

# LIVING

THE ADVOCATE.COM | SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2025

1D



**Terry Robinson**

FAITH MATTERS

## Hospice chaplain tells story of faith, trauma and renewal

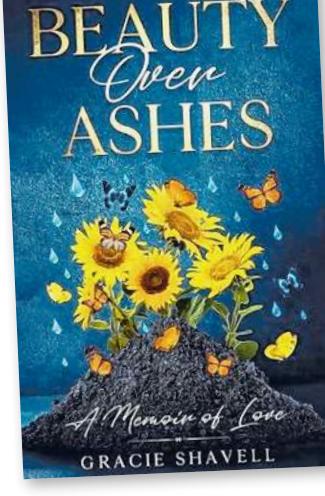
Don't expect a long read when you pick up Gracie Shavell's first book, "Beauty Over Ashes: A Memoir of Love."

But do expect a powerful one as the Baton Rouge hospice chaplain and Bethany Church member shares her deeply personal journey from child trauma to her strong faith.

Though concise at a mere 45 pages, "Beauty Over Ashes" packs a punch, beginning with the impactful opening chapter titled "El Nehekumah: The God Who Gives Comfort." Shavell quickly takes readers to that fateful day of March 1996, when her mother suffered what turned out to be a fatal seizure.

That was also the day that young Shavell showed the instincts that now guide her work with hospice patients.

"I vividly remember comforting my older cousins who were in my bedroom awaiting the final verdict of my mother's status," Shavell writes. "I went to them to comfort them. I remember hugging them and telling them that 'Everything is going to be okay.' It was at that moment that four-year-old me acted like a caregiver and the caregiving hasn't ended."



Shavell's road to caregiver wasn't without its challenges and pain.

It wasn't until her early teen years that growing up without a mother caused Shavell to have bitterness, anger and resentment toward God.

More family deaths only compounded her resentment.

"As life began to change for me, the older I became, I battled with how a loving God would allow me to go through such an early age," writes Shavell, a native of Starkville, Mississippi.

Her world grew dark. She became rebellious and suicidal. She explored demonic activities and engaged in "sexual sin." The trauma of losing her mother so young affected her until she was 30, Shavell writes.

However, through school and street ministry work in New Orleans, Shavell found purpose and a relationship with God — though she had grown up in the church — that has remained unwavering.

"My surrender to the Lord on December 31, 2009, was only the beginning of my transformation into being a 'new creation in Christ.' The more I surrendered to the Lord, the more my life began to reflect that surrender," Shavell wrote.

She devotes the remainder of the book to sharing her spiritual and professional journeys, including her entry into social work, her studies at New Orleans Baptist Theological

► See **CHAPLAIN**, page 2D

People take their time to get their last photos of the traditional Christmas Eve bonfires along the Mississippi River in Lutcher. | STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL JOHNSON



## BORN BY THE RIVER

Before the Christmas Eve bonfires, here's how Lutcher and Gramercy got their names

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA

Contributing writer

On Christmas Eve, thousands of people will enjoy the annual spectacle of bonfires on the levee in the St. James Parish towns of Lutcher and Gramercy.

These River Road communities exude a sense of history, one in which colonists from France and Germany, as well as enslaved West Africans and French Acadian refugees, settled over the course of the 1700s and created a plantation economy still discernible today.

But agriculture development and town formation are two different processes, and historically along the River Road, the latter was rather scarce. Only two sizable towns emerged between Baton Rouge and greater New Orleans before the Civil War: Plaquemine and Donaldsonville, both of which formed at bayous



PROVIDED PHOTO BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA

The former Lyon Cypress Lumber Company headquarters in Garyville

(Plaquemine and Lafourche) forking off from the Mississippi River. Most other antebellum River Road communities were little more than hamlets or enclaves gathered around courthouses, churches or intersections.

► See **BONFIRES**, page 3D

This paucity of urbanism may be attributed to the plantations themselves, which, by forcing and coercing Black families to live on-site, usurped social forces

## BR Italian restaurant opens second, bigger location

Various dishes from Bistro Italia, a restaurant that recently opened a new location on George O'Neal Road

PROVIDED PHOTO



BY MADDIE SCOTT

Staff writer

Bistro Italia opened its new location Dec. 2, and this spot is almost twice as large.

At 15255 George O'Neal Road, the new Bistro Italia location is fully open for business. The New Jersey-born owner, Jon Wilkinson, said they had grown out of the old spot at Coursey Boulevard a couple of years ago.

The Italian restaurant opened 12 years ago in 2014 and serves

pizzas, pastas, salads, wraps and sandwiches in a casual dining atmosphere.

Wilkinson wanted to create the same neighborhood restaurant, but aims to add a few new things. Some of those include expanded hours and some new menu items.

*Bistro Italia, 15255 George O'Neal Road, Baton Rouge. Open daily from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Sundays.*

# The case of the slippery, sliding salmon

**Dear Miss Manners:** I frequently attend luncheons at which the entree consists of bagels, lox (smoked salmon) and cream cheese.

Bagels have grown in size substantially since my childhood. Nowadays, a whole bagel is too much for me, so I carefully take one half with the tongs provided. I spread it with cream cheese, then lay a slice or two of lox on top.

But no matter how carefully or slowly or seemingly thoroughly I bite into this open-faced sandwich, it is inevitable that the slice of lox slides off the top with my teeth embedded in it — dangling there, despite the gluey nature of the cream cheese.



Judith Martin  
MISS MANNERS

This is very unattractive. I came up with a solution that works for me: I hold the bagel in one hand and a fork in the other. I press down with the fork near where I take each bite, thus anchoring the slice of lox. Success! Am I horribly off base?

**Gentle reader:** Well, the lox is staying on base, so we are halfway there.

You could also use a discreet finger to hold it in place, as long as you find a place to wash off any lingering fish smell afterward.

A third option would be to take the lox off of the bagel and cut it on your plate — preferably with a fish knife — and then return it

to the bagel, matching bite sizes with lox pieces.

But really, the fork method is acceptable, as long as you do it discreetly — and, Miss Manners warns, as long as you promise not to turn your head too quickly, stabbing yourself in the cheek in the process.

**Dear Miss Manners:** I wonder if there is a proper way to greet people you never speak to, but see all the time, when you suddenly run into them in an entirely different setting.

I refer to them as the "SNOW" people: those you see regularly at work, school, the gym, church or around the neighborhood, with whom you always exchange a friendly Smile, Nod Or Wave.

Then one day, you see them

at the supermarket. Your initial reaction is surprise (as if they don't exist outside the sphere you know them from), followed by joy and a desire to embrace them like a long-lost friend ... until you recover your senses and realize, with acute embarrassment, that you don't even know their first name!

It seems silly to say, "What are you doing here?" since the answer is obvious, but to ignore them seems equally rude. Do you exchange another friendly SNOW greeting and move on? Or does etiquette require actually speaking to them — for perhaps the first time ever?

**Gentle reader:** Another friendly SNOW. This necessitates, however, a third reaction in your reper-

toire, which is a somewhat deflated, but still polite, realization that you are only acquaintances. The person will likely mirror your reaction and be similarly content to move along.

But if you are ready to transition to a full-on greeting and name exchange, Miss Manners assures you that that is an option — provided you are able to muster mutual consent from the other party.

Send questions to Miss Manners at her website, [www.missmanners.com](http://www.missmanners.com); to her email, [dearmissmanners@gmail.com](mailto:dearmissmanners@gmail.com); or through postal mail to Miss Manners, Universal Uclick, 1130 Walnut St., Kansas City, MO 64106.

## BONFIRES

Continued from page 1D

that otherwise would have spawned nucleated communities. Plantations effectively replaced villages and towns, "providing" everything from housing and food production to light industry and a landing on the river. This is why plantations had names — just like towns.

Which brings us to Lutcher and Gramercy, the two communities most associated with the bonfire tradition, as well as nearby Garyville. None of these incorporated towns existed in antebellum times; rather, they were products of northern industrialists of the Gilded Age who saw lucrative opportunities along the bucolic River Road.

They speak to the fact that much of the blossoming of Louisiana's villages, towns and small cities occurred after the Civil War, in what the historian Lawrence N. Powell has described as "post-emancipation metropolitanization." That spurt of community formation came in part from the liberation of enslaved families, as they moved off former plantations, and in part from out-of-state industrialists, who saw new investment opportunities in post-bellum Louisiana.

In 1877, Pennsylvania timber tycoons Henry Jacob Lutcher and G. Bedell Moore built a mill in Orange, Texas, to process cypress trees from the Sabine River basin. In the infamous tactic that would come to be known as "cut and run," Lutcher and Moore soon depleted this natural resource and sought a new supply elsewhere. They found one 200 miles to the east, in the Maurepas Basin, access to which could be gained by laying railroad tracks along the River Road and digging canal networks into the swamp.

In 1889, the Lutcher-Moore Company bought the Chenet Plantation in St. James Parish, and in 1892, established



PROVIDED PHOTO BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA

Sugar mill in Gramercy

a depot in collaboration with the Mississippi Valley Railroad. The company then constructed what a Picayune journalist in 1895 described as "the largest and most complete sawmill plant in the state ... furnishing the beautiful crimson-heart Pontchartrain cypress to every state in the union, up into Canada."

In an adjacent parcel, the company laid out "wide, regular streets and shaded avenues lined with pretty and commodious houses," all with "the air of a thriving village," and named it after co-founder Henry Jacob Lutcher.

The quintessential company town, Lutcher became home to over 700 people employed at the ever-growing complex of factories producing lumber, shingles, sashes, doors and blinds.

While the workers and their families got by, the company and its investors prospered. "If we rich men of Louisiana did not show her wealth of products to the world," asked Henry Jacob Lutcher, "who would?"

As would happen elsewhere in Louisiana, however, the old-growth timber eventually grew scarce and inaccessible. The company shuttered its mill in 1931, leaving residents to return to farming or fur-trapping, else find jobs in the emerging oil-processing industry. Today, what remains of Lutcher's timber-town origins is a number of old company houses, many still occupied, and a wood hatchet on the town logo.

As Lutcher grew, competing companies also eyed

Maurepas timber and surveyed the River Road for industrial perches. In 1903, the Illinois-based Lyon Lumber Company acquired the Glencoe, Emilie and Hope plantations in St. John the Baptist Parish, which together extended deep into the Maurepas Basin.

Claiming it owned the finest cypress tract in the world, the Lyon Cypress Lumber Company built a sawmill equal to the task of harvesting it, located five miles downriver from Lutcher.

Like its competitor, Lyon also built housing for its workers and their families and named the town after its director, John W. Gary.

Featuring stores, a bank, theater, hotel, meeting hall, church and three train stations, Garyville exemplified the planned company town and rather quickly surpassed a thousand residents.

But as would happen in Lutcher, the boom soon turned to bust. After Lyon's cypress stands were all felled by 1915, the company switched to harvesting yellow pine on the northern side of the Maurepas Basin, where it established another company town called Livingston.

As the pine began to dwindle, a series of fires destroyed stacks of stored lumber, further undercutting profits. Operations ceased on both sides of the lake in 1931, same year as in Lutcher, and today, all that remains of Garyville's raison d'être is the old Lyon Lumber Company headquarters, recently a museum.

As Pennsylvania industrialists established Lutcher and gave it a German name, and as Illinois magnates founded Garyville and gave it an Anglo name, New York tycoons established another industrial town in between and named it after, of all things, their tony Manhattan neighborhood.

Their firm, Colonial Sugars, specialized in building centralized rail-linked sugar plants to replace the small plantation-based mills from antebellum times. They teamed with the Illinois Central Railroad, which ran its trains on the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley tracks through the sugar parishes from Baton Rouge down to New Orleans.

In 1894, Illinois Central executives acquired the Golden Grove Plantation in St. James Parish and collaborated with Colonial Sugars in building a modern sugar plant to process cane raised on regional plantations. Because the president and vice president of Illinois Central — both of whom were major stockholders in Colonial Sugars — lived in Manhattan's Gramercy Park, they named their Louisiana investment after their faraway urban neighborhood.

In 1902, Colonial Sugars greatly expanded its Gramercy operation by opening a full-scale refinery to granulate sugar for national distribution, for which it built worker housing, a school, church and recreational facilities. As Gramercy grew, the refinery changed hands, becom-

ing the Cuban-American Sugar Company, Savannah Foods and Industry and Imperial Sugar.

Now jointly operated by Cargill and Louisiana Sugar Growers and Refiners, Inc., the Gramercy plant is now second in size to the Domino refinery in St. Bernard Parish — which, incidentally, played a similar role in catalyzing Arabi and Chalmette following its opening in 1912.

Unlike the long-gone timber mills of its neighbors, Gramercy's raison d'être still dominates the townscape and remains an important part of the local economy.

The stories of Lutcher, Gramercy and Garyville, now home to over 8,000 people, serve to remind that River Road historical narratives often tend to elide the gritty circa-1900 industrial period, emphasizing instead the antebellum plantation era.

The communities of Avondale, Norco, Reserve and White Castle also trace their origins to industry (shipbuilding, oil processing, sugar processing and timber milling), while Plaquemine, established in 1819 as a transshipment point, reinvented itself in the 1890s by also becoming a timber town.

The late-1800s period of "micropolitanization" (town formation) also demonstrates that industry along the River Road did not begin



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