus stayed on expansion and growth far and beyond the destructive forces of nature.

The landscape is forever changed and we, as a people, are wiser for the challenges we have faced, knowing the future will unfold with new lessons. History brings surprises good and bad; and while nature has become more predictable, we have never been able to control her. The administration of Governor Blanco faced unprecedented challenges, maintained its integrity and addressed these challenges with firm resolution against unexpected odds. Governor Blanco returns to Lafayette with a wealth of experience. Expect to see her. While she will have more time to enjoy her friends, family and nine grandchildren, she will not be cloistered beyond the reach of her people, the Louisianas she loves. Acadiana welcomes the Governor home after a job well done....

The Blanco’s enjoy a Saints game. (L-R) front row: 3rd oldest Nicole Blanco, 2nd oldest Monique Blanco Boulet, 5th Piar Blanco Eble; back row: the oldest Carmen Blanco, son-in-law Michael Eble, Governor Kathleen Blanco and Coach Raymond Blanco, 4th Raymond Blanco, Jr., and son-in-law David Boulet.