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By Heath Allen BIO

Vanishing Tribe: Coastal erosion threatens survival of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw

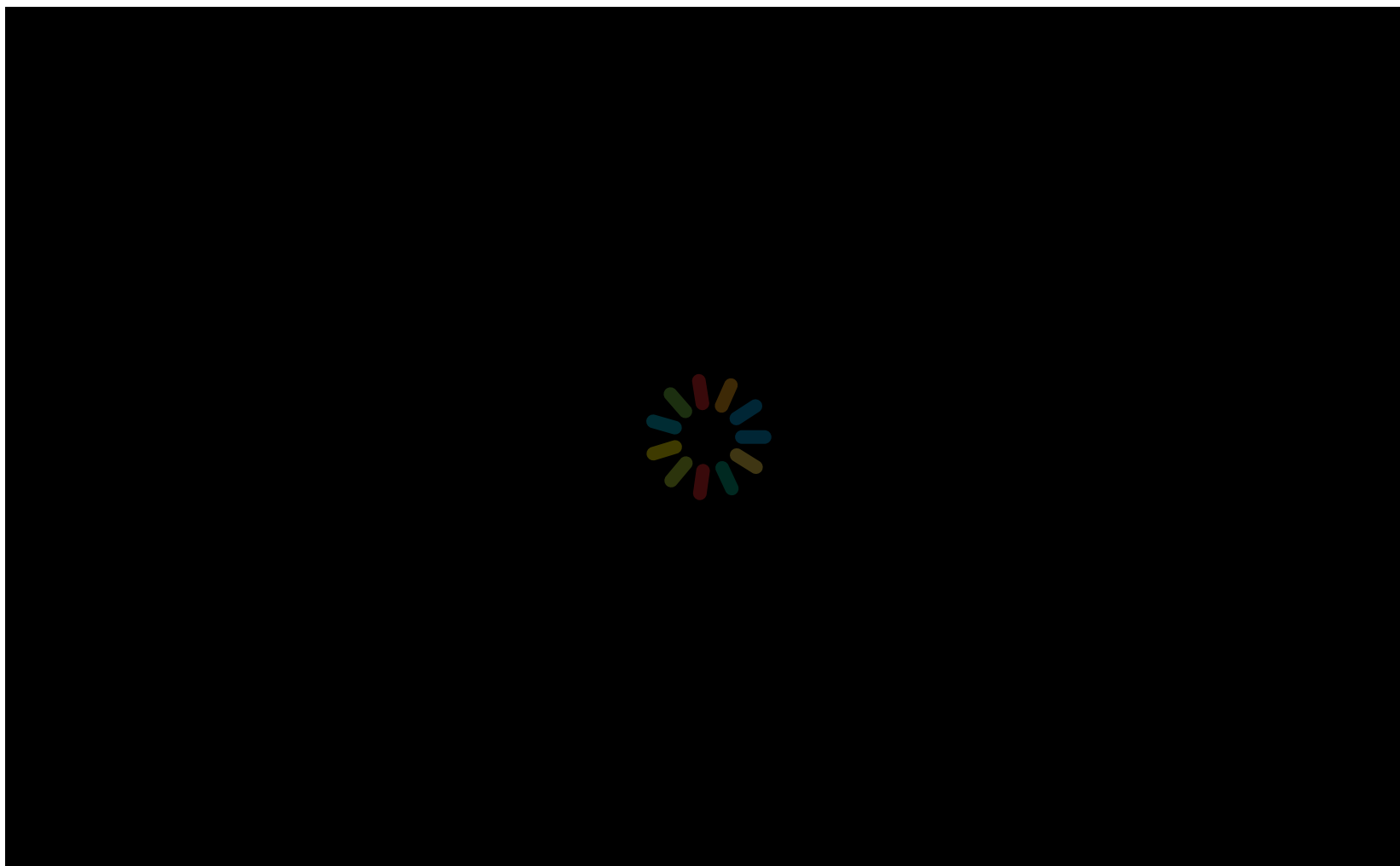
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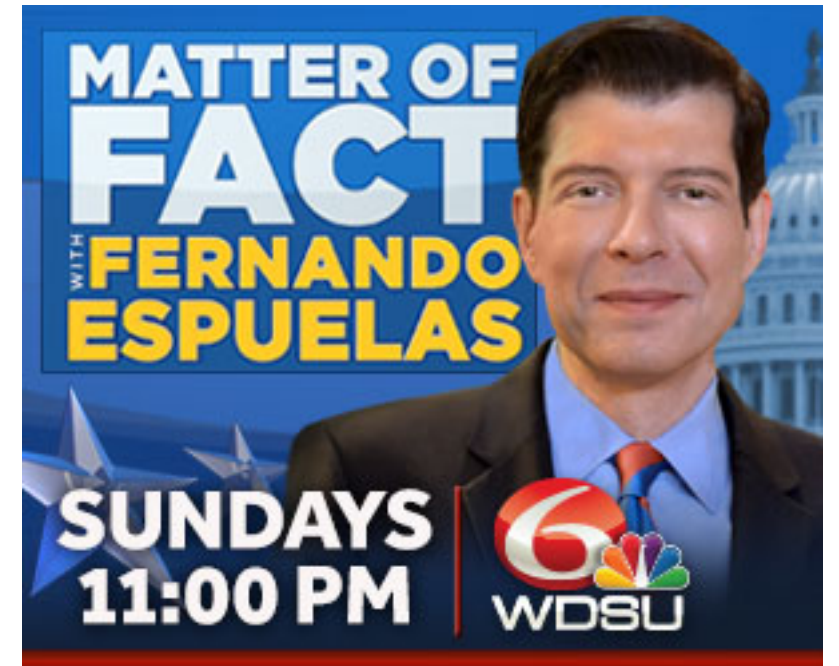
TERREBONNE PARISH, La. — TERREBONNE PARISH, La. — Residents of the tiny Terrebonne Parish community of Isle de Jean Charles face a real dilemma. Coastal erosion already threatens to swallow what's left of their island home, and a massive hurricane protection project planned for the area will ultimately leave residents on the outside looking in.

Going back generations, the island has been home to a mixed Cajun and Native American population, Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw. Now down to just a handful of families, their history and heritage hang in the balance. The federal government has put up more than \$50 million to help them relocate. But many of them don't

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want to move and are prepared to stand their ground.

Traditional Chief Albert Naquin, of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians, remembers the island as a child.

"A way of life did disappear," he laments. "There used to be a lot of trees. Like I say, I could leave from my house where they had trees, and I could walk in the trees all along here and nobody would see me."

Albert Naquin is not alone. Father Roch Naquin, 83, a Native American Catholic priest, also remembers.

"This whole section on this side of that levee, I would say was all woods, and then beyond that was all good marshland."

Roch Naquin was born only 100 feet from where he sits and reminisces, reaching back to a time on his beloved island now long since gone. As a young priest, his ministry took him away from the island. Now retired, he's returned to the land of his childhood.

"Fishing was our culture. Trapping was our culture," Roch Naquin said. "I did that before I would go to school. Used to be able to trap on the other side there. It wasn't all water like it is now."

Slowly but surely, the Gulf of Mexico has crept toward Isle de Jean Charles, Pointe-aux-Chenes, and neighboring communities in the fragile paradise that is Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes. A major hurricane protection project underway would help protect much of the area, but Isle de Jean Charles is not included.

"A decision was made in the federal alignment, I think, back in the late '90s, '99 or so, that the island, the Isle de Jean Charles did not meet the federal cost to benefit ratio," says Reggie Dupre, the executive director of the Terrebonne Levee and Conservation District.

Few have been more frustrated with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers than Dupre, who says over the last 25 years, the federal government has spent \$72 million -- on studies -- to determine if the area was eligible for a hurricane protection project. While they studied, Dupre says his parish continued to wash away.

"We're trying to hold on for the next few generations over here," he said.

Tired of waiting on the federal government and ravaged by hurricanes like Rita, Ike and Gustav, the voters in Terrebonne passed taxes twice, raising its own money, and the Terrebonne Levee District began working to fill in the federally proposed 72 mile earthen levee footprint.

"We have been able to cobble together about \$300 million of protection, and we have another couple hundred million planned in the relatively near future," Dupre said.

The "Morganza to the Gulf" hurricane protection project is designed to protect the fragile marsh from storm surge, but the federally approved line of protection does not include Isle de Jean Charles.


Albert Naquin sought some sort of relief.


"We submitted for a grant through (the Department of Housing and Urban Development) to see if we can make new homes for the residents of the island and those highly impacted in from Pointe aux Chenes, Montegut, Chauvin and try to get them back together."

In January, HUD officially awarded \$92 million to the state of Louisiana, better than half the total designated to help relocate the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians to a "resilient and historically-contextual community."


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"Hopefully it's going to put them back together to bring culture back," said Albert Naquin. "Culture, family ties, and everything else."

But some of the remaining Native American population have no intention of moving off the island where Edison Dardar has lived all of his life.

"No money, no offer," Dardar said. "This is home."

Dardar and his wife, Elizabeth Dardar, live just across the road from the all-but-lost cemetery where many of their relatives are buried.

"I was born here," says Elizabeth. "My mama and daddy was raised here, and they gave us this property."

Albert Naquin sees relocation as a way to one day re-united his people, but the Dardars have no intention of being uprooted.

Says Edison Dardar, "So, in Houma, what I'm going to do? Stay in the house all day just waiting for me to die?"

"We ain't leaving," said Elizabeth Dardar. "They want to leave. Hey, y'all leave. Leave our island alone."

Right now, there is no push. Under the HUD grant, the group has two years to begin a move, somewhere.

"Everything is going to stay as is," says the chief. "Nobody is being pressured to move, but at least they will have a place to go in the event something should happen. Now it's a matter of finding a place to where we could settle and where it's big enough for us to put at least a 100 homes and have room for growth for the future."

For many of those with deep Native American roots, it is hard to leave. "It's the idea that of leaving the place where I was born and raised. This is home." says Roch Roch, who is prepared to move when the time comes. "There's more to share. You can recall stories, memories of the past and be able to share that with each other and sustain that culture."

But opinion is split, and there are those, like the Dardars, who plan to stay, holding on to the island, their heritage and home.

"Leave our island alone," says Elizabeth Dardar. "Stay away from our island. If they don't want to come onto our island and see our island, please stay away from our island, but leave the people on the island alone."



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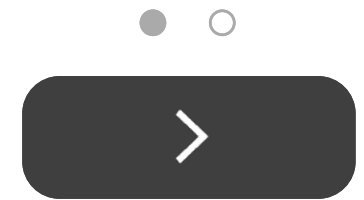


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