

MicroFest/Artists Spotlighting the World As It Is and the World As It Should/Could Be

by Carol Bebelle



NEW ORLEANS AGAINST ALL ODDS

New Orleans is known for its music, its people, its food, and its party atmosphere, but also for its startling distinction of having more prisons per capita than any other city in the world. The combination of cultural assets and the social implications of such a dramatic and aggressive prison strategy positions New Orleans in a paradoxical situation. We are a vibrantly rich cultural city. And we are an economically poor city. We are a city struggling to achieve equity and social justice. And we are a city that more and more captures the fancy of the new and returning disaster volunteers, young urban dwellers, entrepreneurs, innovators, and creatives who are thrilled at the opportunity to participate in the rebuilding and re-creation of this city. This establishes a genuine creative tension between new—New Orleans residents and the historical residents of the city. The insiders are afraid of losing their heritage, history, and status, and the outsiders are looking to become insiders, not necessarily thinking whether their presence and actions are at the expense of anyone else.

This is a city that is fluent in the art of improvisation. It is in our music, our problem solving, and our cooking. In New Orleans, we never do exactly the same thing twice. Life is performance here. Characters walk the streets and inhabit every aspect of New Orleans life. Art imitates life that imitates art. Culture is both a seminal and pivotal influence here. The creative spirit is present within the people in their use of language, the lilt in their voices and bodies, the flair in their moves, the style of their clothes, their hair.



Jose Torres-Tama performing *Aliens, Immigrants & Other Evildoers* in his studio surrounded by *Photo Retablos: Immigrants in Chocolate City*.
Photo: Michael Premo

This creative impulse, mostly taken for granted, was never more necessary than in fueling our recovery from the near destruction of our dear city and its subsequent resurrection after the “Katrina-related federal flood.” Our Lazarus experience is both instructive and inspirational to the nation. Many communities have had disasters, but none had 80 percent of their land mass flooded or near complete removal of its residents from their home base. New Orleans knows *place matters* in a deep and personal way. Those who left and returned, those who came to help and stayed to live, and those who see the promise in a newly developed American city are establishing the basis for constructive and creative tension in life and culture as we go forward. What formula will emerge? How much past, mixed with how much present, seasoned with what degree of the spontaneous and the creative—what will be the new—New Orleans formula?

Is New Orleans a prophetic city? Importantly, New Orleans teaches the world how to craft something of value out of loss, grief, and tragedy. This reality is very strange for most of American society but very familiar to African Americans, developing world civilizations, and artists and culture bearers who are accomplished at rescuing life out of tragedy and treasure from trash.

The challenges that low-wealth communities in Metro–New Orleans face are so overwhelming that most people would give up. Yet south Louisianans continue to try, continue to reach for more life, love, and opportunity. We continue to fight for the right to be safe, secure, and to have a basic and acceptable quality of life.

Festivals, music, and theater have provided the boost for people who could have given up. Culture and sports have become our healing balm in the absence of direly needed mental health services. This fertile ground has been seeded by the addition of four state-designated “urban main street” cultural districts, several new theater venues, and a nearly year-round season of sports and festivals.

The [Network of Ensemble Theaters’ MicroFest](#) came to New Orleans to discover the city’s secrets and insights and to explore the influence of place on community-based and ensemble theater work. This inquiry and observation are an effort to better grasp the potential that artists and culture-bearers might contribute to building community and American resilience going forward.



Runnin’ Down the Mountain, NEW NOISE. Photo: Bruce France

ART IN SERVICE TO HUMANITY: THE PRACTICE OF ENSEMBLE THEATER

With [NEW NOISE theater’s](#) magnetic play, *Runnin’ Down the Mountain*, the artistry and strategy of ensemble theater opened MicroFest: New Orleans. *Runnin’ Down the Mountain* is a delicately crafted story of a brother and a sister who are housemates and life partners.

The simple day-to-day world of their existence poured out in curiously sweet drops, sequenced and wrapped together to give us so much more than the story of their lives; we witnessed how each was the salvation of the other. This simple story was an appetizer to the diverse snatches of performance we were destined to feast upon throughout MicroFest. The story, and our response to it, demonstrated powerfully how good theater can alter our rhythm, our perspective, our consciousness, and maybe even our blood pressure.

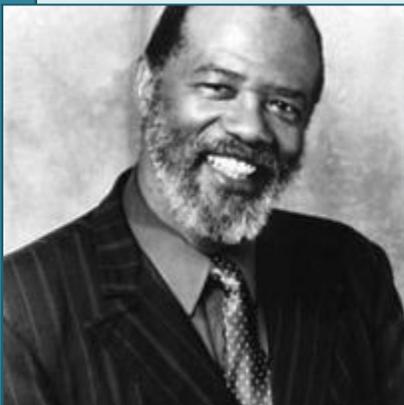
NEW NOISE performed in a rectangular garage style add-on structure with wooden bleacher seating. This functional no-frills venue represents but one version of the many venues that have opened in New Orleans. Offices, corner stores, and gutted houses have been remodeled, at the same time that major developments have gone forward, all to become creative places where theater and performance are produced. Significantly, some of these creative spaces are also sites where artists and culture bearers and community members work their magic, exercising the impulses of democracy out of strife, isolation, injustice, the yearning for something better or more, and the determination for community agency.

Continuity in Theater Practice

NEW NOISE is located very near the former home of the historic Free Southern Theater. This prompted me to remember the important role it played in the civil rights movement and beyond.

Free Southern Theater (1963-1978)

Founded in 1963 by John O'Neal, Doris Derby, and Gilbert Moses at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, the Free Southern Theater was designed as a cultural and educational extension for the civil rights movement in the South. Closely aligned with the Black Arts Movement— and more specifically the Black Theatre Movement—several members of the Free Southern Theater were figures of national prominence. The leaders aimed to



introduce theater to the Deep South, free of charge, to communities which had no theater in their communities and little in the way of cultural production. With both political as well as aesthetic objectives, the group aspired to validate positive aspects of African-American culture and to act as a voice for social protest. Its brief history was marked by internal artistic and managerial disagreement, but the legacy of Free Southern Theater serves as a model for other community theater groups across the nation.

Amistad Center Archives **John O'Neal**

Free Southern Theater eventually moved from its birthplace in Mississippi to New Orleans, where it remained until it ended in 1978. The effect of its work, both locally on the community from which it drew its audience and as a national model, continues to this day. It is impossible to think of Free Southern Theater without thinking of John O’Neal, a cultural treasure with a 50-year history of resisting oppression in the community and from the stage through [Junebug Productions](#), the undisputed heir to Free Southern Theater.

Runnin’ Down the Mountain reminded me so much of the way in which Free Southern Theater used the stage to reveal to the community a truer or deeper reflection of itself, a clearer sense of the challenges the community faced, and the solutions that were needed.

Notions about conscious and intentional theater practice were further stimulated by the work of [Artspot Productions](#)’ presentation of *Did You See Me?* written and performed by the [Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women \(LCIW\) Drama Club](#), a women’s ensemble of ex-offenders at the Resurrection After Exoneration Center.

This work at once showed the power of possibility and transformation in the hands of Kathy Randels and Ausetua Amor Amenkum, capable and committed artists who guided the four LCIW Drama Club ensemble members in creating and sharing their personal journey from incarceration to society re-entry. Each story inspired admiration for the integrity of these women as they disclosed personal and intimate parts of their lives. They bared their souls and then offered us the sweet reward of their prize—lives reclaimed. They used their time of incarceration and their artist coaches to reinvent themselves. “Did you see me?” was the repeated query. “Did you see me? Did you see how high I held my head? Did you see how I swayed back and forth with the wind?” Their stories reminded us again of the power of story and the transformative nature of agency applied toward personal redemption.

LCIW Drama Club’s touching performance evoked yet more memories—works by New Orleans’ Monroe Bean on homeless Vietnam Veterans and Tom Dent’s prophetic and unfortunately timeless “Ritual Murder,” a psychological autopsy on black on black homicide in urban communities in America. This tradition of using the stage simultaneously as lectern, pulpit, dreamscape, or crystal ball has a long history in New Orleans; it has ebbed and flowed and is once again rising. These morsels of performance, these pauses to savor and inhale story, so cleverly and movingly insinuated throughout MicroFest, created a frame for the many “takeaways” we would list on our final morning together.

Continuity of Cultural Activism

My introduction to and experience with Junebug Productions and [Urban Bush Women](#)² was Junebug’s Environmental Racism Project, planned and produced from 1995–1998. Community artists were partnered with community social and educational organizations to create responses to environmental threats. We learned the hard way that art activism was not better than community activism, just different. Notably, we also learned that together they created a rather formidable force.

Today, Mel Chin has collected thousands of Fundred dollar bills designed by children across the country to be brought to Washington DC in exchange for real money to treat the extreme lead poisoning found in low-wealth areas of New Orleans, especially in our neighborhood, Central City, which has one of the highest readings of lead in the city of New Orleans. [Ashé Cultural Art Center's Kuumba Institute](#) and other children across New Orleans have participated in this creative community activism/engagement project along with youth and schools across the country.

Major contributors to the cancer rate in Louisiana are the rows of industry— Alcoa, ChevronTexaco, Dow, DuPont, and ExxonMobil— situated along an 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River known as Cancer Alley. Louisiana is ranked among the top states in per capita production of toxic wastes, hazardous chemicals, and carcinogens.¹

During MicroFest, we visited St. Charles Parish Norco, one of seven parishes that constitute Cancer Alley, a community that struggles with the effects of environmental neglect and racism. We heard from the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, an environmental health and justice organization working with communities that neighbor the state's oil refineries and chemical plants. The Bucket Brigade employs cultural strategies in its grassroots activism.

About Fundred

(excerpted from [FUNDRED](#) website)

Draw your unique Fundred Dollar Bill, mail it to a Fundred Collection Center and be part of the solution to eliminate the devastating effects of lead-contaminated soil that currently places children at risk for severe learning disabilities and behavioral problems. This nationwide drawing project will honor the value of your action. Make a Fundred! Make a Difference! These valuable drawings will be picked up by a special armored truck and presented to the U.S. Congress with a request for an even exchange of the creative capital—your Fundreds—for real funding to make safe lead-polluted soils in New Orleans. Once we create a lead-safe New Orleans, this innovative environmental model will be available to other lead-polluted cites.



Children making Fundred bills as part of Mel Chin's Paydirt project.

Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Art-to-Action Workshop



Top Left: Queen Reesie, Guardians of the Flame, with Andrew Wiseman. Photo: Kate Gilbert

Bottom Left: MicroFest participants learn the Crude Step Two Step. Photo: Kate Gilbert

As an example, the community delivered a giant Christmas card to the homes of Exxon executives in 2012, driving home the community's seemingly unheard message of resistance and demand for accountability. The Louisiana Bucket Brigade sang Chemical Carols, with lyrics appropriately revised to mobilize people, capture attention, and articulate a message, and lyrics that ultimately effected a higher level of community consciousness. This cultural organizing exemplifies artists, activists, and community working together to change the policies and actions of those in power.

A hard-fought battle resulted in a bittersweet victory that allowed at-risk families to be compensated and relocated. But this has severed the family lines in Norco. Kristen Evans, an activist from the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, shared the pain that many relocated residents feel—they no longer can call their homeland home. She explained that a resident representative who had been invited to participate in this MicroFest site visit had sent her apologies for not being there—the wound of separation from her childhood community

was still too tender. The use of activism on the environmental racism battlefield has proven effective over time with small and large victories for the community.

What Does Success Look Like?

On June 11, 2002, the Concerned Citizens of Norco won their hard fought battle with Shell Oil. Since the death of two community members in an explosion in 1973, the Diamond neighborhood advocated for a fair buy out of their contaminated and dangerous



properties. They demanded relocation from Shell, as Shell had moved on top of them in the 1950s. Older members of the Diamond community—women in their 60s and 70s—recount holding signs and picketing in front of Shell in the 1970s. Nearly thirty years later, Shell finally listened. A small, four-street neighborhood convinced the world’s second largest oil company to hear its demands.

The [Louisiana Bucket Brigade](#) began working with the Diamond community in 1999. We trained community members how to document Shell’s pollution in their neighborhood. We also worked hard to gain media exposure for the community. Our work resulted in 61 media stories in one 12-month period. During the final months of the campaign we organized a rally in front of Shell’s Houston headquarters. “Let My People Go” was the rallying cry. Stories appeared in the Houston Chronicle, Shell’s hometown newspaper.

Official website www.labucketbrigade.org

Norco: Profile Community Group: Concerned Citizens of Norco

MISSION STATEMENT & PURPOSE

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade is a 501(c) (3) environmental health and justice organization working with communities that neighbor the state's oil refineries and chemical plants. Our mission is to support communities' use of grassroots action to create informed, sustainable neighborhoods free from industrial pollution. Through its Art-to-Action, the Brigade embraces integrated approaches with diverse community partners that combine creative action, social media, storytelling, theater, video, journalism, visual art, dance, puppetry, music, street performance and interdisciplinary media for social change

CULTURE AND ART TO THE RESCUE

Queen Cherice Harrison Nelson of the Mardi Gras Indian Collective called Guardians of the Flame presented an unforgettable one-woman show at MicroFest. Accompanied by tambourine and drumming assistants, her “informance” taught about the cultural content

of life in a Mardi Gras Indian family while showcasing her fabulous talent for storytelling—a brand of insight, comedy, and wisdom interlaced with personal moments of her life. When Queen Cherice tells her story, hard life realities explode into inspiring performance and visual art. She reveals the premature birth of her only child and his struggle to survive, her father’s death, her efforts to emerge a respectable woman in a leadership role in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Most poignantly, perhaps, she relays her bout with breast cancer, possibly born of her residence in south Louisiana, one of the highest cancer rate areas in the nation.



Mardi Gras Indian Queen Cherice Harrison Nelson.
Photo: Michael Premo

Queen Cherice has found some relief from her own painful dealings with cancer. She testified to the therapy and solace she derived from having the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, her cultural safety net, to catch her in her life’s stumbles and falls. This was a privilege to witness. The Mardi Gras Indian cultural tradition has allowed her to reclaim and proclaim her agency and also to publicly rectify some of the frequent misunderstandings of this maligned cultural phenomenon.

These intimate experiences of people struggling to respond to daunting challenges help us to recognize the potential support and assistance that culture and art can provide. They also provoke thought and inquiry that cause introspection.

How important is it for theater artists to learn from and about, honor, and build on work that has come before? What is the essential relationship between artist and community? Is the artist a tool of the community? Is the community a client of the artist? How much should the voice of the art be the artist’s versus the community’s? How should the ensemble continue to learn to update its knowledge base and its understanding of issues and perspectives on the issues? The literal and the symbolic are basic tools of artistic practice. How can these tools be most effectively put to use to get the truth from a work of art?

Why Don’t You Get Me?

Unfortunately, we need to make continuous efforts to improve the standing of artists in the public’s eye. This is a matter of survival. It is very painful for artists and culture bearers to be undervalued and to experience a terrible disconnect with mainstream America. We have an image problem that needs fixing, and it is the cultural community’s problem to solve. Is the ability to survive economically so compromised by the brand we wear as

artists and cultural bearers? We must face the reality that our efforts to change this perception have largely failed. We are still on the outside of America's homes, school boards, and civic and commercial offices with our noses pressed against the window, wishing we were inside.

Symbolically, *inside* means artists/culture bearers working with stakeholders and within systems fighting for arts in the schools, for public art and community centers in neighborhoods, and for venues for performance and visual art. Being *inside* means artists/culture bearers are valued by other sectors and civic leaders for their capacity to see things differently. Being *inside* means meeting the demand for those creative capacities when community problem solving stalls or stales, when it requires an outside-the-box rescue.

Strategically, if not idealistically, broader commitments and strategies that redefine the role for artists and culture bearers in society must be pursued. Perhaps we need a fixer or at least a fixer strategy. Even the National Rifle Association is discovering that public opinion matters. How can we broaden our public base? Over most of its advocacy timeline the ecology and climate change movement has been comprised of advocates who are decidedly white, middle-, and upper class. Yet, on Sunday, February 17, 2013, nearly 50,000 people traveled to the National Mall in Washington DC to march to the White House in a Forward on Climate action. The coalition of organizations that produced this event includes the Sierra Club, 360.org, and Hip Hop Caucus. The crowd was young and diverse. The speakers on stage represented the streets, the suites, and the full palette of the human family. Significantly, the group had the president's attention as they chanted his motto. Are there lessons to be learned here by the cultural community on building consensus and support for a worthy cause?

MicroFest, in its curation of experiences in New Orleans, as well as Detroit, Appalachia, and upcoming, Honolulu, shows us how we, as artists, can re-invent our reputation in the community. Being a willing facilitative partner in community projects is a critical way to contribute to and reshape the reputation of artists and culture bearers across America.

The community issues in the Metro–New Orleans area are mostly long-standing issues. The fresh approaches that artists have brought to these problems have helped to rally inspiration, support, and sometimes, even progress. For example, it is taken for granted within the cultural community that we deconstruct to construct and re-create. Perhaps this model of creation and re-creation is a useful one to recognize and teach to the world.

[Kids Rethink New Orleans](#) is a great example of melding the creative practice of *Theatre of the Oppressed* with a youth development approach with the goal of increasing the capacity of public schools to serve students better.

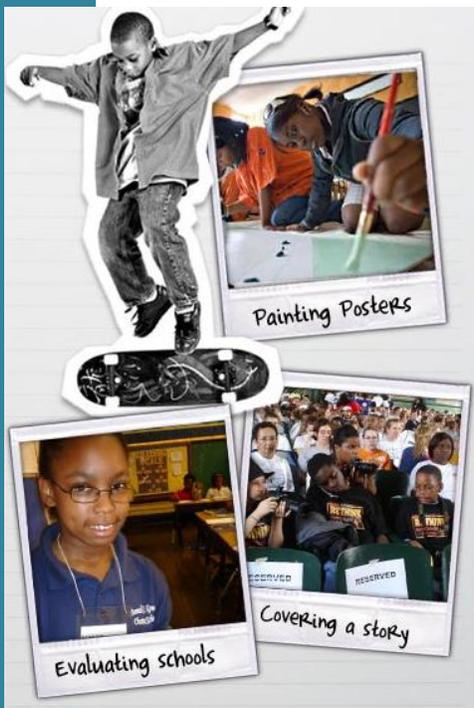
Rethinkers, as young participants are called, have focused efforts on replacing a pervasive policy of zero tolerance around discipline in charter schools with a more equitable practice

called restorative justice. This effort is aimed at interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. At MicroFest students discussed the concept of restorative justice with a mature confidence, explaining their approach to righting a wrong, not just to punishing a student. The students had strategies to address food justice and also impressive digital media projects to advance their many ideas:

- [Change the School \(Jingle Bells\)](#) (2011)
- [Move Your Body Flash Mob](#) (2011)
- [Rethink Zombie Movie](#) (2011)
- [Captain Strawberry vs Mr. Butterfinger](#) (2011)
- [Digital Petition for Fresh Fruit](#) (2011)
- [Real Food Now](#) (2009)
- [The Rethinkers' Guide to Hosting a News Conference](#) (2009)

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) was born in 1971, in Brazil, under the very young form of Newspaper Theatre, with the specific goal of dealing with local problems—soon, it was used all over the country. Forum Theatre came into being in Peru, in 1973, as part of a Literacy Program; we thought it would be good only for South America—now it is practiced in more than 70 countries. Growing up, TO developed Invisible Theatre in Argentina, as political activity, and Image Theatre to establish dialogue among Indigenous Nations and Spanish descendants, in Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico... Now these forms are being used in all kinds of dialogues.

Official website: [Theater of the Oppressed Laboratory](#)



From Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools [website](#)

One of the Rethinkers' first actions was the Great Cafeteria Takeover—the students rebelled against bad food and eventually succeeded in renegotiating the food contract with Aramark, the lunch catering vendor. The story of this victory is told in an Emmy-nominated film, [The Great Cafeteria Takeover](#), on HBO.

The success of the Rethinkers' work is a great example of working inside with the people affected to generate new ways of changing a system.

The give and take between communities and artist/culture bearers is symbiotic. A community gets the opportunity to look at challenges from a more insightful perspective and perhaps gain empowerment and inspiration. An artist/culture bearer gets the stimulation of people, circumstance, and/or occurrence as fodder for the fire of creativity and art making.

What do we believe can be gained or fear will be lost when we bring our talent to bear for a greater good? Is this sacrifice or is it “art for life,” a philosophy of choice that views the art, art making, and artist as critical components of civil society?

HERE WE STAND AT THE CROSSROADS

Many storytellers preface their sharing with a teaser, such as: “This is my story, be it sweet or not so sweet. Take some and let some come back to me.”

MicroFest was a sweet experience. The affinity of the participants and the zeal and spirit of their intentions, combined with a well-planned event, resulted in a good balance of knowledge sharing, dialogue, inspiration, networking, and art sharing. In the end, some insights emerged for me.

These times we find ourselves in can truly be considered a crossroad: There is much that can be considered opportunity and much that can be considered danger.

If creatives are anything, we are game changers. We are willing and very able to make “being chased by an angry mob look like we are leading a parade.” We can redefine words, create new concepts, coax new meanings from old concepts, and reinvent ourselves over and over again. But, can we, will we help communities do the same? Are we willing to really try? Are we able to temper our need for agency and respect in order to help a community become more empowered and find its own agency and self-respect?

Can we honor the values of community—whatever they are? For example, can we put aside any disagreement or difference in values we might have with an institution or system—whether city government, the justice system, or the organized church—to acknowledge that ours is not necessarily the bigger truth? Can we be good partners even when we believe we know better than “they” do? Having a different opinion is not necessarily a trump card; it can be viewed as a distinguishing value of diversity.

How committed are we to continuity? Do we stand proudly on the shoulders of our giants? Or, does every new generation feel compelled to re-invent practice? How do we make space in the evolution of our work for the John O’Neals, the Ted Gilliams, the Chakula cha Juas, the Monroe Beans, the Carol Suttons, and the Adella Gautiers of our New Orleans world and their counterparts in other worlds? All elders now, these icons were the forerunners of ensemble work in the service of social justice for black folks in New Orleans. They were foot soldiers who imagined the power of theater to teach, organize, and activate the community around the civil rights movement. They worked on this notion together, often realizing unintended accomplishments with and for the communities they served.

The African philosophy of *Sankofa* advises us to take from the past so that the present is firm for creating a good future. Performance—whether the Mississippi Blues of the 30s and 40s or Rhythm and Blues of the 60s and 70s; whether a torch song by Lady Day or its reinvention by Mary J. Blige today; whether a Langston Hughes’ poem or Marc Bamuthi Joseph’s contemporary work; whether Alvin Ailey’s Revelations or Urban Bush Women’s Walking with Pearl—we must not forget whose shoulders we stand upon. We really do not

want to miss the creative spark that lays waiting for us, left by a fellow journeyer who passed this way before.

I am completing the task of writing this essay after a meeting to discuss future plans to redevelop a major historical corridor in New Orleans that has special meaning to the black community here. The Claiborne corridor was the center of black life from the early 1900s to the 1960s, when it was literally gutted by the construction of the interstate highway to support a growing suburban white and black middle class. At the time it destroyed the pathway for creating an expanded black middle class in New Orleans.

At present we are discussing whether or not to take the interstate down and how to reconfigure this much-tried community yet again. Interestingly enough, the number one priority in our discussions is community and culture. But, the back story is preparation for a burgeoning biomedical future. Not the worst thing that could happen—this might be an unexpected opportunity in a planning process that flags culture as a central consideration.

With studies showing a decline in adult participation in arts programming and the steady decline in arts education in schools, our opportunities to nurture our future artists and culture bearers may well fall fully into our own hands. Community development and youth development are natural partners in our efforts to advance the cause for art and for ensemble theater, more specifically. America needs storytellers to keep alive the journeys we have made and the ones we imagine before us. Whether we speak plainly or in symbolic form, we must see ourselves as critical memory keepers and dream catchers and instigators for our community.

Choosing to serve this higher calling some of the time or all of the time is less of an issue. That we can be counted on to contribute our part to creating, re-creating, and refining democracy is the critical issue. Can we count on artists and culture bearers to be there? Will we use our third eye, creative center, or essential selves to take the long view? There we will see our fingerprints present in the lifestyle, traditions, and culture of a world we all helped to imagine and create from today.



Carol Bebelle is a native New Orleanian. She holds a B.A. in sociology from Loyola University and an M.A. in education administration from Tulane University. She has a 20-year career in the public sector as an administrator and planner of human service programs. In 1990 Carol established a private consulting firm offering planning, development, and grant-writing services to human service programs. Her clients have been nonprofits, religious programs, entrepreneurs, and artists.

Carol is a published poet and essayist. She is a popular panelist and commentator on the transformative power of culture. Her written works can be found in various anthologies, reports, and journals. In 1998 Carol Bebelle and Douglas Redd founded Ashe Cultural Arts Center (Ashe CAC), an organization dedicated to community and human development using culture and art. Ashe CAC became a central player in the rebuilding of New Orleans, particularly the Central City community, and the cultural landscape especially for community artists and culture bearers.

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End Notes

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² Urban Bush Women's mission is to create dance and to create community. Founded in 1984 by choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Urban Bush Women seeks to bring the untold and under-told histories and stories of disenfranchised people to light through dance. It is done from a woman-centered perspective and as members of the African Diaspora community in order to create a more equitable balance of power in the dance world and beyond. This is done by facilitating the use of art as a means of addressing issues of social justice and encouraging civic engagement.