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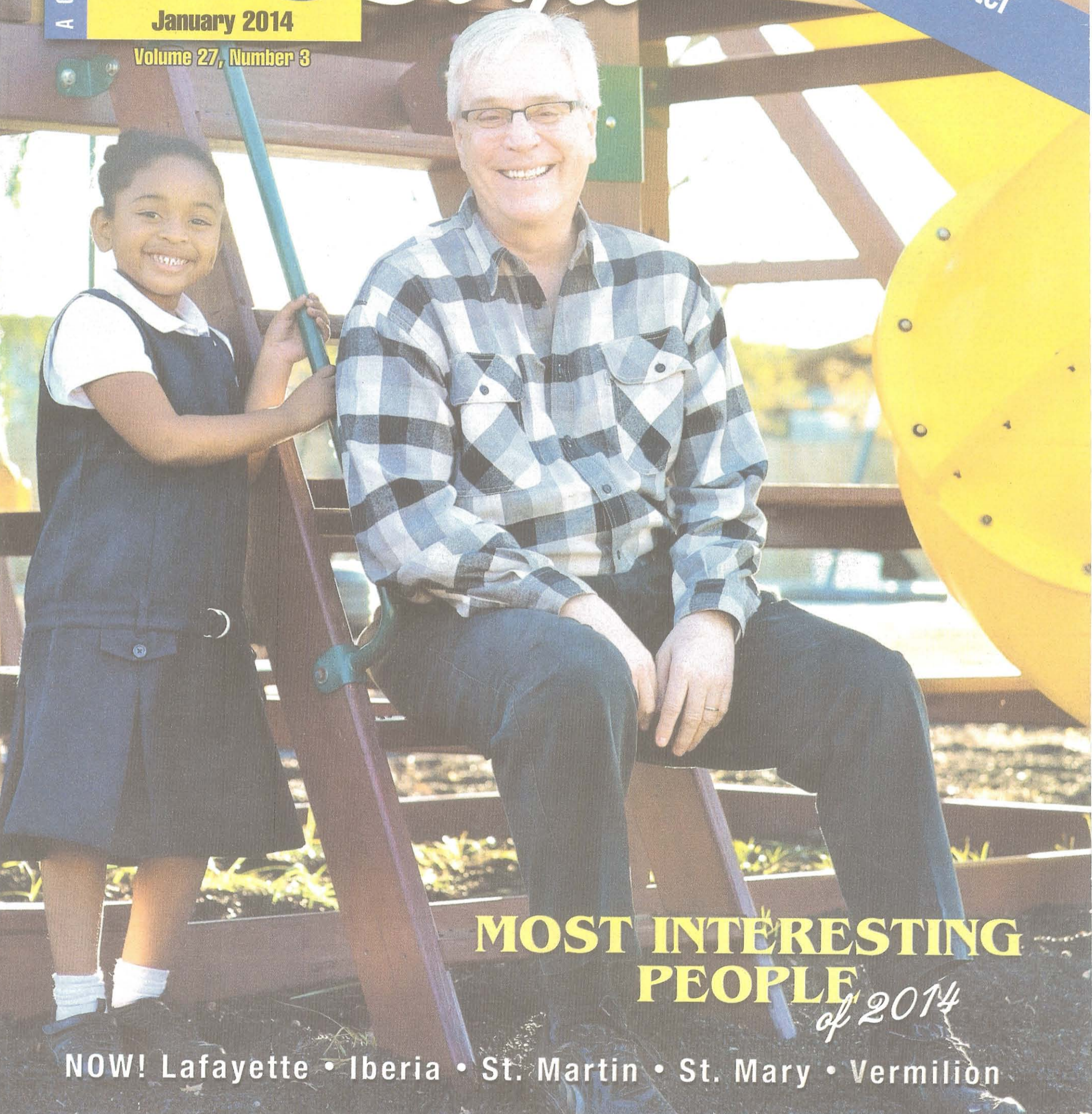
A C A D I A N A

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MOST INTERESTING PEOPLE
of 2014

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For more than 30 years, Sister Helen Vinton and the Southern Mutual Help Association have been fixtures of the New Iberia area. Her mission is simple: help the community to help themselves. Sister Helen strongly believes in the virtues of hard work, self-sufficiency and generosity. Although she hails from humble beginnings, her impact on her community is far from small. When asked about her Midwest roots, she notes, "I grew up, thankfully, in a family where my generosity was counted on." This spirit of giving has led to widespread reform in respect to farming practices on a national scale.

Sister Helen notes that she has always had a love of nature and the physical world around her. After receiving a scholarship to St. Mary-of-the-Wood's College for her bachelor's degree, Sister Helen earned a Master's degree in Biology from St. Mary's College and continued education credentials from Ohio State University.

After serving the teaching ministry as an earth science teacher in Indianapolis, Sister Helen began working as the editor of the *National Catholic Rural Life* magazine and coordinated Pope John Paul II's visit to Iowa. She was also the first ever woman appointed to the Louisiana State Pesticide commission where she worked as an agent of change. She worked tirelessly to have regulations enforced for aerial application of pesticides to avoid polluting populated areas and water supplies.

Sister Helen has served on numerous local, regional and national boards and committees responsible for environmental education. She founded and co-founded several organizations committed to bettering living and working conditions in rural areas in Louisiana and on the national scale. In 1992 she co-founded the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working group. While the group started with fewer than 25 members, it now boasts nearly 1,700 members in over 13 states. She helped to develop more sustainable practices for using pesticides and herbicides by local growers. While not everyone was on board initially the farmers who did try the alternative methods experienced higher crop yields as a result. She also co-founded the Rural Advancement Foundation, which works to monitor international food security.

In the late 1980s Sister Helen came to New Iberia to assist the staff at SMHA. After working in the area she felt called to continue on permanently with SHMA, raising awareness and education about sustainable farming within the New Iberia area. Recently she spent time working with local fisher families and farmers to recoup their livelihoods after the 2005 hurricanes Katrina and Rita as well as the 2010 British Petroleum gulf oil spill. When asked about the accomplishments of the rebuilding process, Sister Helen noted, "the way we work with people, we don't do [things] for them, but we work with them... We don't build the communities, they build them."

— By Samantha Stevens

Sister HELEN VINTON

"One has to be true to oneself and claim your roots and grow from that."

—Sister Helen Vinton

