



Creating Stewardship for the Chauvin Sculpture Garden in a Coastal Louisiana Fishing Town

by Gary LaFleur, Jr., and Dennis Sipiorski

Kenny Hill was a bricklayer who divided his time between Branson, Missouri, and Chauvin, Louisiana, for several years (1988–2000) while Branson was experiencing a construction boom. On the site that he rented in Chauvin he began to use leftover construction materials to create life-sized sculptures. In 2000, Hill walked away from the sculpture garden leaving several pieces unfinished. The exact reasons he left remain a mystery, although an eviction notice was found among his belongings in his house. Soon after his departure, a series of events occurred to rescue the unique art site (Mason et al. 2002, Cibelli 2005, Stone 2007, Eberhardt 2008). Dennis Sipiorski, then head of the Nicholls State University Art Department contacted the Kohler Foundation, which quickly set about rescuing the art, purchasing the land, and eventually gifting the site to Nicholls State. The advisory board Friends of the Chauvin Sculpture Garden was established shortly thereafter to aid in the preservation, public awareness, and programming of garden events.

Here we describe some of our strategies to build a cohesive team of collaborators who offer a sense of stable continuity to the educational mission of the garden. Some of our most successful projects include establishment of our weekend Artist-Docent program, partnership with students of the Nicholls Honors Program, and hosting our annual Chauvin Folk Art Festival and Blessing of the Fleet. While the specter of Louisiana's coastal land loss looms on the horizon, we currently take advantage of the synergy among several cultural narratives that converge at Chauvin for increasing the visibility of the visionary art of Kenny Hill at the Chauvin Sculpture Garden. Twenty years since we came together as a board, we are looking back at some of the practices that allowed us to thrive and maintain a successful relationship with the Chauvin Sculpture Garden. We hope that sharing some of our experiences may be helpful to others targeting similar outcomes.

About the photo: Aerial view of the Chauvin Sculpture Garden.

Photo by Dylan Maras.

Early Challenges and Setting

The Chauvin Sculpture Garden lies 30 minutes south of the city of Houma and an hour south of the Nicholls State main campus in Thibodaux. Being off the beaten path contributes to the ambiance of the garden, but it also leaves the garden in danger of being on the back burner of a small university with the typical budget constraints of any small university. Chauvin lies along an interesting path between the city of Houma and the fishing village of Cocodrie. Traveling south from Houma, the landscape transitions from a bustling modern city of strip malls, to the family-oriented fishing town of Chauvin, to a long line of raised camps for weekend visitors at the end of the highway in Cocodrie. Because of its proximity to the brackish marshes of the Louisiana coast, Chauvin is feeling the effects of an ecological phenomenon designated “coastal land loss,” which differs from the more commonly encountered “beach erosion.” In coastal land loss, large portions of brackish marsh are transformed to open water, so what was land 30 years ago is now shallow bays (Reed 1995). The lack of marsh leaves Chauvin more vulnerable to coastal storms, flood inundation, and a loss of habitat that tangibly changes the diversity of traditional occupations and culture.

Although the Louisiana Office of Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority is leading substantial efforts to restore the coast, there are also government-led plans to offer assistance for citizens to migrate north to higher land that is protected from storm surge by a large levee system (CPRA 2017). The recognition of these struggles to combat coastal land loss has gradually led to a quiet, yet palpable feeling of despair about the future of Chauvin and nearby coastal villages. Through our efforts to help the Chauvin Sculpture Garden thrive, we offer a point of pride in the community and a reason for guests from faraway places to visit.

Our Strategies for Sustainability

Establish a board with a diversity of expertise.

Our board membership currently includes four members who were raised in the Chauvin community who ensure that our activities remain consistent with the traditions and rhythms of Chauvin residents. Educators are vital contributors, including two K–12 teachers and six college faculty from three universities. The teachers incorporate the garden’s artwork into their art classes and host receptions at the garden. University faculty insert the site into their curricula, helping maintain the site as a unique gem of academic study. We have established a practice in collaboration with the Nicholls Art Department to offer a gallery show at the Garden Studio, located across the street from the Garden, as a post-exhibit venue for artists who exhibit on the Nicholls campus. The Art Honor Society Kappa Pi uses the garden for induction ceremonies, creating a deep connection between students and the garden. Local professionals on the board are also important, giving us a strong network of ambassadors who publicize our activities throughout the community.



Early meeting of the Friends of the CSG board members, when the mission and goals were defined, 2004. Photo courtesy Gary LaFleur, Jr.

Organize programs relevant to the community.

The Friends of the Chauvin Sculpture Garden take their inspiration from some of the few things that Kenny Hill said about the garden, one of which was that he “built it for the community.” Hence, we never charge admission for entry to the garden or events, although we always welcome donations. As a board we have created and maintained several ongoing projects that allow us to fulfill a wide range of mission objectives, reaching a cross-section of visitors and increasing awareness and appreciation of the garden.



Artist-Docents Loreli Bergeron and Kelli Champagne touch up sculptures in preparation for the 2018 Chauvin Sculpture Garden Picnic.

Photo by Chris Heller of the *Houma Courier*.

We created the weekend Artist-Docent Program in association with the Bayou Regional Arts Council to ensure that the garden has personnel on site every weekend. We recruit college students and young artists to serve as Artist-Docents. We conceived of this position as a person who could act as host, tour guide, and protector of the art, but in contrast to a conventional museum docent, we expect these Artist-Docents to repair, repaint, and conserve the art. They actively engage visitors as stewards, requesting that they help repaint and, in essence, become part of the garden, a collaborator with Kenny Hill in the maintenance of his sculpture garden.

One of our favorite collaborators is the South Louisiana Wetland Discovery Center (SLWDC). Each summer SLWDC brings a group of 40 children to the garden, where we teach them to make fish prints (*gyotaku*) and about the geography of the bayou region. We introduce them to the visionary art of Kenny Hill and use the site to encourage the students to offer their own interpretations of the art. We have found that these young students are enthusiastic about bringing their parents and family members back to the garden for future visits.

Although Nicholls State University owns the garden, recruiting faculty to involve their classes is challenging. One solution was creating a long-term relationship with the Nicholls Honors Program, whose faculty coordinator is art historian Deborah Cibelli, who has published her own work regarding the art of the garden (2005). Honors students adopted the site as a service-learning project, committing to at least one workday per semester, bringing ten students for a day of gardening, cleaning, repairs, and repainting. Students receive an on-site lecture about Kenny Hill and his artistry and training in how we gently preserve the pieces. They must submit a report offering feedback about their experience in the garden.

Through our board members who are Chauvin residents, we interact with several community groups such as the Terrebonne Advocates for Possibility and the Li'l Caillou Volunteer Fire Dept. As a manifestation of this partnership, we host paddlers at the garden as their halfway point rest stop. Every year we receive new visitors who are paddling, along with family members who come to the garden to cheer them on.

Our premier annual event is the Chauvin Folk Art Festival. Created by the Sculpture Garden coordinator Michael Wyshock and Dennis Sipiorski, the festival purposefully coincides with the traditional Blessing of the Fleet organized by the Shrimpers of Chauvin and St. Joseph Church through the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux. The Chauvin Folk Art Festival attracts artists, entertainers, filmmakers, and visitors from larger Louisiana cities as well as from other states. The event has three objectives: highlight the art of Kenny Hill, offer a venue to exhibit the work of other Louisiana folk artists, and provide a show of support for the traditional fishing community of Chauvin by paying homage to a day that they have celebrated for decades. The Chauvin Sculpture Garden has quickly become recognized as a great place from which outsiders can watch the Blessing, including politicians, filmmakers, and the press.

Lessons Learned

The most important element of our board's success has been that we maintain strong friendships as we collaborate to host garden activities. Neither the academic merit points, nor the site notoriety, nor the sale of artistic work are enough incentive to bring board members together. But the joy of staying in touch, introducing new students to the work, and creating a successful festival together led to a strong commitment that survives over many years of life transitions, including moving to different schools, changing jobs, and surviving coastal storms.



Nicholls Honors Program students Megan Boudreaux and Chelse King volunteer to conserve garden sculptures.

Photo by Dylan Maras.

The Cajun residents of Chauvin are generous, cooperative, and tolerant of our site, which was built in the middle of their town. Neighbors often volunteer as tour guides for visitors who show up at odd hours when no docents are working. They provide an informal rapid-response force to report storm damage and clear away fallen trees before university maintenance workers can arrive. We struggle with the conceptual conflict that bigger is better. For instance, we would be able to apply for more festival funds if our festival attracted a crowd of 1,000, rather than a core of 200 visitors, but our site is too small for a bigger crowd. While more funding and more guests would be attractive at one level, we appreciate our tradition of maintaining a smaller, more intimate, more meaningful experience for visitors. Rather than competing with the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which sometimes occurs during our Chauvin Folk Art Festival, some visitors find us an attractive antithesis to the jazz fest since our free event brings visitors to meet the people of Louisiana in low-key setting steeped in local culture, with the added value of experiencing the visionary art of Kenny Hill where he created it.

Finally, we acknowledge the contributions of our board and docents. Although the garden is open every day from sunrise to sunset and many visitors explore the garden without the aid of a docent, some of our most important connections are through our Artist-Docents on site. Our garden personnel have been featured in several documentaries, including work by filmmakers Godshall (2009) and Evans (2017). Through the continuous work of our board to increase the visibility of the garden, we received the designation “[12th Most Amazing Sculpture Garden on Earth](#).” By

hosting our annual festival on the bayou and opening our garden to the community for viewing during the Blessing of the Fleet, many people have made the garden their favorite destination and a permanent part of their yearly calendar.

Other Resources to Learn More

- <https://www.nicholls.edu/folkartcenter>
- <https://www.facebook.com/Chauvin-Sculpture-Garden-308926650045>
- <http://www.kohlerfoundation.org/preservation>
- <https://www.ncptt.nps.gov/blog/expression-of-faith-and-fear-the-chauvin-sculpture-garden-by-kenny-hill>

The Future

The Chauvin Sculpture Garden is situated in a region suffering from a gradual ecological catastrophe where an average of one acre of marsh is transformed to open water every hour. The amount of land loss has been documented as one of the most accelerated rates measured anywhere on earth. Yet the town of Chauvin perseveres, and we are committed to maintaining the garden in this environment. The sculptures of the garden receive occasional damage from strong winds and high waters, but this is currently only an inconvenience, not an immediate threat. We are considering a method to increase drainage and keep water from Bayou Petit Caillou from seeping into the garden. At the same time, there is a synergy in offering visitors the opportunity to tour the garden, meet Chauvin residents and artists, and continue south to sites where coastal land loss is more apparent, leading down to the [Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium](#) (LUMCON) lab. We have recognized that keeping our site open to the public contributes to the larger community efforts to remain resilient in the face of coastal land loss. For now, these elements work together to attract a diversity of visitors ranging from art pilgrims, to social scientists interested in community migrations, to academics seeking firsthand examples of coastal land loss. In this way we believe that we are not only preserving a world-class visionary art environment but also giving back to a community that we love and support.

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