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## St. Joseph's Night

Data Zone  
Page 4

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A Data News Weekly Exclusive

# Project Continues to Raise Awareness of State's Incarceration Conditions



Page 2



**Newsmaker**

**French Quarter Festival 2025**

Page 6

**State & Local**

**Dr. Fateama S. Fulmore Appointed as Superintendent of NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS)**



Page 6



# Project Continues to Raise Awareness of State’s Incarceration Conditions



Solitary Gardens in New Orleans, created by jackie sumell, stands as a powerful symbol of resistance and reform. Rooted in the abolitionist movement and the work of the Angola 3, the garden sparks dialogue around incarceration, solitary confinement, and the urgent need for justice system transformation.

**By Adia Fienagha**  
**Data News Weekly Contributor**  
**Photos by Adia Fienagha**  
**and Courtesy Solitary Gardens**

Louisiana voters rejected four state constitutional amendments in the March 29th election, three of

which impacted the courts and judicial system, and one which could have potentially tried more juveniles as adults. The vote served as a boost for ongoing work by advocates to reform incarceration and the Criminal Justice System across the state.

A six-by-nine-foot concrete cell, 23 hours a day for an average of three months with little communication

with the outside world, is a reality for 77-percent of Louisiana’s prison population who have experienced solitary confinement. jackie sumell, a prison abolition activist and creator of Solitary Gardens, is continuing to lead a project transforming the dimensions of solitary cells into garden beds.

“It became more and more clear that solitary con-

Cover Story, Continued on page 3.

INSIDE DATA	
Cover Story . . . . .	2
Data Zone. . . . .	4
Newsmaker . . . . .	6
State & Local News	6
Fleur De Lis . . . . .	7

### DATA NEWS WEEKLY

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Cover Story, Continued from page 2.



The project welcomes volunteers who plant community gardens inspired by formerly incarcerated persons who were placed in solitary confinement at Angola.



finement was the most important target as an abolitionist practice, it is the most concentrated form of our collective punishment," sumell said.

The inspiration for Solitary Gardens began when sumell connected with Herman Wallace when she was 29. He had been incarcerated for her entire life. Wallace, Albert

Woodfox and Robert King - known as The Angola Three - started the first Black Panther Chapter in a prison. Their activism led to their placement in solitary confinement for crimes they could not have committed. They endured four decades of abuse in what was known as the bloodiest prison in America. Wallace was exonerated in 2013 but

died three days later only experiencing a brief time of physical freedom. While studying architecture, sumell asked Wallace to design his dream home, inspiring The House That Herman Built. A full garden was central to his vision, laying the foundation for Solitary Gardens.

"They become portraits of folks that carcerality, the prison industri-

al complex, is determined to make us forget, and that's a superpower," sumell said.

Each garden mirrors a solitary cell, with planting space limited to the area where a person could walk. The beds are built from 'revolutionary mortar,' created using sugarcane, cotton, and tobacco which were the largest cash crops of chattel slavery.

The purpose being to "illustrate the evolution of chattel slavery into mass incarceration by building the cells out of the crops," sumell said, while also creating something that will change over time. "This idea that over time we see these prison cells turn into garden beds, start to fall down... plays into the belief of prison abolition, that if we see these prison cells disappear, somewhere in our subtle mind, we can believe it can happen," sumell added.

The project has contributed to four successful court hearings. Crops harvested are sent to incarcerated individuals' families or the John Thompson Legacy Center located in the 7th ward and named after a man falsely incarcerated for 18 years who fought for Criminal

Justice Reform, where they will be used for mutual aid.

"The foundation of the U.S. Criminal Justice System has always been rooted in White Supremacy, and prisons have long functioned as a constitutional means of enslaving Black and Brown bodies" said Cayla Lumar, a New Orleans native and the President of the Social Justice Coalition at Xavier University of Louisiana who partners with the project.

Solitary Gardens is an open-source project, allowing anyone to participate, with gardens built across the U.S. Volunteers are asked to commit for at least two years, as incarcerated individuals are often at risk of being forgotten. Volunteer hours are from 10 a.m. to noon, with events and locations posted on the project's Instagram - @solitarygardens.

"Conversations about prison abolition have always been important," said Nia Youngblood, a first-year Xavier student from Henderson, Nev. "With social media creating a bigger landscape of ears, we can actually band together and get stuff done."

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# St. Joseph's Night

## *A Celebration of the Black Masking/ Mardi Gras Indian Tradition*

Photos by Fleur De Lis  
Story by Edwin Buggage  
Editor-in-Chief  
Data News Weekly

Each year on March 19th, New Orleans' Black Masking Indians often referred to as Mardi Gras Indians, fill the streets of America's most African City with vibrant color, pulsing rhythms, call-and-response chants, and a deep sense of cultural history as they celebrate St. Joseph's Night. Illuminating the evening with dazzling, hand-sewn suits adorned with intricate beadwork and feathers, they honor a tradition rooted in both African and Native American Heritage.

This powerful celebration is born from a legacy of solidarity between enslaved Africans and Native Americans, who shared spiritual and cultural practices as a form of resistance to oppression. By masking on St. Joseph's Night, Black Masking Indians assert identity, resilience, and ancestral pride transforming the streets into sacred spaces of remembrance, resistance, and cultural affirmation.

More than just a spectacle, St. Joseph's Night is a living journey through New Orleans' history. It truly stands as a tribute to survival, creativity, and community, and Data News Weekly was there!!!



St. Joseph's Night radiated beauty and splendor as the rich tradition of Black Masking, also known as the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, was on full display, celebrating the unique cultural heritage of New Orleans.

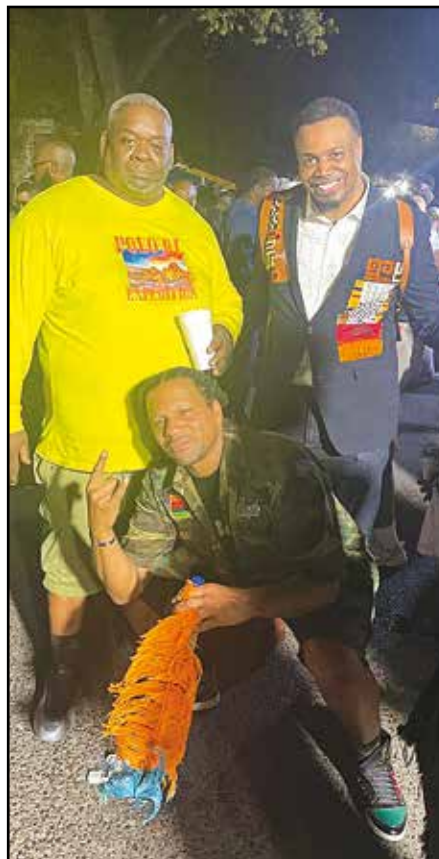


Data Zone,  
Continued on page 5.

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Data Zone, Continued from page 4.



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photos from  
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# French Quarter Festival 2025

*A Celebration of New Orleans Music, Cuisine, and Culture*

## Data News Staff Edited Report

It is that time of year French Quarter Festival 2025 presented by Chevron, taking place from April 10

to 13 in the Historic French Quarter. As the largest free celebration of Louisiana's music, food, and culture, the festival invites both locals and visitors to immerse themselves in the vibrant Spirit of New Orleans.

## Musical Lineup Highlights

This year's festival features over 300 acts across 22 stages, showcasing a diverse array of genres from traditional Jazz to Zydeco. Attendees can look



Charmaine Neville

forward to performances by renowned artists such as Kermit Ruffins & the Barbecue Swingers, The Dirty Dozen Brass Band, and Irma Thomas, the Soul Queen of New Orleans. The Chevron Evening Concert Series at the JAX Lot will spotlight the Chapel Hart Band, The Original Pinettes Brass Band with Mia X, Little Freddie King, and Rockin' Dopsie Jr. & the Zydeco Twisters.

## Culinary Experiences

Food enthusiasts can indulge in offerings from over 65 top Louisiana restaurants. New participants like Chubbie's Fried Chicken join beloved longstanding vendors such as Vaucresson Sausage and Ms. Linda The Yakamein Lady. Chef Kevin Belton will emcee the newly named Mike's Amazing Culinary Stage, presenting live cooking demos and sharing stories about New Orleans' cherished culinary traditions.

## State & Local News

# Dr. Fateama S. Fulmore Appointed as Superintendent of NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS)

## Glenda Bell Data News Weekly Contributor

On April 2, 2025, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) appointed Dr. Fateama S. Fulmore as the permanent Superintendent of NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS). Dr. Fulmore had been serving as Interim Superintendent since December 2024, following the resignation of Dr. Avis Williams.

Dr. Fulmore brings over 20 years of experience in PK-12 Education, having held positions such as Deputy Superintendent for NOLA-PS, middle and high school teacher, assistant principal, high school principal, and chief of accountability and school improvement. Her leadership has been marked by a commitment to improving student outcomes and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Dr. Fulmore overcame significant



Dr. Fateama S. Fulmore

challenges, including poverty and trauma, to become a first-generation college graduate. She holds degrees from Appalachian State University (B.S.), Gardner-Webb University (M.A.), Grand Canyon University (Ed.S.), and Gwynedd Mercy University (Ed.D.). Recognized for Excellence in Authoriz-

Fulmore, Continued on page 7.

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# Annual Congo Square Festival Celebrates Ancestral Heritage

Story by Gabrielle Cromwell,  
Photos by Ashton Broden  
Data News Weekly  
Contributors

The Congo Square Rhythms Festival continued the Legacy of Enslaved Africans' Traditions in Armstrong Park during the weekend of March 29-30, 2025. The Annual Festival attracted locals and tourists alike to celebrate through music, food, culture, and spirit.

"I'm a local and 15-year attendee of Jazz Fest, and I've never heard of this one. I believe this is something that our community should be more aware of because of the knowledge that it holds. It's something the new generation...even older ones can learn from," said Timeshia Jackson, the Regional Director of Supply and Logistics at Ochsner Health, and a New Orleans Uptown native.

The festival was created by the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation, Inc., and is a free prelude to their more well-known Jazz



The 2025 Congo Square Rhythms Festival pulsed with entertainment, food, and vendors, honoring the historic grounds where enslaved Africans once gathered to preserve their heritage. It was a joyful celebration of resilience, rhythm, and community.

Fest. Many tourists travel to New Orleans just for the Congo Square Rhythms Festival because of its rich history and importance to African American Heritage.

With the festival being an outlet to celebrate traditions; it is also a way to put local businesses at the forefront.

"It's always a good history lesson, and also to pass on to our kids

so that they understand what we came from and what ... struggles we went through. It's not something we want to forget," said Gizelda Toomer, the Owner of Zelda's African Imports and a New Orleans East native.

There were a number of Black-owned and local businesses at the festival this year ranging from La-salle & Jackson™, UglyBettyBoy-

Crush by Plusisaplus, and Earth Alchemy Ceramics, and food vendors such as 14 Parishes, Ms. Linda the Yakamein Lady, and Cafe Dauphine, among others.

"This is the only place that exists now, for me, that acknowledges African Tradition," said Ikhlas Abdullah, a New York native and festivalgoer.

Satiated in culture and now prepared for Jazz Fest, New Orleansians and visitors shared that in this city, history is always celebrated, alongside great food and music. "It's crucial that we keep the Congo Square Rhythm Festival Tradition alive. I truly wish our inner-city community had been introduced to this event earlier on," Jackson said. "I've learned even more about African American Culture, food, spirit, and tradition at the Congo Square Rhythm Festival, all while enjoying incredible music. I was especially moved by the "Ancestor Tree" (or "Eggun Tree") and look forward to returning to connect with my ancestors again," she said.

## State & Local News

### State Representative Delisha Boyd Introduces the Caleb Wilson Act to Combat Hazing in Louisiana Colleges

Data News Staff Edited  
Report

State Representative Delisha Boyd announced today the introduction of House Bill 279, known as the Caleb Wilson Act, a pivotal piece of legislation aimed at eradicating hazing in Louisiana's post-secondary institutions. This bill mandates that all incoming freshmen, as well as members of Greek letter organizations, band, and athletic programs, complete a comprehensive anti-hazing course.

House Bill 279 requires that all post-secondary schools implement a standardized anti-hazing curriculum designed to educate students about the risks and consequences of hazing, the importance of consent, and the resources available for those who may experience or witness such acts. The training will be mandatory for all incoming freshmen and for members of Greek organizations, athletic teams, and performing arts groups.



Caleb Wilson

Representative Boyd emphasized the importance of this initiative, stating, "This legislative session, I'm proud to introduce House Bill 279 — The Caleb Wilson Act, a critical step in the fight to end hazing in Louisiana institutions."

The proposed legislation has been provisionally referred to the Committee on Education for further consideration. House Bill 279



State Rep. Delisha Boyd

is set to be debated in the upcoming legislative session, and Rep. Boyd urges her colleagues to support this crucial initiative.

"Together, we can make a difference and protect our students from the harmful effects of hazing," she added.

For more information about House Bill 279 or to schedule an interview with Rep. Delisha Boyd, please contact her office at 504-223-3077 or hse102@legis.la.gov.

Fulmore, Continued  
from page 6.

ing by the Louisiana Department of Education, she also completed the Michael Casserly Urban Executive Leadership Institute for Superintendents.

In her new role, Dr. Fulmore aims to address the district's financial challenges, including a \$36 million budget shortfall resulting from an accounting error. She has already made progress in closing this gap by half and is implementing measures to prevent future discrepancies.

Dr. Fulmore's appointment has been met with optimism from the OPSB and the broader New Orleans Community, who look forward to her continued leadership in advancing the district's educational goals.



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