President, provost look back on Southern Louisiana’s education system, poverty

C.J. Williams
cj.williams@thevermilion.com

Two portraits hang in the office of University of Louisiana at Lafayette President Joseph Savoie, Ed.D. The first, taken by Elmore Morgan Sr., is a picture of a young woman with several children in a boat in the Atchafalaya Basin. The woman is rowing the boat away from what appears to be a poverty-stricken residential area off the shore of the water. Savoie said he sees a special message in that photograph.

"As an education major, the message it sent to me: They've got all this poverty... but that teacher, through those books, is rowing them away from that poverty into something better," said Savoie.

The second picture, taken in 1939 by a WPA photographer, is of an African American woman teaching a small class of just a few African American students. The classroom is visibly poverty-stricken and the teacher doesn’t quite have her math right on the chalkboard, but Savoie’s said the woman knows that providing an education to her students is the only way out of their desperate situation.

The common denominator isn’t hard to find: education is key.

Savoie got choked up describing the first photo. It touches him not only because of its emphasis on education but also because the young woman in the photo strongly resembles his mother. Savoie’s mother got her degree in education from UL Lafayette (then known as Southwestern Louisiana Institute) in 1940, the same year the picture was taken.

As an alumnus of UL Lafayette, Savoie followed in his mother’s footsteps as an education major. He said he always wanted to be a high school history teacher, and he grew up in Sulphur, Louisiana, enriched in Acadiana and its culture.

"It's an accepting and inviting culture," Savoie said. "I think that has a lot to do with its history of people who were desperate and struggling to survive. As people struck out they went into undeveloped land and had to make it on their own. Folks came in and they built communities around that. I think that same kind of spirit exists today. It's just part of the DNA of south Louisiana."

Savoie described Sulphur as an interesting place to grow up in because of its distinct influences and diverse separate communities. He said the southern part of town, where he lived, was deeply Cajun. His father's family was from Cameron Parish. English was his father's second language, and Savoie's grandmother refused to speak any English.

Savoie's Acadian roots are echoed by the university's provost.

Provost Jamie Hebert, Ph.D., an Abbeville native, credits his father for the beginnings of his connection to UL Lafayette. His father, one of 14 children, was the first person in his family to go to college, attending SLI.

As president, Provost Jamie Hebert, Ph.D., has made it a point to talk about the importance of education and its role in poverty reduction. In an interview with The Vermilion on Friday, Hebert discussed the role of education in the lives of students and the community.

"The first educational opportunity for my entire family was on this campus," said Hebert. "Everything that happened, and will happen, in higher education in our lives is always going to be tied back to the very first steps my dad took onto this campus."

Hebert's father studied mathematics, and Hebert said that inspired him to major in statistics and become a self-described "data geek." He said he recalls his undergraduate experience at the university as the most transformational point of his life, and described a diverse, supportive faculty that helped frame his time as a student.

"I met faculty who believed in me, faculty from backgrounds that I wasn't familiar with, not only in terms of their disciplines but in terms of their cultures, their religions," said Hebert. "This place gave me an opportunity to experience all of that in a very rich way in a short amount of time."

Hebert said the people that make up Acadiana are his favorite part of the culture, crediting the residents for all of the things that the region is known for.

"Hands down the greatest asset of Louisiana in my opinion is the people," said Hebert. "A lot of people will say 'I love the food, or the art, or the music,' but all of that comes from the heart of the people. Without the people and without the passion for life that exists down here we wouldn't have any of those other assets."

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