

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 00:00

Welcome to La Louisiane, conversations brought to you by the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. I'm managing editor. Marie Elizabeth Oliver. Today, I'm here in Cypress Lake studio, and we're welcoming Candice Dazet, assistant director of student engagement and leadership here at the University, and Kevin Blanchard, CEO of Downtown Lafayette. Thank you both so much for joining us.

Candice Dazet 00:23

Thank you for inviting us!

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 00:24

We're here to talk about the upcoming Ragin' Cajuns Downtown Alive! on Friday, September the 5th. But I'd also like to discuss the connections between downtown Lafayette and UL Lafayette, which is the topic of an article that I wrote for the recent Fall issue of La Louisiane. So, I really, really am excited for this conversation. Kevin, one of my favorite quotes in the story came from you when you were talking about, you know, how we are going to attract the next generation to stay in Lafayette. And you said, you know, they don't want to live in a 1970s version of Lafayette. They want to live in a 2025 version of Lafayette. So, can you share a little bit about you know what you meant by that, and kind of what a 2025 version of Lafayette looks like?

Kevin Blanchard 01:13

When you say that, I'm turning 50 this month, and so it makes me feel really old. I might be able to accurately describe what I mean by 1970s Lafayette. But, you know, we are kind of in a competition as a city, right, as an area, the community, with, with every other community in our country who, you know, is looking for a way to engage this generation. You know, the way our economy has developed over the last, like, you know, decades is so little about how you can grow your economy. Is about where you're located, from a natural resources perspective or a transportation perspective. It's more about what type of people can you attract to this place to do good work and to get the sort of like things done. And so, you know, we've seen this model across the country. You know, there's always some random place in America that just it's a place people really love to be, and all of a sudden, they've got a lot of great, you know, great economic and development potential because of that. So, you know what I mean is this generation of folks who are coming out of getting into the workforce, or just into the workforce, they have options. And you know, if we're not looking at, well, what is the sort of community that we're presenting, and how are we, you know, attracting these folks, then we're going to lose out, you know. And I have two kids in college and a senior in high school, and I want them to stay here, you know. And I think we all want that, you know. And we have to remember that every other city around America that has a college wants the same thing, right? You know? So, so, yeah, how are we being proactive and saying, OK, well, what's the what kind of place do you want to be when you grow up?

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 02:51

And downtown's a big part of that.

Kevin Blanchard 02:53

Big part of it. Yeah, absolutely. You know, the I was thinking I moved here right after I graduated from college, my wife was at UL, and that's I met her, fell in love. Never left.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 03:05

Happens to a lot of us.

Kevin Blanchard 03:08

But it was downtown where I first fell in love with Lafayette, right? The first time I went to Festival International, and I remember, you know, someone was like, you just, just go downtown, you'll find it. I was like, What do you mean? Like, where's the stage, you know, and you realize, like, oh no, there's this entire ecosystem that is developed around this really great event, but it's also in this really great place. So yeah, and we're neighbors right, downtown and UL have been basically coexisting for 100 plus years, and so turning towards each other and saying, OK, how do we build on these relationships and the energy and all the great things are happening at the University, and leverage that to wins for everybody?

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 03:51

Absolutely. And Candace, I know your job is really it's engaging students, but I know that extends past just engaging them with the University but also engaging them with the larger community. So, can you share why that's important?

Candice Dazet 04:06

Absolutely, so Kevin kind of touched on it, but we really want students to find their community outside of UL. UL has its own community system kind of built in when they come here. We do a lot of engaging events. We help them find ways to get involved, but we also want them to be great citizens of the Lafayette and the surrounding community that they're a part of. So, you know, like you mentioned, downtown is so close. We want to show how walkable it is. We want them to get involved and to be able to experience life outside of just UL. We want them to see different ways that they can give back to the community, that they can be involved, that they can find employment options, their internship options that make them want to stay I'm remembering a student we had, CivicCon. A year or two ago, and that's what he said. He said, I didn't find anything for me to stay job wise, and that's why I'm moving. And so hopefully with this partnership, we can show them that maybe it just takes a little bit more digging and a little bit more connection to that community for you to find those places. And I think downtown does a great job of highlighting that. And so, to have this partnership, it helps us highlight that to the students as well.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 05:26

Absolutely. And in your experience, what do students what kind of feedback do you get from them that they like most about being part of this community they love?

Candice Dazet 05:36

So what's trending right now is a lot of the third spaces options, and I've heard that from some students or even from community members, like there's a lack of third spaces. And I think this helps highlight that there are a lot of third spaces around the community that are free, that you can get to, you can

walk to, that you can find community with. You know, I think Parc Sans Souci is such a great representation of that it continues to evolve. You now have, you know, not just the fountain, but you now have the park area Magnolia Pantry just opened up, so helping find those third spaces that they're looking for. You mentioned, you know, you're turning 50, you know, I also went to UL a decade or so ago, and so what that experience looked like for me was different downtown, was nightlife. And so, we want to show them, and that's also what they're looking for, is, you know, different experiences. I love that about this generation is that they are so interested in doing different experiences together outside of just, yes, the normal nighttime downtown. And so, this provides that, and that does give third space options to be able to find out just a hop, skip and a jump right across the street.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 06:56

Well, that's so neat, because in our last episode, we talked a lot about mental health for students. And part of that, part of that conversation, was talking about community and like having spaces to come together. And I love that you mentioned that, and it makes so much sense that you know downtown is right there and has so many, so many options.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 07:17

Well, if you're just joining us, this is Marie Elizabeth Oliver, managing editor for La Louisiane. I'm here with Candice Dazet, assistant editor of student engagement and leadership, and Kevin Blanchard, CEO of Downtown Lafayette. So, we're here to talk about Ragin' Cajuns Downtown Alive. I mentioned it earlier, Candice, can you share a little bit about you know, how that event evolved, and just share with people you know, what you've been working on?

Candice Dazet 07:43

Yeah, so this is our third annual Ragin' Cajuns Downtown Alive. It's really exciting. So, our Dean of Students, Margarita Perez, had a vision, and she entrusted me to kind of head spearhead that, that initiative. And I'm so excited, because she knows I love anything kind of music, activities, just anything engaging. And so, we started out our first year just really trying to start that partnership with, you know, here's the UL side. We bring in the Pride of Acadiana, Ragin' Cheer and Jazz. You know, we had our president speak. And then we also have student like live action stations as well, where they check in. We we build those partners with we have old time as our partner to feed them. The Coca Cola distribution donates water, which is amazing, and then our Student Government Association also donates swag items for the students, because we got to incentivize them in a little way.

Candice Dazet 08:47

But yeah, so it kind of started as like, here's our blank slate, like, here's some things we know that will get students to the event. And downtown had a lot of you know, obviously experience putting on the Downtown Alive piece of that. So, we kind of just kind of slid in there and like, here's the Ragin' Cajun piece for our first year. And then year two, we were like, all right, now, how can we elevate this and make it bigger? And so, we had a piece of the intermission, which was really cool. We pulled in Ragin' Roar, our University Traditions Board, students had a piece of that. And that's one thing I want to highlight. Is like, you know, we always want to pull students into this, because it's for them as well. But yeah, they did Ragin' Roar. We had a whole pep rally piece. We pulled in Athletics. The whole baseball team showed up. They were like, "Let's go." They were more energized than, you know, you know,

anybody else. They were so excited to just be like, "you need a water, you need a water." So, they were so great. And so, for year three, we were like, "OK, so let's really bring in that Ragin' Cajun connection to this, I started meeting with more people to highlight it. You know, on social media, we have a new GIF for Instagram. We doubled down on Athletics. We've got some exciting things coming for year three. So, every year you kind of learn, OK, this worked, this didn't work.

Candice Dazet 10:08

We are really excited. We have a new Staff Senate, so we're going to have a staff, faculty and alumni tent altogether. It was kind of separate, so we're going to pull that all together, because there's a lot of crossover there. So, you know, and from what I'm told, because they do the geo tag, there's over 5,000 people there. So to, you know, kind of you get your community piece, the students get to see the community, and then now we're incorporating the faculty, staff and alumni piece into that. They've all had a small piece, but we're kind of, again, elevating, building it bigger. It's just really exciting to see. Every year, we kind of just like, "OK, what's one thing we can add?" And Downtown even threw me a curve ball. Was like, how about we do this? You know, we're playing a hometown team, and so we're, you know, there's some other exciting surprises I don't want to give away just yet but look forward to intermission. But yeah, so it's really, really exciting to see that every year you know you have your things, you're like, "Ah, maybe not, let's do this again." But for the most part, it's like, "No, we're doing this again." Like, "How can we pull in more people and get them excited about it?"

Kevin Blanchard 11:15

Look, it's this has quickly become our most attended Downtown Alive! every year, and something that we want to build on. But you know, when you think about it from our perspective, besides everything we talked about how trying to make connect, connection with these students. We don't do Downtown Alive! in Parc International, where there's a fence and a gate, and you kind of have to come through one because it's a free event. So, what's the point of that? But also, because we want for Downtown Alive! to be, to feel like it's in downtown and the folks are you can kind of wander into it and find it, or, you know, wander away. And so, we're excited because we do track a lot of the foot traffic and kind of understand, like where people are coming from and who are these folks. We're excited because people come and spend money downtown. Frankly, they come and spend time and, you know, using that gateway point of the of the show as a way to, like, introduce people. You know, we have 37 restaurants downtown right now. It's a by far, the most we've ever had. And so, there's so many different types of experiences that people can have there and downtown alive, in particular this group getting the students in, and frankly, the rest of the University community. And, you know, there's a few, few people my age that I saw last year's Downtown Alive! some UL folks who were like, you know, I probably haven't been downtown a little bit, you know, and things are looking great. And like, well, it's, that's why we got you here. Yeah, yes.

Candice Dazet 12:37

I do think it's like a bridge back and forth that, you know, kind of to do a pun, but bridges the gap of like them learning from each other. You know, one of the surprises we had last year was the Pride of Acadiana baton twirlers lit on fire, and they did the "Hot to Go" and like the students were so excited, but the audience also knew the dance and so, but if they didn't, they were like, "OK, I got to learn this."

Like, they were teaching each other. And so, I think that's such a big piece of it too. Is like to bring people together, and so I think that's kind of the important piece of it, too.

Kevin Blanchard 13:10

And can I say so I'm I've been in this job for a year and a half, and so I've had one Downtown Alive! with UL and some other stuff. But we've had two UL groups come in students through Soul Camp and the Parish Proud event, and to work with our ambassadors. And we've, you know, everything from picking up trash to some painting and some light construction and everything else. And I cannot tell you how impressed we have been with the output, but also just the kids, just the quality of the students. And, you know, I was thinking, you know, now that I'm 50, I was like, I don't remember being that positive and open to new things when I was that old, right? But we've noticed that too. And kind of overheard, in one event, a couple of kids as they were walking down there, like, you know, I haven't seen downtown in the daytime, but, yeah, it's pretty cool, you know, and, and so I love that, right? I love knowing that, that we might be getting, getting a little bit of attention, maybe getting our hooks in a little bit on, like, our next downtown supporters.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 14:14

Yes. And it's so like, just being at that event is so magical, because you feel the energy. You feel like you're living somewhere exciting, yeah, which I think, like, for me, as, as they say, like a boomerang, you know, somebody who, like, left and lived in bigger cities and came back. It just, it fills you with such excitement to be in this place. And so much of that are the students like, you know, they just bring so much energy. And so it's really neat to see that downtown and to see like them engaging, and hopefully that's what, like you said, hooks them in and helps them not only come downtown, but like stay in Lafayette.

Kevin Blanchard 15:04

Our goal is for the students at UL to feel like downtown is their campus. That's our goal.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 15:04

I love that. I love that. And, and I guess just kind of continuing that conversation, like, can you give your kind of like pitch for people either, whether it's students, members of the University community, people who maybe, like you said, haven't been downtown much. I've lived here forever but only come for Festival. Why now? I know there's been, like, a lot of momentum downtown. What are you most excited about?

Kevin Blanchard 15:24

I'm super excited. So, you know, every downtown around America had some struggle at some point in the last few decades about how to bring people back, how to understand, sort of, what are we missing. And a lot of good folks been working for a long time, and I feel like maybe I came into this job a year and a half ago, when the pickle jar was pretty much loose. So yeah, we've got a new hotel that's got an 83-room boutique hotel right there by Parc Sans Souci. It's going to overlook the Parc Sans Souci stage. We have our ambassador program, which is a team of four full time folks seven days a week that are picking up trash, cleaning up graffiti, giving directions, you know, just being a caretaker for the folks downtown. And then we're doing a lot of work that's just getting started now, but working with the

philanthropic community, the business community, with UL and some other community partners, to start really doing some long-range planning on getting some of these big parking lots and empty spaces and sometimes blighted properties that we do have in the downtown area and putting them back into commerce. And I can tell you that I've been involved in some way, shape or form and that type of work for good 15 years now, and across the board, there is so much more optimism and confidence. And, you know, it's more about what's the right project, as opposed to, like, is anybody going to pay attention? Are we doing the right thing? And I tell people, it's not because one day we woke up and just had a better idea, right? It's because for years, we've been doing things like Downtown Alive! You know, it's in the name, you know, 40 years ago, it was because we needed some life downtown and, you know, I think for a while that kind of got pigeonholed or evolved into like, well, Downtown Alive! means it's a free music concert every other Friday night or whatever, right? But the reality is, no, it was a way for us to get and engage new audiences and to introduce new folks. And so, you know this, you know, Downtown Alive! is another example of the more successful we are at promoting programming our downtown, at showing people how much fun and activity they can have, the difference and variety of activities and providing them that variety, it just builds the right story, builds right narrative. So, we have 200 new residents downtown in the last three years, which is just a massive, massive victory for us. And we just checked our sales tax numbers to kind of look at our growth over the last few years. And actually, over the last four years, we've averaged more growth in our sales tax as a percentage than pretty much everywhere else in the parish, including Youngsville, I just have to say. So, there we have. We just have a lot of good momentum now and you can kind of feel it, you know, we folks are making those smaller investments. Some of our smaller businesses are expanding a little bit. We've gotten to the point where if a business closes, there's many, often times looking for a better spot downtown or a bigger spot downtown. And so, the retail churn and some of the office churn that we have is moving in a positive direction. So, yeah, no, it's a great time. And you know, the secret of all of this, I think, is we've done better as a community. I'm not just talking about downtown. We've done better as a community when we have leaned into the things that make us unique. Yeah, and you know, that has a lot to do with our culture, that has a lot to do with our University, and so those are kind of our pillars, and that's what we're putting our faith in, because that's what's worked.

Candice Dazet 19:01

I'll add on to that too, because I think the businesses do such a good job of reaching out to our students as well. You know, you do have to evolve with the times and the students, and they do a great job of like, making it esthetic and Instagramable, but also reaching out to them through the channels that they use hiring our students, that's a big deal. You know, a lot of our students have to work, and so for that easy access of that walk across, if they don't have a vehicle for them to find a job that's close and still, you know, amazing. And again, the culture piece of that. But I do appreciate that the businesses that are downtown do some type of reach out to our students. They either provide discounts, they're part of our Red Dot program. So they, I think, also are part of that change in culture of, you know, highlighting that piece of connection to UL as well.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 19:54

Because I'm sure you see a lot of students who you know they, they are familiar with the city. They've either lived here, they live nearby. But if they're living on campus, downtown, probably feels a little different.

Candice Dazet 20:08

It does. Yeah, so you know, again, sometimes it's so easy to get just in your bubble. I go to class, I go to work, I go to class, I go to my student, work, meeting, whatever it is. So sometimes, you know, if it's not in your face or it's not being highlighted, you can forget the extras that you have. So, I do think by having these partnerships and by businesses reaching out or having the Art Walk on Saturdays or different things that happen downtown, remind students like, "Oh, I do need a little me time. I need a break. I'm going to go look at some art. I'm going to go touch some grass," as they're saying. So, yeah, so again, it's all those little pieces like that you said that kind of build or add up. It's not just one thing. It's everything coming together at the right time.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 20:53

So, is there anything else kind of, before we wrap up either about this relationship? I loved how you both described it, you know, as a bridge and as an extension of campus. I think that's just so spot on and different from how maybe it has been in the past. It's really like, we feel, people who are aware, like, feel this momentum. So, it's, it's exciting. I don't know if there's anything else you wanted to add.

Kevin Blanchard 21:16

No, I just, you know, the energy here, around the students, and the environment that the University has created to empower the students, I think, is the thing that we really are excited about, you know, you know, I'm just a big fan of what the Office of Sustainability has been doing as far as getting the kids involved in, you know, traffic safety and some other like, very tangible, real life, things that are that would make a student's life and experience more productive. And so, we just look for any opportunity that we can to be part of that energy and to help.

Candice Dazet 21:53

Yeah, I think I'll add that. You know, I used to be a recruiter before this job for UL, and that's kind of how I would describe the culture of UL in Lafayette, is you get that big campus feel, but still somehow, it's a small community. You might not know people yet, but you're going to know that, like you won't walk five minutes down either campus or the road, or, you know, in a store without running into someone that you've seen or met or, you know, have been in a similar organization with, and that's the great part about who we are, like while we are, you know, a bigger university, we will always have that close-knit feel. And I love that about us. And then, you know, I'll plug another piece. Is like we do provide transportation. We are, you know, going to have this in September. It is a little hot, it is walkable, but we do want to also make sure they arrive safely and not overheated. And so, we also have the museum, Science Museum downtown that is considered part of campus. So, we get to drop the students off there, and then they get to do that little walk around the corner. And, you know, get surprised by walking into Parc Sans Souci, seeing this, the Lafayette sign painted. And so, if you are interested and more information, louisiana.edu/cajuncraze is the website with all the activities. And then will be the activity that caps off those fun two weeks. Yeah. So, it's the end of that kind of, yes. We call it a little extra lagniappe, you know, a little extra. And so that is kind of how we built it is, like, this is the activity that kind of brings everything all together at the end. And you know, they've met people throughout the two weeks of Cajun Craze. So here it is, find your friend, meet some people there, and like, let's enjoy it together. So yeah.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver 23:42

Great. Thank you. Thank you so much. Appreciate it, and we appreciate you joining this conversation with La Louisiane, the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette since 1989. Check back next month for more discussions with members of our University community. You can listen to an archive of this conversation and read related articles by visiting Louisiana.edu/magazine or pick up a copy around town. KRVS is listener supported public radio for Acadiana, a service of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Thanks for listening.