



first person

with Pam Breaux | Director of the National
Assembly of State Arts Agencies

by Kristy Como Armand

From Lake Charles to Baton Rouge to Washington D.C., Pam Breaux has blazed a trail championing the arts. Born in Lafayette, Louisiana, her family moved to Lake Charles before she started school, so Southwest Louisiana is home to her. After earning undergraduate and masters degrees in English, she began her career of arts administration at the Arts & Humanities Council of Southwest Louisiana. Her career path took her to the Louisiana Division of the Arts, where she was Executive Director, and then to the position of Secretary of the Office of Cultural Development at the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism (CRT). While there, she led Louisiana's cultural economy initiative and spearheaded the state's attainment of UNESCO recognition of Poverty Point as a World Heritage site. She is currently the President and CEO of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) in Washington D.C., where she works with state arts agencies across the country to promote and protect the arts. Thrive caught up with Pam to discuss her work to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to benefit from the arts in their daily lives.

What is NASAA and what is your role there?

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) is the professional association that serves the nation's 56 state and jurisdictional arts agencies. At its core, NASAA exists to strengthen state arts agencies, and we do that by representing them, providing them with knowledge services, and uniting them around common goals and a shared vision that the arts help all communities achieve their fullest potential. Louisiana is connected to this network through the Louisiana Division of the Arts, a program under the commission of the Lieutenant Governor.

As NASAA's President and CEO, I spend a great deal of my time championing state arts agencies and emphasizing the importance of the arts in public life. America's communities need the arts because they create vibrant and fulfilling places to live, work, play, and raise families. Public sector support of the arts ensures that all communities, regardless of wealth and geography, benefit from the power of the arts. I work directly with state arts agencies to inform and inspire their work today and new ways of working in the future. NASAA is a remarkable association, and each day here is different.

I can be talking with a member of Congress about how the arts benefit wounded veterans one day and helping a state arts agency explore new strategies to revitalize rural communities the next. I'm so fortunate it's a joyful job!

Since NASAA is a non-profit association, I have the great fortune of working with a talented and dedicated staff, board of directors and committees to accomplish our goals. We'll be marking our 50th anniversary in 2018, by celebrating a legacy of accomplishments, but just as important, we'll continue to freshly examine how NASAA and state arts agencies can provide the most significant benefits to our country.

Describe your childhood, growing up in Lake Charles.

Lake Charles will always be home to me. I attended Sacred Heart Elementary School and Saint Louis Catholic High School, where I received a solid foundation academically, spiritually, and as a whole person within the context of community. I learned at an early age that giving back is as important as moving forward, and I try to balance both ideas as I navigate life. I'm grateful for this foundation; it continues to inspire me to this day.



Second Lady Karen Pence launched her signature initiative on October 18, 2017. Healing with the HeART demonstrates the power of art therapy to support physical, mental and emotional wellness for individuals of all ages, including those facing cancer, anxiety, PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, eating disorders, autism, dementia, depression and more. Visits to art therapy sites across America--many facilitated by state arts agencies--informed this uplifting initiative. NASAA President and CEO Pam Breaux joined Second Lady Karen Pence and Florida colleagues to kick off Healing with the HeART.

What led to your choice of English as a major?

I have always loved reading, and that love informed my majors in undergraduate and graduate school. As a 17-year-old entering McNeese, I wasn't sure what career would be the right fit, but I was absolutely sure about my love of literature. I distinctly remember returning home from my first registration at McNeese; I had just declared my major. When I told my mother, she asked, an English education major? I proclaimed, no, just English. I followed that love of literature, and it led me to fulfilling experiences and eventually, my career path in arts administration. At McNeese, studying literature within the framework provided by the College of Liberal Arts taught me about the arts and about the world I had yet to experience. It ignited my curiosity and set me on a course to explore the world through travel and through continued exposure to the arts. Whether my journeys were fueled by Alice Walker, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, or any number of writers and artists (It's impossible to have a favorite!), those journeys taught me so much; they helped me appreciate people, our many distinct cultures as well as see how fundamentally connected we all really are.

How did your early work with the Arts & Humanities Council of Southwest Louisiana contribute to your career path?

That was such a happy experience! As a natural organizer and a lover of arts and culture, it was a great fit. Working at the Council meant working at the intersection of arts, humanities, volunteerism, and arts administration, and those experiences helped me understand and value the role of the arts in public life and the importance of public policy supporting that role. The arts benefit us all in so many ways, and we often don't even realize it; they're good for our connections to each other as well as good for communities, education, the economy, our well-being, our creative capacity and so much more. My interest in the arts as a critical part of public policy was born at the Arts & Humanities Council, and it changed the trajectory of my career.

You've been involved with Louisiana Travel/Tourism, and your job requires a great deal of travel. What is your favorite destination?

I definitely love to travel. I particularly love traveling to France, with Paris being a real highlight for me. Honestly, I can never get enough. I used to wonder about why I feel so at home in France, even though I'm not fluent in French. It's no surprise that Louisiana's cultural ties to France answered that question for me. Years ago while in Paris, late on a Sunday night we were looking for someplace to have dinner. We decided on a small restaurant with incredible aromas and very few tables. We went in and had a really delicious meal; we were the last patrons in the restaurant that night (interestingly, that happens quite a bit). As we finished dinner, an older woman came out from the kitchen to greet us. She wasn't fluent in English, and we weren't fluent in French, but we communicated on a few levels. She told us that she knew we were from Louisiana. That was a bit of a surprise. We asked her how she knew, and she remarked that we eat like French people, so she knew we must be from Louisiana. It's a cultural connection I treasure and have never forgotten.

What do you miss most about Louisiana? What do you love about living in DC?

I have been in DC for over two years now, and there's plenty I miss about Louisiana. I get homesick at the beginning of shrimp season, when I know the freshest gulf shrimp ever is being served up boiled and beautiful at restaurants in Lake Charles and across the state. I also get homesick when I report to work in DC on Mardi Gras day. That's so unfair, am I right? Lucky for me, I get home to Lake Charles pretty regularly. It grounds me, and I can take care of my pesky Gulf shrimp addiction.

Living in DC is quite an adventure! Most people think about Capitol Hill action when they think about DC; I work in that environment, so the Hill is a part of my professional experience. However, as a city, Washington is a vibrant community made up of beautifully distinct neighborhoods and great opportunities to experience culture, cuisine and art.

What stands out to you about the arts in Louisiana?

I'm fortunate to be able to travel across the country and experience the arts. I'm just as fortunate to be from Louisiana, where arts and cultural experiences have shaped who I am. Louisiana is indeed unique; history, culture, and the sense of place inspire its artforms. The arts and culture are inextricably linked, and over the course of generations, the creative people of our state have told Louisiana's story, and it's a story that has resonated world-wide. It's no accident that Louisiana gave birth to so many musical genres, for example, Jazz, Cajun, Zydeco, and Swamp Pop music couldn't have been created anywhere else, and this music inspires folks across the globe.

Louisiana's sense of celebration also stands out for me. People in the state celebrate EVERYTHING! Whether in daily life or at the many hundreds of festivals that dot the state map, that sense of celebration is an important part of life, culture, and art that makes the place so unique. Every state has festivals, but Louisiana's many festivals are on steroids! It's special and so different from other states and should never be taken for granted.

There is much debate and concern about public funding for the arts. Can you give us some insight?

During the last few months, I have been asked many times about the fate of public funding for the arts. It's commonly known that an attempt was made to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and other federal cultural agencies. I'm personally quite optimistic about the future of the NEA. Congress continues to demonstrate a desire to keep the cultural agencies whole. Although the fiscal year 2018 budget isn't firm yet, Congress has placed the NEA and other cultural agencies in a healthy position moving forward. I believe that will continue.