

SOUTHERN MUTUAL HELP ASSOCIATION, INC. BRIEF HISTORY

Rural South Louisiana is “Cane Country,” with sugar cane dominating much of the landscape as well as local economy and culture. In 1969 when Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc. (SMHA) was founded, many sugar cane farm workers were trapped in “plantationism,” working under and living in conditions little different from those of enslaved people barely a century before. These conditions and SMHA’s work to identify, document, make public and transform these oppressive systems are the subject of numerous national magazine features and a “60 Minutes” segment (all of which can be shared upon request).

A diminutive, soft-spoken Dominican nun and social worker from the French Alps. An intensely determined young Cajun woman and former nun fresh from a Master’s program in clinical psychology at the local university. A civil rights attorney who would spend the next several decades desegregating schools in his native St. Landry Parish (county). A sugar cane farm worker who was one the plaintiffs in a landmark legal case organized by SMHA that was a key step in dismantling “plantationism” in rural Louisiana.

These individuals – of different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultural/socio-economic backgrounds – came together out of the War on Poverty through their common values and shared passion for justice to create SMHA. Over 50 years later, this passion for justice remains bedrock to the organization’s work today and is personified by long-time President and CEO and current President Lorna Bourg, the young Cajun woman who co-founded SMHA with the late Sister Anne Catherine Bizalion.

Under **Lorna Bourg**’s leadership, SMHA has received numerous national awards including the Fannie Mae Foundation Sustained Excellence Award, National Community Reinvestment Coalition National Achievement Award, Independent Sector Leadership IS Award, and a Points of Light named by President George H. W. Bush. Lorna herself is a MacArthur Fellow and Fannie Mae Foundation James Johnson Fellow known for her visionary leadership and as a leader in the field of rural community development. Her vision and tenacity are also evident outside the community development field, where she initiated and led the recovery of the remains of 17 U.S. Airmen – one of whom was her brother – who were shot down over the former Soviet Armenia. Her work resulted in the military changing its DNA Protocol as applied to aged remains and in obtaining a final full accounting of the incident and group burial with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery.

Sister Anne brought to SMHA her international perspective and a global view of how systems work (and don't work), and Lorna continues as President to ensure SMHA's Board of Directors and staff leadership maintains that global lens as well as the importance of considering the intersectionality among race, class, and gender when tackling unjust systems. In 1980 SMHA was joined by Sister Helen Vinton, a life scientist who recognized (and wrote about) over 50 years ago how humans' interaction with the land and waters was endangering future generations' access to that same land and water. *Sister Helen* shares the passion for justice in which SMHA was founded and helped create within SMHA new areas of work built around families who make their living from the land, including moving (commodity) sugar cane farmers toward more sustainable practices, working with Louisiana's traditional family fishers on ways to preserve their livelihoods and way of life, and on citizen education, organizing and advocacy around environmental issues (particularly around herbicide/pesticide use and impacts).

Over 50 years after SMHA's founding, rural South Louisiana is still "Cane Country." The rural landscape is still dominated by sugar cane, but the industry is much different from the days of SMHA's early work helping farm worker families' break away from "the plantation." Mechanization displaced many of the primarily African-American farm workers years ago, and the practice today is to bring in skilled seasonal immigrant labor for planting, harvesting and grinding. So too has SMHA's Board and staff leadership adapted and changed beyond the founding generation, with Board member Juanita Alvarez Mainster bringing a multi-lingual, multi-cultural view from her first-hand perspective as the child of immigrant farm workers (and a farm worker herself throughout her early life). SMHA's current CEO *Hilda Curry*, who shares co-leading capacity with former President and CEO/current President Lorna Bourg, is former three-term Mayor of the City of New Iberia, and she brings new connections and relationships as well as a different understanding of local government. Other Board members' portfolios of service include racial/gender equity, philanthropy, legal expertise, and not-for-profit management; common to all is the passion for justice that has defined SMHA and guided leadership decisions since 1969.

Yet, despite organizational adaptation and growth over the past 50-plus years – from work with farm worker families on education, health care and working conditions/wages to include self-help housing and affordable housing development, connecting families, fishers and other small businesses to affordable capital, and a significant expertise in disaster recovery – SMHA's roots and heart remain firmly in "Cane Country." SMHA's work with farm workers was featured in a one-year exhibit called "Grass, Scrap and Burn" at [The Whitney Plantation](#), the only plantation museum in the country that focuses on the lives of the enslaved people rather than on the owners of the plantation), and the Executive Director of The Whitney Plantation, Ashley Rogers, joined SMHA's Board of Directors in 2020.


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