

For 30 years, a native of the Sand Hills of Nebraska has quietly gone about improving the lives and livelihoods of families who make their living from Louisiana's land and waters. As Senior Executive Officer and long-time Life Quality Director for New Iberia-based Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc., Sister Helen Vinton works with fisher families who make up the rich "gumbo" of cultures and heritages that is our Louisiana Gulf Coast: from native Atakapa-Ishak and African-American families in lower Plaquemines Parish, Cajun and Creole families in Lafourche and Terrebonne, to Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese fisher families in Iberia and Vermilion Parishes.

She helped fishers find ways to keep their businesses viable in the face of low-priced imports and regulation that unfairly limited traditional fishers' access to waterways and/or prime harvesting hours. She established a flexible grant/loan product to help fishers and fisher-related businesses recover from 2005's Hurricanes Katrina and/or Rita, then found a way to help fishers again after the one-two-three punch of major hurricanes in 2005 and 2008 and the BP Oil Disaster in 2010.

She has worked with farmworkers, primarily African-American men and women, to protect them from pesticide exposure, then, as the first private citizen and the first woman ever named to the Louisiana State Pesticide Commission, worked on behalf of farmworkers and other citizens to ensure regulations that keep people safe were properly enforced. She helped marginalized small farmers implement practices that improved their soil and increased their yield while better protecting the environment, and she connected small farmers impacted by the 2005 and/or 2008 hurricanes to small grants, hay and feed that helped them keep their livestock – and their businesses – alive.

She co-founded and was on the first Board of Directors of the 13-state Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, and she is a former Board member and past President of an organization that works internationally on food security, an issue that significantly impacts the most marginalized individuals and families. She serves on the Board of Directors of Southern Mutual Help Association and its affiliate Southern Mutual Financial Services, Inc., that provides affordable first mortgage capital for hard-working low-to-moderate-income families across Louisiana. A Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, she also served on the Board of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and was an inaugural inductee into OMB Watch's Public Interest Hall of Fame.

She mentored the African-American young people who received SMHA's Critical Difference Scholarship for children from sugar cane farmworker families, helping these students – primarily young women – develop important life skills along their paths to becoming teachers, lawyers, and doctors.

Helen is part of the leadership team helping redevelop the historically African-American West End of New Iberia that has, over the last several decades, been known more for its blighted properties and criminal activity than for its importance to the history and culture of New Iberia. Helen and SMHA's focus on rebuilding the spirit and pride of a community, not just buildings, is evidenced today by strong community leaders, thriving new faith-based and other community groups, and many community-driven initiatives for youth, health and fitness, and arts and culture.