



*C*itizens of Louisiana began to take notice of Donna Edwards in 2015 when she appeared in campaign commercials with her husband, John Bel, a candidate for Governor of Louisiana at the time. As you are aware, Edwards won the election and Donna became Louisiana's First Lady. Thrive spoke with Ms. Edwards recently and she talked about her family, her passions, and how her life has changed over the past year since moving into the Governor's Mansion.

# first person

with **Donna Edwards** by Angie Kay Dilmore

Louisiana's First Lady

**Where did you grow up and what was your childhood like?**

I was born in Mississippi. My dad worked for International Paper Company as a forester. We moved to Alabama, and from there to Amite, Louisiana. My mom stayed home with me and my two older brothers. She was one of the best homemakers. I grew up in a very strong household with strong faith, involved with our church, my dad was in Kiwanis. We did a lot of things together. I remember Sunday afternoons walking through the woods, picnics, and going to the park.

**When did you and John Bel meet?**

I met my husband in 6th grade when my family moved to Amite. We started dating in high school. He went on to United States Military Academy at West Point. I attended University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg and graduated with a business degree in Industrial Management. After John Bel's Ranger School, we got married. Our first tour of duty was at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. We lived there until our first child, Samantha Bel, was born. After 3 1/2 years, we moved back to the mainland and moved around a couple different places. Our last tour of duty was at Fort Bragg, N.C., where our second child Sarah Ellen was born. We were eight years in the army, active duty. Then we moved back to Amite, where John Bel went to LSU law school. We had our third child, John Miller, right after 9/11.

**Your daughter Samantha has spina bifida. How is she now and how did you and John Bel raise her to be as strong and independent as possible?**

Samantha had a lot of obstacles to overcome. After she was born, I decided not to go back to work, stay at home, be a part of her everyday life, and make sure she had whatever she needed physically, mentally, and spiritually to be successful. She beat a lot of the odds and is considered quite a miracle. Now she is married, working on her master's degree, and will become a school counselor.



**How has your life changed since the election and moving into the Governor's Mansion?**

While I was a stay at home mom, I was a professional volunteer – PTO, church and school activities, Jr. Auxillary ... I helped build a park in our community. People kept saying I should go into education because I love children. So I went back to school and became certified and taught eight and a half years before leaving to go on the campaign trail. So I'm no longer in the classroom as a teacher. But I still have those desires to support teachers and make our schools successful. During the historic Louisiana floods this past year, I was able to partner with a lot of different groups to raise money for classroom supplies and needs.

**What are some changes you didn't expect?**

I didn't anticipate the 24/7 security, not being able to take a drive whenever we feel like it or going shopping without anyone knowing.

**What are your goals as First Lady?**

I've started the Louisiana Governor's Mansion Preservation Foundation. There's a lot of upkeep on this home – painting, leaking roof and porch – those necessary repairs come out of private funding because we have no money in the budget right now. So I'm trying to raise awareness and money. Our first fundraiser was last month, called A Christmas Evening in the Mansion. We will have Evenings

at the Mansion two to three times a year to raise money to repair and preserve the state's home. Second, I will be starting up the Louisiana First Foundation to support art, music, and movement in our schools. My third goal is to focus on our foster care program. In 2016, we had the most foster children adopted out of the foster care program ever – 735 children. We're very proud of that.

**Describe how you found a balance between your own career and supporting a husband in public service.**

Being First Lady has become my new career. It's a full-time job. I have a desk and I go to work every day. I make calls and appearances and I try to make a difference as a public servant alongside my husband in trying to promote our state and make it a better place for all Louisianans.

**You have a full, often stressful scedule. How do you relax and unwind?**

I love tea and I love candles and I start each day off with meditation and scripture. That gives me peace.

**Name three things on your bucket list.**

That's hard because I haven't had much time to think about my bucket list. I've been enjoying traveling to more states and hope to do more of that. I've been encouraged to learn how to play tennis. And I'd like to write a couple of books, maybe a children's book.

