



## Ending the cycle of poverty in St. Landry Parish: Hope for Opelousas is molding a new generation

- [BY LAUREN CHERAMIE | Staff writer](#) Oct 23, 2022 | 7 min to read



A sign that reads, “& above all else love” hangs on the wall in Loren Carriere’s home as he discusses the organization Hope for Opelousas. Fourteen years ago, Carriere founded the nonprofit in his hometown with the intention to do just that – love.

“We began with an idea that we wanted to love our community,” Carriere said. “We believed the crazy idea that God loves individual people and that he can love a community to life, too.”

Through Hope for Opelousas, Carriere and his staff are molding a new generation of young people in the community to take ownership of their futures by providing educational support, mentorship and family services.

In the 2021-22 school year, 99% of the students in the Hope for Opelousas program passed all classes in school and 97% of students demonstrated significant improvement in reading fluency – significant in a parish where only 48% of high school students tested at or above the proficient level for reading, and 37% tested at or above that level for math, according to data from U.S. News and World Report.

After Carriere went to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and returned to Opelousas in 2005 after graduation, he saw his hometown in a different light. He saw families struggling with situations that they didn’t cause.

"When I lived here as a kid, I played sports in the park. I had a normal life here," Carriere said. "When I got back, I saw a community where you had so much heartbreak and challenges that families were in."

In the same year, Carriere met Reggie Dupré at a Bible study at Palace Café in Opelousas. They formed a friendship over ministry, as they were asking the same

questions about the world, the church and the community. In the meantime, Dupré was going on mission trips across the country with his family. Through talking about his experiences, he and Carriere began to ask themselves, “What about Opelousas?”



Landry Parish. Loren Carriere founded Hope for Opelousas, a nonprofit outreach organization that provides educational support, mentorship and family services to residents in St. Landry Parish.

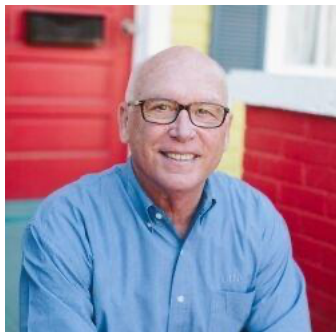
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Carriere and Dupré started Hope for Opelousas in March 2008.

Dupré, CEO of Dupré Logistics, serves as the organization’s board president. His and the organization's mission is to help ignite hope while working to stop the cycle of poverty in Opelousas. According to the [United States Census Bureau](#), 35.9% of people in Opelousas live in poverty, and at least 28% of St. Landry Parish residents fall beneath the ALICE threshold, meaning they are working but not making enough

to make ends meet – that's nearly 64% of the population who are struggling financially.

“Really, what we try to do is just help the parents to love their kids and serve their kids – to create an environment where they’re valued, challenged and pushed to really develop all of the character and the potential that they have, which they have so much potential,” Dupré said of his position with the students.



Reggie Dupre, pictured, met Loren Carriere in 2005 at a Bible study at Palace Café. Dupre now serves as the board president for Hope for Opelousas.  
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The organization started with 12 kids that Carriere and his staff met in the neighborhood where they operate, which they call “The Hill.” Then, siblings and cousins of those kids and others in the community joined. The organization now accepts anyone in St. Landry Parish from first to 12th grade, though Carriere said there’s a waiting list for every grade level to get into the program.

He said they do prioritize families, so if one kid is already in the program and his or her siblings want to join, they’ll get bumped up on the list.

“If we can strengthen an entire family of kids and go really deep in relationship with the parent over an extended period of time, that will make our efforts more focused and have a better potential outcome for everyone involved,” Carriere said.

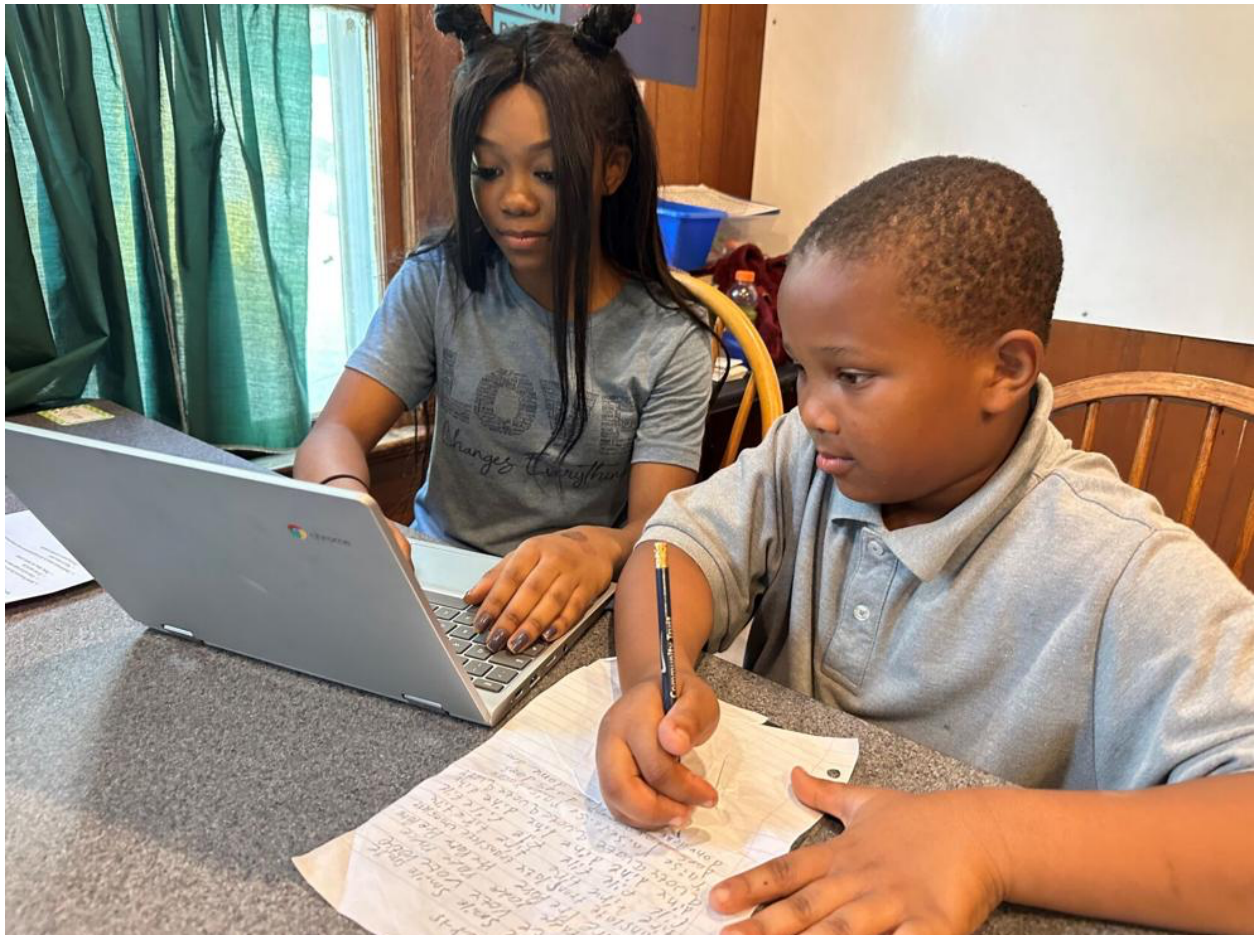


Hope for Opelousas supports students through after-school tutoring, networking and character development. Pictured, Jaylin Garrette answers a question during tutoring.  
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Carriere consistently refers to the kids in the program as “our kids,” and he talks about them the way a parent would — with love and pride balanced with discipline and respect.

“We essentially become an extension of their family, and they’re a part of ours,” Carriere said. “We love their kids like they’re a part of our family.”

The organization supports students through after-school tutoring, networking and character development. The program's website states that in the 2020-21 school year, St. Landry Parish had a “69.0 performance score out of an 88.5 statewide average.”



Left, Tyra Green, an Agent of Hope, works with Johnny Roberts. Carriere explained that Agents of Hope are local high school seniors and juniors that work with the younger kids in the program.  
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“We know that education will open doors,” the website says. “While our kids may not have a choice but to attend D-rated schools, we work with our students to make the grade in school so they can succeed in life.”

Though education is a top priority, the program focuses on the “whole person,” Carriere said. To do this, they provide opportunities to the students that they may have otherwise not had.

Dupré said the organization has taken participants to local college sporting events, but they've also gone to the Grand Canyon, the Appalachian Trail, Lake Tahoe, North Carolina and a variety of other places to hike and backpack. Carriere considers these “adventure trips” powerful because of their ability to teach leadership and persistence. While on the trips, they also participate in service work.

“These trips are, in many ways, a vision trip for our students and a very challenging experience for them. It’s not just a vacation,” Carriere said.

Outdoor learning programs and outdoor play time also further children's overall education, a fact backed up by data from the National Wildlife Federation. Outdoor activities improve "lifelong learning skills, prospects for career success and school test scores," the agency wrote in its [Back to School Report](#) (2010), adding that the "indoor childhood" trend will have long term and negative effects on children’s physical, emotional and educational development.

In March, the nonprofit research organization Common Sense Media published [survey results](#) showing that overall screen use among teens and tweens increased by 17% from 2019 to 2021 — growing more rapidly than in the four years prior. The survey polled 1,306 people ages 8 to 18 online and said that teens

reported spending more than three hours a day on average watching videos or TV, nearly two hours a day gaming and about 20 minutes a day video-chatting with friends.

To combat the trend of kids spending about six hours a day inside and online, Hope for Opelousas has created standards students must meet to go on the adventure trips. Students have to be active participants in the program and exhibit leadership qualities. They also have to commit to a physical training program, participate in pre-trip skills training and attend team meetings. Carriere said this preparation is a "buy in" that "creates the foundation for leadership growth."



The organization takes students on "adventure trips" to Tennessee, North Carolina and other places.



From left to right, a High Country River guide, students Kamron Levier, Keithen Fontenot, Alyssa Daggs, Demarques Thomas and founder Loren Carriere go on a rafting trip.  
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The organization has also connected with local schools over the years to host service project days in the community. Over the past 14 years, Carriere said they have painted and renovated several houses in the neighborhood. This year, they hosted mission teams from Opelousas Catholic, Academy of Sacred Heart, Northwestern College and Bryan College to help with the organization and around the community.

Recently, the program started a community garden on campus. The project, according to Carriere, offers “so many lessons” about life and hard work. Last year, Carriere said they harvested around 1,000 pounds of produce from the garden, which all went home to the families in the program.



A sign that reads, "Grow Hope" displays over the community garden at the organization's campus.  
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“Does it work?” Dupré asked of the organization’s impact. He didn’t hesitate to answer. “I think it does. We have kids that have literally gone to New York City and

gone to school up there. We have kids at LSU, Southern, Grambling and UL, but we also have kids that go to work as truck drivers and go to trade school.”

Jaylen Boyd joined the program when he was 12 years old after his sister joined with a friend. He’s now 19 years old and a sophomore at LSU majoring in mechanical engineering.



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Boyd said his time in the program exposed him to new experiences beyond his hometown, and it made him more mature and responsible. During his freshman year of high school, Boyd went on a trip to the Appalachian Trail. The group left

Opelousas, stopped in Washington, D.C., hiked a portion of the trail while camping out, went to New York, then Niagara Falls and came back to Louisiana.

"We went to New York and got to experience the city," Boyd said. "That was probably the most interesting trip we've been on."

When he was a sophomore in high school, Boyd became an "Agent of Hope," which Carriere said is a paid internship program for local high school seniors and juniors to work with the younger kids in the program. Carriere calls these volunteers "front-line mentors" as they spend time with the kids, help tutor them and mentor them.



Jaylen Boyd joined Hope for Opelousas when he was 12 years old. He's now 19 years old and a sophomore at Louisiana State University majoring in mechanical engineering. Pictured left to right, Loren Carriere and Boyd stop to take a picture while mountain biking in Carson City, Nevada, on July 30, 2020.

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“Responsibility is the biggest thing that it taught me,” Boyd said. “As a student, you know all the other students as your friends. As a tutor, you know them, you become their model. They want to be like you. So then you get exposed to the trouble they have in their life.”

Boyd’s experience as an Agent of Hope also taught him about trust and the importance of believing in yourself and others.

“You get out of it what you put in,” Boyd said of the program. “(Hope for Opelousas) just lets you realize that, although this world is so big, you can conquer it. Put your mind to it. It’s not impossible.”

The organization’s motto is “Love changes everything,” and Carriere said love looks different every day. Sometimes love is calling out spelling words to a kid, and other times love is throwing a football.

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“I do believe love is the most powerful force in the universe,” Dupré said. “And when you see it lived out, not talked about, it can change everything.”

The staff at Hope for Opelousas is changing the trajectory of students’ lives through relationships, service work and mentorship. In the future, Carriere hopes to double the amount of kids in the program in Opelousas and expand to other parts of the state.

“It’s amazing to watch young people grow,” Carriere said. “It’s a very hard, perplexing time, and it’s hard to be a human. But it’s easier when you know you’ve got people that love you and have your back and are committed to you.”

To learn more about Hope for Opelousas,  
visit <https://www.hopeforopelousas.org/>