‘Lache Pas’ helps CODOFIL hold on

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Hundreds gathered Sunday in and around the Cochon restaurant in River Ranch to eat, socialize — in French, mostly — and dance to help raise money for the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana.

Restaurants including the French Press, the Saint Street Inn and Johnson's Boucanniere helped cater the event, called "Lache Pas" after the French phrase that means "hold on," "don't let go" or even "never give up."

CODOFIL and its supporters are raising money to make up for a $100,000 cut in funding for the organization in Gov. Bobby Jindal's state government budget.

"CODOFIL did not initiate this. This bubbled up from the ground," said CODOFIL Director Joseph Dunn. "The initiative came from the people."

Dunn said the cut, which happened June 15, took away around 40 percent of the agency's budget.

"We would literally not be able to pay the electric bill if it wasn't for fundraisers like this," he added.

Toby Rodriguez, who coordinated the event, said he did so by being a common link among the various organizations he'd been part of in the past.

"When the cut happened, I called up a bunch of friends and asked, 'Are we going to take this lying down or are we going to stand up and do something about it?'" he said. "The right people stood up to answer the call."

Rodriguez said French had a "distinct presence" in his house growing up.

"My father's first language was French. He didn't learn English until he went to school," he said. "However, when I was a child, my dad was not encouraged to teach us French."

Rodriguez called himself "semi-fluent" in the language, but also "not happy" with just that.

"I want more for my daughter," he said. "I want her to be raised in a Cajuniana that embraces its language."

Festival International de Louisiane, which puts on the world's largest Francophone festival in Lafayette every spring, was among the organizations present at the fundraiser.

"The whole reason I got involved with Festival International is because I associated with all of the people at the grass roots of the French immersion in Louisiana," said Lisa Stafford, the festival's programming coordinator.

French immersion helps students focus on learning French at school. Stafford's sons, Chris and Mike Stafford, are members of the regionally popular band Feufollet. As children, they toured French Canada as an earlier incarnation of their band.

"Without French immersion, Feufollet would not be playing on the stage behind me right now," Lisa Stafford said.

She made a point to say people weren't there to be against anything.

"We're not here to question or bash Bobby Jindal. A lot of people here are not Francophones. We're here to educate those people," she said. "It's a real heartfelt thing here — the music, the culture, the food. We wouldn't have any of it without the French influence."

Rodriguez said 100 percent of all money collected from ticket, food and merchandise sales will be donated to CODOFIL. He also said the food itself, as well as the material to make the merchandise, was all donated for the cause. The bands themselves, which included Feufollet, Wayne Toups and Cory Ledet & His Zydeco Band, were playing for free.

"It's our language," Rodriguez said. "If we don't put the fight up to save it, no one will."