

Sen. Mary Landrieu praises 'Arnaudville experiment'

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Says state's culture can become economic gold mine



U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu visited St. Landry Parish Tuesday to lavish praise on the NUNU Arts and Culture Collective. / Freddie Herpin, Daily World

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu came to St. Landry Parish Tuesday to lavish praise on what locals have come to call the “Arnaudville experiment.”

She gave special praise to George Marks, an Arnaudville native, artist and entrepreneur who is considered the father of that experiment.

Like so many people, he had left his home in rural St. Landry Parish to seek opportunity in the big city. But in 2005, Hurricane Katrina destroyed his home and business in New Orleans.

He returned to his original home in Arnaudville and created what is now known as the NUNU Arts and Culture Collective.

Marks invited a number of other artists to join him, and the town is now home to artists from throughout the state. But the collective is involved in far more than just art, hosting festivals, gatherings, workshops, poetry readings and more.

Soon other businesses, catering to this new artistic community, followed.

“This is really extraordinary and will grow and grow,” predicted Landrieu, who called the experiment a model for the entire state “not just as a cultural center but as an economic driver.”

NUNU’s work, especially its effort to create a community-wide French immersion experience, is already drawing support from LSU in Baton Rouge, UL in Lafayette and Tulane in New Orleans, among others.

Landrieu said Louisiana already has a rich and diverse artistic, culinary and tourism economy.

She said projects such as this can help it develop into a movement that may in time come to rival the state’s oil and gas economy.

“This is not a cute, little thing. This is a big, big thing,” said Landrieu, who compared the state’s cultural movement to what country music has done for Nashville, Tenn., and the film industry has done for Los Angeles.

“We have to recognize and start believing in it,” Landrieu said. “Louisiana is sitting on a gold mine.”

Elizabeth “Boo” Thomas, president of the state’s Center for Planning Excellence, said Landrieu’s visit was prompted by a personal invitation from her organization.

“Sen. Landrieu is very interested in preserving what is unique about our Louisiana culture. We have been working with her for a number of years,” Thomas said.

“We told her about Arnaudville and what is happening here. She was very interested,” Thomas said.

Thomas said the center is currently active in 17 parishes but reserved much of her praise for Arnaudville. Thomas said her group has no money but does have access to planning experts and others who can help a community prosper.

What her group is primarily interested in doing is fighting against homogenization.

“A big Wal-Mart will come in and drain out the character of a community. It will become just another anytown. Our program seeks to keep what is unique in a community while still allowing for development,” Thomas said.

In most communities, she said the center's job is to find the energetic people who can make use of its expertise to make change possible.

"In Arnaudville, that group is already here," Thomas said. "This is a new model for us."

Jean-Claude Brunet, the French consul general for Louisiana, was also on hand for Landrieu's visit and also praised the Arnaudville experiment in general and NUNUs in particular.

Local activists are currently working with a similar program — Les Articulteur — in Redon in the Brittany region in France.

The Les Articulteur movement, which is rapidly spreading throughout Europe, is all about creative place-making.

Creative place-making, at its most basic, is a partnership between government, business and the arts to accentuate the best in a community. If done right, it helps generate new tax revenues for government, more customers for local businesses and more work for area artists who help bring all this together.

"They have a shared vision," Brunet said of the groups in Redon and Arnaudville.

"We want to continue to support this partnership that is finding innovative ways to bring business and artists and other partners together," Brunet said. "The arts, education and economy are coming together ultimately to create jobs and economic development."

He said the potential, especially for a rural community like Arnaudville, is tremendous.

"This will allow the community to keep its young people and talented people at home to develop the local economy on the basis of their shared roots," Brunet said.

Arnaudville Mayor Kathy Richard said she is already seeing the results of that effort, with both the arrival of new businesses and expansion of existing businesses.

"So many ingredients are being put together in the last couple of years to make Arnaudville an outstanding town," Richard said.