Graduates impacting Louisiana’s communities and beyond
Established in 1974, the University of Louisiana System is the largest postsecondary education system in the state, enrolling over 83,000 students and employing approximately 9,000 people at eight universities. The UL System produces the majority of the state’s public four-year graduates in education, business, engineering, nursing and pharmacy. UL System institutions are Grambling State University, Louisiana Tech University, McNeese State University, Nicholls State University, Northwestern State University, Southeastern Louisiana University, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

Graduates impacting Louisiana’s communities and beyond

Previously you may have read about the new tradition: non-traditional students. Or, perhaps you recall a piece that focused on valuable student learning experiences offered at University of Louisiana System institutions. Now I would like to direct your attention to results, specifically, what constitutes success for higher education.

There are numerous ways to measure productivity at college campuses from enrollment numbers to degrees awarded to (the limited but nonetheless popular) graduation rate.

These data are important, but they fail to capture the essential human element in all we do. Thus, I encourage you to read about Jennifer Clark, David Kinnison, Joseph Sonnier, John Weimer, Trey Rogers, Leslie Ross Smith, Kellie DeReese, Mike O’Neal, Marcus Morton and Antoine Smith and his wife, Dr. Jennifer Waller-Smith.

These former UL System students are making impacts in Louisiana’s communities and beyond. They are part of higher education’s success.

Access | Value | RESULTS
DeReese exemplifies teacher education excellence at McNeese

Northwestern grad uses degree to better her community

Tech alums take company from campus incubator to national innovation award

From custodian to teacher, UL Lafayette grad is “Still Mr. Sonnier”

Business grads from Nicholls go far

Southeastern grad is “The Numbers Man” at Shaw

From Grambling Gridiron to Gatorade

ULM grad is changing lives one syllable at a time
From custodian to teacher, UL Lafayette grad is “Still Mr. Sonnier”

By Christine Payton

Joseph Sonnier has worked at Port Barre Elementary since 1981. The older students remember him as Mr. Sonnier, the janitor. Now, he is Mr. Sonnier, the teacher.

“When I was still a custodian, they were just in kindergarten and coming up. You think that kids are not going to respect you because, ‘Oh, he was just a janitor.’ Those kids respect me more because they see what I’ve done and what I’ve accomplished,” he said in an interview.

Sonnier teaches math, science and social studies to two groups of third graders. Higher education has always been a lifelong dream. It took him eight years, while working full-time, to earn his bachelor’s degree in elementary education.

Neither of Sonnier’s parents completed high school. His father left school in the eighth grade and his mother dropped out when she was a junior in high school, both because of family obligations.
Even though his parents lacked diplomas, “they stressed the importance of education,” Sonnier said. He finished fifth in his class at Leonville High School in 1979. The following fall, he enrolled at Southern University, majoring in electrical engineering.

He eventually dropped out to help with family obligations. He went on to work at several jobs before becoming a custodian at Port Barre Elementary.

At home, Sonnier and his wife, Felicia, emphasized education—by their words and example. While their sons, Shaun and Maurice, were in high school, Felicia earned a degree in accounting from Louisiana Technical College.

After both boys had graduated from high school, Sonnier said to himself, “Well, I think it’s my turn.”

He enrolled at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, but was able to attend most of his classes in Eunice, thanks to the 2+2 elementary education program, in which UL Lafayette instructors teach courses on the LSU-Eunice campus.

He began in August 2000 as a part-time student and attended night classes, slowly earning college credits. By the spring of 2005, however, the remaining classes he needed were not offered at night.

“He credits his family, especially his wife, for supporting him. He’s also grateful to “great professors who stood by my side when I was going through all of this. They kept me going; they kept inspiring me.”

In pursuing his education, Sonnier developed a new identity.

“People looked at me not as a custodian, but as a person who’s being educated by the university. It wasn’t the idea of me being a custodian and going to college. It was that somebody, no matter how old he was, took the initiative to go back to school to make himself better, and the university supported that.”

- Joseph Sonnier

With the approval of St. Landry Parish school officials, Sonnier began a grueling schedule that would last for the next two-and-a-half years. His workday began early each morning. Most nights, he got only two or three hours of sleep.

He faced personal challenges during this time as well. In December 2006, Sonnier’s father died of complications from Lou Gehrig’s Disease. “I was in the middle of finals, but I didn’t want to have to retake any courses. It was kind of rough, but I got through it.”

Finals rolled around again the following May and Sonnier would suffer another loss. His mother died of cancer. Again, he pushed through, taking his final exams in the midst of grief. He earned a perfect 4.0 grade point average in each trying semester.

He plans to pursue a master’s degree in administration and supervision to become a principal.

“I believe God has a way of using people for certain things. And, I really feel that I am, I guess, a messenger that you can do anything if you set your mind to it. It’s not where you start, it’s where you finish.”

For More Information Visit: www.louisiana.edu
Southeastern grad is “The Numbers Man” at Shaw

By Rene Abadie

Following many major disasters around the world—from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans to recent tsunami damage to nuclear power plants in Japan—one Louisiana-based company is likely to be at the forefront of helping restore operations.

The Shaw Group, Inc., a company founded in 1987 in Baton Rouge as a fabrication shop, has evolved into a highly diversified operation encompassing engineering, construction, technology, environmental and industrial services. A Fortune 500 company, The Shaw Group has more than 27,000 employees in strategic locations around the world.

Behind the scenes in the company’s Baton Rouge headquarters, Southeastern Louisiana University graduate David Kinnison serves as one of the company’s key financial professionals.
Having joined Shaw in 1998 as budget and treasury operations manager, he now holds the title of company vice president and treasurer. In his current position, he is responsible for managing banking relationships, credit facilities and other types of financing for the multi-billion dollar company.

“When I started with Shaw, we were an oil and gas pipe fabricator and that’s all we did,” said Kinnison, a 1988 accounting graduate of Southeastern. “Now our pipe fabrication business is one of our smaller units. We build power plants, refineries, and chemical facilities all over the world.”

Kinnison is one of numerous Southeastern alumni who are making their marks in a wide variety of businesses, industries and government. Among some of the more recognized alumni are: Robin Roberts, anchor of ABC’s Good Morning America; U.S. Federal Judges James Brady and Carl J. Barbier; distinguished opera stars Donald George and Daveda Karanas; entrepreneur Roger Wang, chairman and chief executive officer of the Golden Eagle International Group, a highly successful real estate and retail business conglomerate in China; and Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Russell Carollo.

A native of Hammond, Kinnison and his family have a long history at Southeastern. His parents, Ruth and Jimmie Kinnison, both taught accounting at Southeastern. His mother is a Southeastern graduate, as are his two sisters, two uncles, a cousin, his wife and brother-in-law. Now his daughter has enrolled, making a three-generation legacy of Kinnisons at Southeastern.

“My experience at Southeastern prepared me to deal with the choices and decisions that I face every day.”

- David Kinnison
Vice President & Treasurer
The Shaw Group, Inc.

He credits Southeastern for giving him the knowledge base to understand how the accounting system is supposed to work.

“My experience at Southeastern prepared me to deal with the choices and decisions that I face every day,” he said.

Kinnison is a certified public accountant and certified treasury professional. Prior to joining Shaw, he formed and managed his own company and later worked at CNG Producing Company in New Orleans and Ocean Energy, Inc. of Baton Rouge.

The Kinnison family supports the university on many levels. “We have tickets to football, baseball and basketball, so we’re out there quite a bit at Southeastern,” he said. His wife is a member of PRIDE, an organization that provides mentoring and fund raising support for the women’s basketball team.

David Kinnison attributes his success in life to several factors: a supportive family, a good work ethic, and a solid preparation for his work in life.

“I’ve been blessed with my family and with many opportunities,” he said. “I think success comes from plain hard work every day and doing what needs to be done.”
200-300 words children his age normally use.

Clark has a particular passion for working with populations in rural and underserved areas, including her home parish of Morehouse. Last year, she graduated from the University of Louisiana at Monroe with a master’s degree in Speech-Language Pathology, where she learned how to evaluate and treat speech and related disorders of communication. Now she has taken what she learned to help improve the lives of the numerous clients she treats in northeast Louisiana.

It’s 9 a.m. and Jennifer Clark, a speech-language pathologist in Bastrop, is gingerly leaning into her young client and whispering this word into his ear — snake.

“Ssssssnake. Can you feel my breath as I am making the sound of snake, Brit?” she asks, as she repeats the word and its corresponding sounds again, “Ssssssnake.”

It seems a minor thing, but Clark is planting the seeds for language development that could bump the two-year-old patient from his current limitations in vocabulary—about 10 words—to the average

By Keli Jacobi
“There is no way that my professors could have prepared me for every single client that would come my way, but they gave me the tools to figure out what to do.”

- Jennifer Clark
Speech Pathologist

"It’s all about communication," she said. “Once children grasp the concept that they can communicate to get the things they want or need, there’s usually an explosion in vocabulary. You can’t stop it."

Clark works three days a week at Morehouse Outpatient Rehab Clinic, treating a broad range of patients with a variety of communication issues. The other two days Clark works with Early Steps, an early intervention program, treating the developmental delays of babies and toddlers in their homes.

“When I decided to go back to school, I wanted to do something that was family friendly, since I had two children,” Clark said. “I had a friend who was a speech-language pathologist. I had never heard of the profession before and really didn’t understand what it was all about, but I liked the idea of working in a variety of settings and helping others...and I am so grateful I made that choice.”

Clark came to her current career in a roundabout way, but the desire to help others has always been a part of her makeup. Her diverse career path has taken her from work as a Spanish teacher to being an art gallery owner giving art lessons to children. She decided to give the accelerated Speech-Language Pathology Program at ULM a try after having earned a General Studies degree and a B.A. in Fine Art at the university.

“When I began the program, I was immediately drawn to my language professor, Dr. Linda Bryan,” said Clark. “I identified with her as she shared with our class that speech-language pathology was her second career. She had been a librarian at one time...She looked at all of us and said something like, ‘You will never be sorry that you chose this career. It is so rewarding.’”

After that, Clark was hooked.

“The faculty is dedicated to keeping up with new research and preparing students for the work environment,” she said. “Basically, they taught me to think. There is no way that my professors could have prepared me for every single client that would come my way, but they gave me the tools to figure out what to do. When I come across something that I’ve never seen before, I know how to find out. I have the tools to figure out the puzzle.”

According to Clark’s mentor, Dr. Linda Bryan, speech-language pathologists are qualified to treat individuals in several areas of communication development, including language, cognitive, voice, articulation, fluency, swallowing difficulties, as well as hearing impairment. The graduate program at ULM prepares students such as Clark to provide direct clinical services in hospitals, schools, rehabilitation centers, and private practice, she said.

ULM’s speech-language pathology students receive much of their clinical training in the new Kitty DeGree Speech and Hearing Center, a state-of-the-art facility that serves clients of all ages. Department Head Dr. Johanna Boult said the clinic helps address the ongoing national shortage of speech-language pathologists in both hospital and school settings, especially in inner city and rural areas.

“A recent study by ULM researchers indicates that the shortage of School-based SLPs has existed in several Louisiana parishes for seven years or more,” said Boult. That’s why new graduates like Jennifer Clark are so critical to the region, according to Bryan.

“Jennifer was the kind of student that was not only incredibly bright, talented, and articulate when it came to academics, but she is also one of the most compassionate and caring individuals that I have ever had the honor to know,” Bryan said.

“The specific need for speech-language pathology services in the rural parishes of northeast Louisiana is critical and I am proud Jennifer is helping fill that need. She was one of the students who touched me most deeply in my 13 years at ULM.”

For More Information Visit: www.ulm.edu
A degree from Nicholls State University can take the bearer to many places. Just ask John Weimer, associate justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court, who graduated from Nicholls in 1976 with a bachelor’s degree in business.

“The education received at Nicholls enabled me to attend law school and serves as a foundation to my career,” Weimer told The Nicholls Worth, the university’s independent student newspaper.

While at Nicholls, Weimer participated in the Student Government Association and worked at both The Nicholls Worth and KNSU, activities that he said “helped develop certain skills that have helped me throughout my career.”

Upon graduation, Weimer earned a law degree from LSU, spent 15 years in private practice and taught business law at Nicholls. He was a full-time faculty member for eight years while in private practice, until he was
The College of Business Administration provided me with the fundamental principles and knowledge needed to succeed in a fast-growing business environment. The professors and instructors challenged their students to think outside of the box whether through homework assignments, group projects or casual class discussions.”

Rogers is not alone in his career success. Professionals who graduated from Nicholls can be found in a wide variety of positions:

- **Tim Emerson**, first vice president of investments at Smith Barney, Bachelor of Science in Finance, 1990;
- **Dean Falgoust**, vice president and general counsel for Freeport McMoran Cooper and Gold Inc., Bachelor of Science in Accounting, 1978;
- **Barry Melancon**, president and CEO of the American Institute of CPAs, Bachelor of Science in Accounting, 1978, and MBA, 1980;

“It’s not only our traditional graduates who are successful business leaders,” said Shawn Mauldin, dean of the College of Business Administration. “We have an Executive Master of Business Administration program tailored exclusively for professionals who, even though they’re already established in the business community, nevertheless want to get the educational edge they need to thrive and expand. They’re right here with us, in class. The EMBA program is so successful, in fact, that we are currently leading two cohorts simultaneously, one on the main Nicholls campus and one at our Houma campus.”
Northwestern grad uses degree to better her community

Leslie Ross Smith has set forth career goals that are aligned with her commitment to helping others and contribute to her community. Smith said much of what she learned as a highly involved college student has translated well into her career in marketing and public relations.

Smith currently works in health care marketing as a community liaison for Compass Health, a company that provides in- and outpatient mental health treatment to senior adults.

She graduated from Northwestern State University in 2005 with a degree in journalism and emphasis in public relations. As a student, her energy and enthusiasm for working with others enabled her to serve as president of her sorority and hold offices in several campus organizations, service groups and social committees while performing with the pompon line and holding down a student job.

“One thing I took away from Northwestern was the importance

By Leah Jackson
Smith maintains an interest in economic development and is now on the board of the Natchitoches Area Chamber of Commerce. She served as a Chamber Ambassador and is now on the membership committee. She believes in reminding area residents about the importance of investing in their local business community and has become involved in the Chamber’s School Board initiative to take a role in supporting public education.

“It’s important for industry to have an educated workforce and a work-ready community to attract more industry,” she said.

Smith is active in her church and is a member of the Service League of Natchitoches where she serves on the house tours committee and long-range planning committee, which utilizes her experience in writing grants.

She is also pursuing an advanced degree in business. In 10 years, she said she would love to see herself as the chief marketing officer or communications coordinator for a department or company’s public relations efforts.

“All the activities I did in college helped me learn to multi-task and work under pressure. It’s a balancing act, but I enjoy being busy,” she said. “It’s important to me to help people. I have to know that I’m making a difference.”

“You can teach someone how to plan an event, but arriving on the job with the skills of a PR writer was invaluable.”

- Leslie Ross Smith
Community Liaison
Compass Health.

As an undergraduate, Smith completed an internship with the Natchitoches Area Chamber of Commerce, which introduced her to people in the business community. Following graduation she was employed in the Natchitoches mayor’s office for five years, working with the Main Street program and in management of the newly constructed Natchitoches Events Center, positions that provided experience in economic development and special events planning.

Her training in public relations writing was a tremendous asset in the real world.

“You can teach someone how to plan an event, but arriving on the job with the skills of a PR writer was invaluable. I was well-prepared for that type of work,” Smith said. “I still have relationships with professors who were mentors, and I now associate with former instructors on a social and community level.”

Smith is a Natchitoches native and her husband Ryan Smith is also an NSU graduate with family ties to the area. Mr. Smith earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at NSU. The couple has a young son and wanted to stay in Natchitoches where Mr. Smith’s career field is in historic preservation.

“I made a good professional network here, so it made sense to stay and build on a network of friends and colleagues,” Smith said. “We both have family nearby and family ties to Northwestern.”

Smith loves marketing and public relations and has found the transition from civic work to healthcare interesting and challenging. In her new position, she is learning medical terminology and becoming informed about signs, symptoms and treatment of geriatric mental health issues such as dementia and depression. She has close contact with patients and their families and said a crucial part of her job is being able to communicate with individuals from different demographics and socio-economic backgrounds.

“It’s rewarding to know that I’m helping individuals struggling with dementia or depression and seeing them become stabilized,” she said. “I stay in communication with the patients and their families. I’m helping the community by putting people back in the community who are more stable and productive.”

of forming relationships and giving back,” Smith said. “Everything you do will reflect on your character and your career. I wanted to stay in Natchitoches and I knew that getting involved would help me when I graduated.”

Access | Value | RESULTS
A passion for teaching and for her students—these drive LeBleu Settlement Elementary preschool teacher Kellie DeReese in the classroom.

DeReese, a teacher there since fall 2005, was driven to teaching because of the compassion of her second grade teacher, Mrs. Smith. “My parents were going through a divorce at the time and I was sad. She showed me a compassion that affected me and gave me purpose at a young age. I wanted to be able to ‘make a difference’ in a child’s life, too.”

A 2004 McNeese State University early childhood education graduate, DeReese said teachers today wear so many hats—social worker, parent, cheerleader. “All of these things allow teachers to have a relationship with their students at this young age. It’s our job to provide that safe community of learning that wires a child for life. What we do counts.”

After seven years, DeReese is amazed at the things preschool students can do. “Just because they’re four years old doesn’t mean they can’t read or understand symbols or absorb what you’re teaching. Research tells us these are our windows.”

She’s taught her students sign language (works their motor skills) and she developed an environmental print (first stage to reading) unit on signage (print children see every day).
McNeese was one of three universities to be awarded a three-year, $450,000 Teacher Collaboration in Inclusive Settings Early Childhood grant to address the law’s issues through a collaborative effort with the Calcasieu Parish School System.

“Inclusion of all students in a classroom necessitates working together collaboratively and cooperatively to combine the professional knowledge, perspectives and skills of both groups of teachers,” according to Dr. Debbie King, McNeese associate professor of teacher education and grant coordinator.

“Since 2008, this grant has provided stipends and supplies and offered professional development workshops with nationally known speakers,” King added. “Over 300 special and regular education teachers and paraprofessionals have taken advantage of professional development opportunities to keep abreast of current ‘best practices’ in order to meet the needs of all preschool children. This year, Beauregard Parish preschool and kindergarten teachers participated.”

DeReese was asked by a Calcasieu Parish school administrator to make a state-level presentation on her environmental print, which then led to her appointments to the Department of Education’s Louisiana Standards Revision Project and Pre-kindergarten English Language Arts and Math Revision Committee.

“It took two years, but we finished this February rewriting the standards for the pre-K curriculum in the state,” she explained. “It was exciting to see some of my ideas incorporated into the curriculum.”

And DeReese said change in teaching can be good but can also be challenging. She points to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that requires the inclusion of students with disabilities into the regular classroom.

In order to address the law, the State of Louisiana offered all state universities the opportunity to apply for a grant to work in collaboration with local school districts to provide professional development opportunities to encourage collaboration between special and regular education teachers.
From its genesis, Network Foundation Technologies (NiFTy) has had its roots in Louisiana Tech University’s innovation and commercialization enterprise.

Marcus Morton, the company’s president and co-founder, and Mike O’Neal, NiFTy’s chief scientist and co-founder, saw an opportunity to use their Louisiana Tech education along with the business support and research resources of the University to develop a pioneering Internet streaming video technology that has gained international accolades and recognition.

Morton earned business degrees at Louisiana Tech, specifically, a bachelor of science in management and a master of business administration. O’Neal earned both bachelor of science and master of science degrees in computer science at Louisiana Tech.

“Louisiana Tech has created an entrepreneurial environment that affords students and faculty with the creative and intellectual freedom that is essential for developing new ideas. The emergence of NiFTy as an innovation in Internet broadcast technology was greatly supported by Louisiana Tech’s research and commercialization infrastructure, and an administration that recognized the potential impacts that high-tech companies such as NiFTy can have on the state,” said O’Neal.

Morton and O’Neal have used the Louisiana Tech Enterprise Center as NiFTy’s base of operations since the Center first opened its doors in 2005. Louisiana Tech is also home to NiFTy’s Broadcast Operations Center from which live Internet video content for professional sports organizations such as the Arena Football
In addition to its broadcasting service, NiFTy provides good job opportunities for Louisiana Tech students and graduates, helping to stem the outflow of intellectual talent from the state and retain the next generation of technology entrepreneurs in Louisiana.

Today, Morton and O’Neal continue to use the knowledge and experiences from their Louisiana Tech education to produce products and services that are having significant impacts on the way television-style broadcasting is conducted over the Internet.

In addition to the Tibbetts Award, NiFTy was also named the 2009 Louisiana Technology Company of the Year, which recognizes those firms that best advance the application of technology and improve the state’s long term competitiveness. The company also received the 2007 Entrepreneur of the Year award from the Louisiana Business Incubation Association.

“InFty was the first online broadcaster to provide a full Free-For-View (FFV) model for a professional sports league, encompassing all team games for an entire season, provided at no charge to the viewer, made possible due to the cost saving technology,” said O’Neal. “The AFL saw an online audience increase of greater than 50 times (5,000 percent) in just the first year after switching from a pay model to NiFTy’s FFV model.”

“InFty has made great strides with the funding provided by the Small Business Innovative Research program through the National Science Foundation,” said Morton. “The assistance given to our business has made a critical difference in helping us achieve our vision of dramatically reducing the cost of online broadcasting.”

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-Mike O’Neal
Chief Scientist & Co-Founder
NiFTy
A high school graduate from Independence, Louisiana, Antoine Smith headed for Grambling State University on a football scholarship. Little did he know he would be learning lifelong lessons from his coaches and professors. Antoine’s professors challenged him to strive for excellence and to always give his all.

“Grambling’s motto ‘Where Everybody Is Somebody’ means a lot to me,” said Smith. “It helped me to be more disciplined on and off the field.”

Currently, Smith is a production manager at the Atlanta Gatorade facility. He advanced from his entry position as Supply Chain Associate (SCA), where his core responsibility was production.
While functioning as an SCA, Smith was production leader for the Propel Hot-Fill Conversion, which converted a production line from a cold-fill to a hot-fill. The project was such a success that he received one of the company’s highest award’s the “QTG - Supply Chain Excellence Award.”

After fulfilling the role of SCA for 13 months, Smith was promoted to production supervisor. In that role he maintained a number of leadership projects including serving as a lead for multiple production lines.

He credits his experiences at Grambling for preparing him to develop and implement measurable action steps to remove barriers and build trust and cohesiveness between various entities of the business. “Playing on the ‘Mighty GSU Football Team’ taught me the importance of teamwork and accountability. When I was faced with obstacles where work-related teams were not working together I was able to use examples of how players working together on teams is what won games and situations,” states Smith.

In his role as resource supervisor, Smith took the lead in developing the department’s production goals and objectives for 2008. He also continued to express passion for coaching others on troubleshooting, identifying problem statements and strategically developing resolutions.

Smith graduated from GSU in December 2004 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electronic Engineering Technology. He said, “the Electronic Engineering Technology Department at Grambling State University challenged me to exceed the objectives and expectations of others and developed me to insure that my educational experiences were equal to and/or better than those of any other institution. So when I am faced with a difficult task I refer back to my memories at GSU and there is where I find the courage and strength to overcome.”

He continued his education at Indiana Wesleyan, where he received a Master of Business Administration degree.

Interestingly, Antoine is not the only successful Gramblinite in his immediate family. His wife, Dr. Jennifer Waller-Smith, also attended GSU and received a bachelor’s degree in biology and was valedictorian of the 2003 class. She went on to Indiana University/Purdue University Dental School and became a dentist. Dr. Waller-Smith is currently a dentist for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

The Smiths have a beautiful two year old daughter named McKenzie, possibly a future Gramblinite.

Grambling State University has over 37,000 alumni worldwide.