The Ultimate Bridal Guide

50 Mardi Gras events around Acadiana
Take a tour of South Louisiana’s historic downtowns
How to shop like an estate sale pro
All about a famous Arnaudville eatery
Local Valentine’s Day gifts for him
The images of nuns that many Catholics remember from their youth are a far cry from many modern-day nuns. Today there are sisters all over the world in many unique missions, from highly-skilled scientists and traveling counselors for circus workers to nurses and presidents of colleges. And a great number have been part of the secular environmental movement long before Pope Francis released his 184-page papal environmental message in 2015 calling on Christians to take action to protect the Earth. Among them, Sister Helen Vinton - biologist, pioneer ecological teacher and environmental expert who, fortunately for New Iberia, followed her life’s nature walk to the bayous.

At a chance meeting during a papal visit to Iowa in 1979 - which she helped organize - Sister Helen met Sister Anne Catherine Bizalion, co-founder of Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA) in New Iberia. With a long-time interest in Louisiana, Sister Helen listened attentively as Sister Bizalion talked about the work done at SMHA. Accepting an offer to work on a temporary project at Southern Mutual, Sister Helen came to New Iberia the following year. That visit grew to become the ministry in South Louisiana to which she has devoted the last 40 years, spending her efforts on behalf of the poor and the environment.

Now 88, she is Senior Executive Officer and Life Quality Initiatives’ Senior Advisor for SMHA, empowering multicultural communities of farming and fishing families in the coastal parishes of South Louisiana, as well as the southeastern states and Puerto Rico. The quiet nun, belonging to the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods in Indiana, has not only been vocal about conservation and sustainability but a forward thinker, designing innovative ways to improve lives without depleting the land or its resources.

Never afraid to take a stand for the right cause, Sister Helen’s first focus shortly after arriving in New Iberia was on sugar cane farming, as she recognized it was an integral part of the cultural and economic fabric of the region. But she also observed that the farming practices had a negative impact on the environment. Getting the farmers to understand and change their established ways was a battle, leaving most probably wondering, “What does...
Personality Profile

5 Cool Things About Sister Helen

1. She was a small plane pilot.
2. She’s rappelled down the sides of cliffs.
3. Her favored music is country and western.
4. Her favorite destinations are Costa Rica and Cuba, because of the diverse cultures, people and the beautiful country sides.
5. The one question she would ask God in a conversation with Him: “How come you have such patience with your creation and your people?”

A nun know about farming?”

Growing up in a large ranching family that raised black angus cattle in the Sand Hills of Nebraska, Sister Helen believes ranching and farming are critical to our food supply here and abroad. “At a young age, I came to love the land and also appreciate the critical importance of water,” she says. She claimed her roots and grew from there. The former biology teacher earned a Master's Degree in Science and Biology and saw protecting the earth as part of her religious duty.

In her one term as the first female - and environmentalist- on the Louisiana Pesticide Advisory Committee, Sister Helen exposed unenforced regulations on safe pesticide usage, demanding stricter pesticide-label guidelines and harsher penalties for pesticide misuse. She then brought in Allan Savory from New Mexico, a renowned specialist in sustainable agriculture with whom she studied, to meet with local cane farmers. Together, she and Savory taught the farmers that soil is a living thing and that certain chemical applications diminish that healthy soil. Farmers were skeptical when they first heard how they could save money using fewer harmful chemicals, yet still utilizing the necessary ones. One can only imagine the looks on their faces when Sister Helen advised leaving the beneficial organic cane “flags” in the field and reducing the burning of the cane for the betterment of the community’s health, especially for residents with respiratory conditions. The unassuming, but convincing nun found a couple of farmers open to her ideas and willing to work with her. It took only one to implement Savory’s recommendations and win the high-yield award that year for others to soon follow suit. That proof and newfound knowledge prompted the farmers to invest in expensive harvesters that would leave healthy organisms in the

Continued on page 10

Sister Helen with sugar cane farm workers teaching them more effective and sustainable ways to farm
Personality Profile

Continued from page 9

field, and, consequently, less trash on the roads and in the mills. It was the
win-win solution for which Sister Helen
is best known.

“The best solutions are those that
are mutually beneficial for all parties
involved,” she says. “Farmers make
more money, communities are healthier,
and the relations are better for long-
term support of America’s agricultural
sector.”

This would be just one of her many
projects with lasting impact. In 1992,
she founded the 13-state Southern
Sustainable Agriculture Working
Group, a group of over 1,300 farmers
who come together each year to share
sustainable practices.

SMHA co-founder and President
Lorna Bourg says Sister Helen’s work
helping farmers transition to sustainable
farming techniques helped SMHA
garner the World Hunger Year Harry
Chapin Self-Reliance Award in 1996.

While on the Board of Trustees
for Rural Advancement Foundation
International (RAFI), Sister Helen
and Bourg attended the RAFI meeting
in Oslo, Norway. They were part of
discussions about biodiversity and
international food security measures
such as the global seed vault, holding
the world’s largest collection of crop
diversity.

At the local level, Bourg credits her
friend and cohort for transforming
SMHA. “Her knowledge, wisdom, and
win-win solutions that connect people
to their land and waters make our work
much more effective.”

The Diocese of Lafayette also
recognized Sister Helen’s substantial
contributions to the New Iberia
community by naming her a 2015
recipient of the Martin Luther King Jr.
Award.

If Sister Helen looks back at her
accomplishments it is only to make
sure that they are viable enough for
future generations. And one project that
she wants to see through completion
for what it will bring to New Iberia
is the Teche Ridge development. “I
want to see it continue to grow,” she
says. “Traditional neighborhood
developments (walkable communities
with retail and services mixed
with homes) like Teche Ridge save
agricultural land by minimizing the use
of the automobile over long distances.
And, they also shorten the distances
that school buses, garbage trucks
and other public services must travel
and reduce the burden on taxpayers
by reducing the area over which
gas, sewer and electric lines must be
installed. Also, residents of traditional
neighborhood developments tend to be
healthier.”

Sister Helen is good at creating
viable, healthy communities because
she understands the foundation of
a true community. As she has put it:
They are built on relationships among
people, among people with the earth,
and the things that grow from the earth.

Although she is the only nun
from her order in Louisiana, Sister
Helen does not see her Providence
life separate from her work and her
relationships with other sisters. “The
Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-
the-Woods in Indiana understood the
spirit of Saint Mother Theodore Guerin,
the founder of our congregation - a
spirit that is with and of the people
wherever they are. I am so fortunate
to be among the people of Louisiana;
I’m not only absorbed by my ministry,
but by Louisiana itself. Louisiana has
many challenges and is a large part of
my life’s ministry because it is rich in
cultures with people who work close to
the land and waters. They are the most
fascinating people to learn from.”

No doubt, this protector of God’s
creations has planted her own seeds of
thought, through her teachings, for a
better life.