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conquered the planet —
and now the U.S.
is threatening to shut
it down.



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Can the world's biggest
virality machine survive?

By Alex W. Palmer

The New York Times Magazine

December 25, 2022

How TikTok Became a
Diplomatic Crisis



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7 **Screenland** White Noise *By Jody Rosen* / 12 **Post-Normal** The Biodiversity Crisis *By David Wallace-Wells* / 14 **The Ethicist** Unequal Affections *By Kwame Anthony Appiah* / 16 **Letter of Recommendation** Dream-Journaling *By Marie Solis* / 18 **Eat** Butternut Squash, Leek and Za'atar Pie *By Yotam Ottolenghi*



20 **How TikTok Became a Diplomatic Crisis**

By Alex W. Palmer / A Chinese app conquered the planet — and now the U.S. is threatening to shut it down. Can the world's biggest virality machine survive?

28 **The Irrepressible Conflict**

By David W. Blight / Was the Civil War inevitable? As America struggles through another era of deep division, the old question takes on new urgency.

34 **Charlene's Miracles**

By Nathaniel Rich / She died in 1959, at age 12. But for local Catholics who believe in her, that was just the beginning of Charlene Richard's incredible story — and the decades-long fight to make her a saint.

Merchandise with the likeness of Charlene Richard, known to her devotees as the Little Cajun Saint, in a shop in Rayne, La. Page 34.

4 **Contributors** / 5 **The Thread** / 10 **Poem** / 14 **Judge John Hodgman** / 17 **Read Like the Wind** / 46, 48, 50 **Puzzles** / 46 **Puzzle Answers**

On the Cover Photo illustration by Pablo Delcan. Source photographs, from top: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images; Mark Schiefelbein/Getty Images.

She died in 1959,
at age 12. But for local
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Charlene's Miracles

By Nathaniel Rich

Photographs by Stacy Kranitz



It took 60 years,

but a postulator from the Vatican finally came to Richard, a lonesome patch of boggy farmland in southern Louisiana's rice belt, last December. He arrived at St. Edward Roman Catholic Church, which stands at the closest thing the community has to a town center, cater-corner to Richard Elementary and opposite a pasture more than large enough for its dozen cows. He was greeted by the young parish priest, diocesan officials from Lafayette, a medical examiner, gravediggers, a pair of police officers and several siblings of the Richard family, whose sister he was there to see.

The postulator followed his hosts to the cemetery. Near the end of the first row, past plots of Thibodeaux and Babineux and LeJeunes, lies the raised tomb of Charlene Richard, who died of acute lymphocytic leukemia at age 12 in 1959. Each year as many as 10,000 people visit Charlene. They know her as the Little Cajun Saint, though the Roman Catholic Church has not yet recognized her as one. To accommodate the visitors, St. Edward sets out beside the grave, loosely arranged as if around a campfire, a pair of weather-beaten wooden prie-dieux, an iron garden bench and a tilting patio chair. Behind the tomb stands a discordant mailbox, painted over in black, on which is shakily written in chalk, DONATIONS REMOVED DAILY. A long plastic container atop the tomb is the repository for handwritten prayers. Petitioners leave plastic flowers, votive candles and children's toys: a Poppity Pop Turtle, a stuffed Elmo.

Everything was cleared for the exhumation. When the gravediggers lifted the eroded marble ledger, they found a simple wooden coffin, nearly covered by water. They hauled in an electric

vacuum pump, but it wouldn't turn on. After some tinkering, it finally hummed to life, spurted the grave water through a hose beyond the cemetery gate. Without great strain the men carried the coffin into the church. They removed the skeleton, laying it on an altar cloth for the medical examiner's scrutiny. A rosary had been entwined around the finger bones. From the collarbones there hung a plastic sacred heart that, to the observers' astonishment, had retained its coloration.

The medical examiner snipped off Charlene's hair and handed a clump to her big brother. The postulator collected Charlene's fingers for preparation as relics. He ordered the skeleton to be laid into a new steel coffin and returned to the vault, which was resealed with concrete.

The postulator made certain to attend to one final task. He folded the dampened altar cloth and, with great care, sealed it in a Ziploc bag. Before leaving town he would mail it to the president of the Charlene Richard Foundation, an invariably gracious, soft-spoken and patient (but not infinitely so) 68-year-old woman named Bonnie Broussard.

The emissary from Rome would never have come to Richard were it not for the ceaseless efforts of Broussard, who for more than three decades has dedicated her life to making Charlene Richard a saint. Why Broussard has pursued this laborious, expensive and thankless goal with such single-minded determination cannot be grasped from the basic biographical facts of her life. She never met Charlene, is not directly related to her and does not live in Richard. She is a

devout believer, but that is unremarkable among the population of Acadiana, the French-speaking region of Louisiana that has one of the highest concentrations of Catholics in the United States. If Broussard had to isolate a single quality that explains her intense commitment to Charlene Richard, it was her profound, lifelong desire to dedicate herself to a cause greater — nobler, grander, more permanent — than herself. What she could not have imagined, what she did not understand until just this past year, was that she was fighting for something even larger than a sainthood. She was fighting, in her dogged and self-effacing manner, for the soul of the church.

As Broussard approached 30, having yet to meet a partner, she began to suspect her calling in life was to become a nun. "I knew I could not be a single person in the world," she says today. She was drawn to the local Carmelite monastery, a cloistered community practicing silence, fasting, manual labor and continual prayer. She had been making plans to join the order when her sister surprised her one Friday night by inviting a mechanic, the divorced father of an 11-year-old boy, to their grandmother's house for gumbo and several rounds of the Cajun card game *bourré*. Within seven months they were married. "An instant family," Broussard describes it. And the family instantly grew: They had three more children in the next five years.

During this period, she was dismissed from her job as a religious educator at the Diocese of Lafayette. Broussard had done nothing wrong. The diocese had. In 1985, it agreed to pay \$4.2 million to victims of Gilbert Gauthé, a priest from Napoleonville who had admitted to molesting at least 37 children. This was the case that began the global scandal of sexual-abuse allegations against Catholic clergy, a crisis that has become the greatest threat to the church's legitimacy since Julian the Apostate. After the Gauthé settlements, the diocese laid off much of its staff. Broussard was distraught, and furious. But she soon found a new teaching job at St. Genevieve Catholic Church in Lafayette, which was led by an exuberant, charismatic priest from Philadelphia named Joseph Brennan.

By the mid-1980s Brennan had become a celebrity in Catholic circles. He was a close friend and spiritual adviser to Mother Teresa, who opened a local chapter of her order in Lafayette and, in 1986, led a Mass at the sold-out Cajundome. (Mother Teresa made occasional incognito visits; Brennan would pick her up at the airport in New Orleans and chauffeur her into Lafayette under cover of night.) Brennan had also become a national expert during that decade's satanic panic, leading workshops sanctioned by the diocese that advised how to detect cults, publishing a book on the subject called "The Kingdom of Darkness." But locally Brennan was best known for having ministered to Charlene Richard on her deathbed.



Above: At Charlene Richard's tomb at St. Edward Church this month, the Rev. Korey LaVergne (center) prays with her older brother, John Dale Richard (top left) and Bonnie Broussard (far right), the woman who led a yearslong campaign seeking sainthood for the girl, who died of leukemia. Opening pages: The Rev. Floyd Calais holding a relic case containing a fragment of one of Charlene's finger bones that he received from the Catholic Church.

Charlene Richard was born on Jan. 13, 1947, nearly seven years before Broussard and about 10 miles northwest of Lafayette, in Church Point. She was the second child of Mary Alice and Joseph Elvin Richard, two years younger than her brother John Dale. Eight siblings would follow, half of them after Charlene's death. Mary Alice was a nurse's aide for homebound patients; Joseph was a sharecropper and later a dragline operator for the state highway department. The Richard home had a pair of bedrooms, each of which held two large beds. The boys slept in one room, the parents and the girls in the other, the youngest child in a crib. They lacked electricity but kept the house clean and orderly. They drank from a wooden cistern and used two outhouses in the backyard. The children were forced to speak English in school, but they spoke French at home; Charlene's father never learned English.

In Brennan's 2009 "My Name Is Charlene," one of a half dozen books published about the Little Cajun Saint, the priest emphasizes that her childhood was indistinguishable from that of any Cajun farm girl. The Richards attended Mass on Sunday and three other days a week. Sons were altar boys,

daughters sang in the choir. The children attended Catholic school until Charlene was in second grade, when they moved three miles away to their grandparents' property in Richard. (As is obvious to anyone in southern Louisiana, and few outside of it, "Richard" is pronounced "REE-shard.") The community was named after Charlene's ancestors who, with the Broussards, were among the first Acadian families to settle in Louisiana.

When the Richards were not in school, and often when they should have been in school, they worked the fields. They grew cotton, corn and sweet potatoes, raised hogs, cattle and sheep and fished for perch in the property's cypress swamp. Joseph barbecued on a grill he jury-rigged by stretching chicken wire over the drum of a scavenged washing machine. In high summer, the children picked cotton until 2 in the afternoon, when a fluttering towel tied to the porch beam announced that it was time for prayer.

"It was a very simple life," says Charlene's older brother, John Dale, today. "We were at peace."

Charlene was exuberant, loyal, generous. At 12 she stood five feet tall, not counting her bob of brown ringlets. Large dimples popped when



Bonnie Broussard and her grandson Isaac. Broussard's son Charlie had lymphoma, and because of the radiation, a doctor told him that he would never be able to have children. Bonnie prayed to Charlene that he would be healed, and he has been cancer-free since 2018. Charlie and his wife conceived and had Isaac in 2021. "It's like Charlene knows what we need before we do," Bonnie said.

she smiled. Girls were devoted to her and boys had crushes on her. She wrote musicals with John Dale, usually assigning him the role of "priest." She rode horses, danced to Little Richard at sock hops and doted on babies. In fourth grade she won Richard Elementary's Math Award; in sixth grade she was the captain of the basketball team, which lost only one game. Her mother told a reporter from *The Morning Star*, the diocesan newspaper, that Charlene "hated to lose."

By 7, Charlene had memorized the rosary. She recited it nightly before an altar she assembled on her bedside table of a crucifix, an old Bible and a rose that she picked each morning. After a teacher lent her a picture book about

St. Therese of Lisieux, "the Little Flower," who died of tuberculosis at 24, Charlene declared that she wanted to be a saint. "If I pray like St. Therese," she asked her grandmother, "will it happen?" In early 1959, when her grandmother recovered from gallbladder surgery, Charlene massaged ointment into the incision wounds. It was during the spring of that year that, while playing in the backyard, Charlene saw the lady in black.

The woman — or at least a figure "shaped like a woman," as Charlene would tell her mother — stood before an oak tree. She was tall and wore a black bonnet that covered her face. Though her eyes were hidden, her stare burned.

"In the name of God," Charlene screamed, "what do you want?"

The woman flew into the sky. Charlene sprinted back to the house and fell, shaking violently, into her grandmother's arms.

Charlene had another vision the next evening. She was emptying laundry tubs in the backyard with John Dale. "I see her again," she said, turning pale.

John Dale couldn't see anything, but he believed his sister. "Many holy people have been visited by Satan in different forms," he says, 60 years later. "Was it that? I have no idea."

Around this time Charlene began to bruise easily and complain of a sore hip. The family doctor suspected growth pains. He prescribed radiation therapy. It didn't help. Charlene bled from her rectum and suffered nosebleeds so severe that she passed out. After receiving the results of blood tests, the doctor handed Mrs. Richard a sealed envelope, addressed to a specialist at Lafayette's Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. "He's going to explain what needs to be done," the doctor assured her. John Dale remembers driving in his grandfather's pickup truck on dirt roads to the city, Charlene on her mother's lap.

When the specialist finished reading the letter, he called for a chaplain. The priest on duty that day was a young Joseph Brennan, who had been ordained three months earlier. Once Brennan entered, the specialist explained that Charlene's condition was terminal. "It was pure chance that I was the priest in the room when the news was told to Charlene's parents," Brennan writes in his book. "The shock was as expected when her parents were told, 'Your 12-year-old girl has two weeks to live.'"

The Richards asked Brennan to tell their daughter. "I was numb," he writes. "We never had training like this in the seminary. What was I going to say? As the elevator reached the fourth floor, I still had no answer, even though I was praying very fervently."

Brennan met Charlene in Room 411 of Our Lady of Lourdes. "A beautiful lady is going to come to take you home," he told her.

"When she does," Charlene replied, "I'll say, 'Blessed Mother, Father Brennan says hello.'"

Charlene spent the next 13 days in unthinkable agony. When the pain grew acute, her eyes rolled back in her head but, Brennan writes, she never complained. During their meetings, Brennan introduced her to the Catholic doctrine of redemptive suffering: the yoking of one's pain to the suffering of Jesus to help others.

By 7, Charlene had memorized the rosary. She recited it nightly before an altar she assembled on her bedside table of a crucifix, an old Bible and a rose that she picked each morning.

There began an informal daily catechism between them. "OK, Father," Charlene would ask, "who am I to suffer for today?" Brennan proposed a candidate, typically another patient, such as a terminally ill woman who refused to accept her fate. Charlene beseeched God to use her pain for healings.

"Without her witness, and her devotion," Brennan said later, "her suffering would not have served any purpose."

On the 12th day, Charlene kissed Brennan and told him that she would be praying for him in heaven.

On the 13th day, Aug. 11, 1959, she died. But as Bonnie Broussard likes to say, that's just the day that Charlene Richard's story began.

It was not easy, in 1959, to make a saint. A Cause for Canonization, as a formal candidacy is called, could not even be opened until 50 years after a candidate's death. The growth of Charlene's cult coincided, however, with a movement within the Vatican to reform the sainthood process. An Apostolic Constitution issued by Pope John Paul II in 1983 shortened the posthumous waiting period to five years. (John Paul II himself was made a saint in 2014.) The old juridical model, in which a proponent debated a "Devil's Advocate" on the merits of a cause, was abandoned for a process that more closely resembles the preparation of a doctoral dissertation.

The making of a saint typically begins in the candidate's diocese. Supporters begin a promotional campaign for an audience of one: their local bishop. They must persuade the bishop that a candidate is not merely virtuous, but heroically so. If successful, the bishop declares the candidate a "Servant of God," officially opening a Cause for Canonization.

The cause is next taken up by a postulator, a supervisory figure licensed by the Vatican. The postulator acts in the deliberate manner of an appellate lawyer preparing a case for the

Supreme Court. His client is not the church but the candidate's petitioners, who are responsible for his fee and any expenses he incurs. The National Catholic Register has estimated that the cost of preparing a cause for papal review can run more than a quarter-million dollars.

The postulator reviews evidence, witness interviews and supposed miracles. (Catholics believe that a saint in heaven can intercede with God, improving the likelihood that a prayer will elicit a divine favor.) After years or decades, he presents an account of his investigation, the *positio*, to nine theologians who review the case. With their approval, it advances to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of the Saints, where a body of cardinals and bishops decides whether to submit it to the pope.

Ultimately the pope makes one of four determinations. He can decline to act. He can decree the candidate a "venerable," affirming a life of heroic virtue. Beyond venerable lies "blessed." To earn that status, called beatification, it must be proved that the candidate has interceded in the granting of a miracle — an event, typically a healing, unexplainable by science. Beyond beatification lies sainthood.

For all the reams of evidence and historical research and liturgical debate, the saint-making process comes down to the authentication of miracles. A saint must have performed miracles. Two, to be exact.

Over the years Broussard had heard rumors of miracles credited to Charlene. Though Father Brennan did not, for decades, speak publicly about his encounters with Charlene, he did confide in a fellow novice, Floyd Calais. Father Calais dreamed of one day becoming a parish priest; two weeks after praying to Charlene, he received an appointment from the bishop to serve as a priest — at Charlene's own church, St. Edward. Calais, now 96, still gets goosebumps telling the story.

Calais began traveling around Acadiana, telling Charlene's story to solicit donations for a new

church. After he raised the full amount in just two years, he began calling Charlene "my little money girl." During his term at St. Edward, Calais claims he witnessed Charlene perform countless miracles, including for members of her family. Mary Alice, her mother, prayed to Charlene, asking for another daughter; she became pregnant with twin girls. A former schoolmate of Charlene's named Lorita introduced Calais to a man she wanted to marry. Calais didn't approve and prayed to Charlene. Two weeks later, the wedding was off. Six months later, Lorita was married — to John Dale, Charlene's brother.

Thanks to Calais's speaking tours, Charlene's legend grew. In 1989, when Brennan and Calais organized a mass at St. Edward on the 30th anniversary of her death, an estimated 4,000 people came, surely the largest crowd ever to have gathered in Richard. Bonnie Broussard had planned to attend, but she woke up with morning sickness — she was pregnant with her third child — and gave her tickets to her mother. It was the last time she missed Charlene's anniversary Mass.

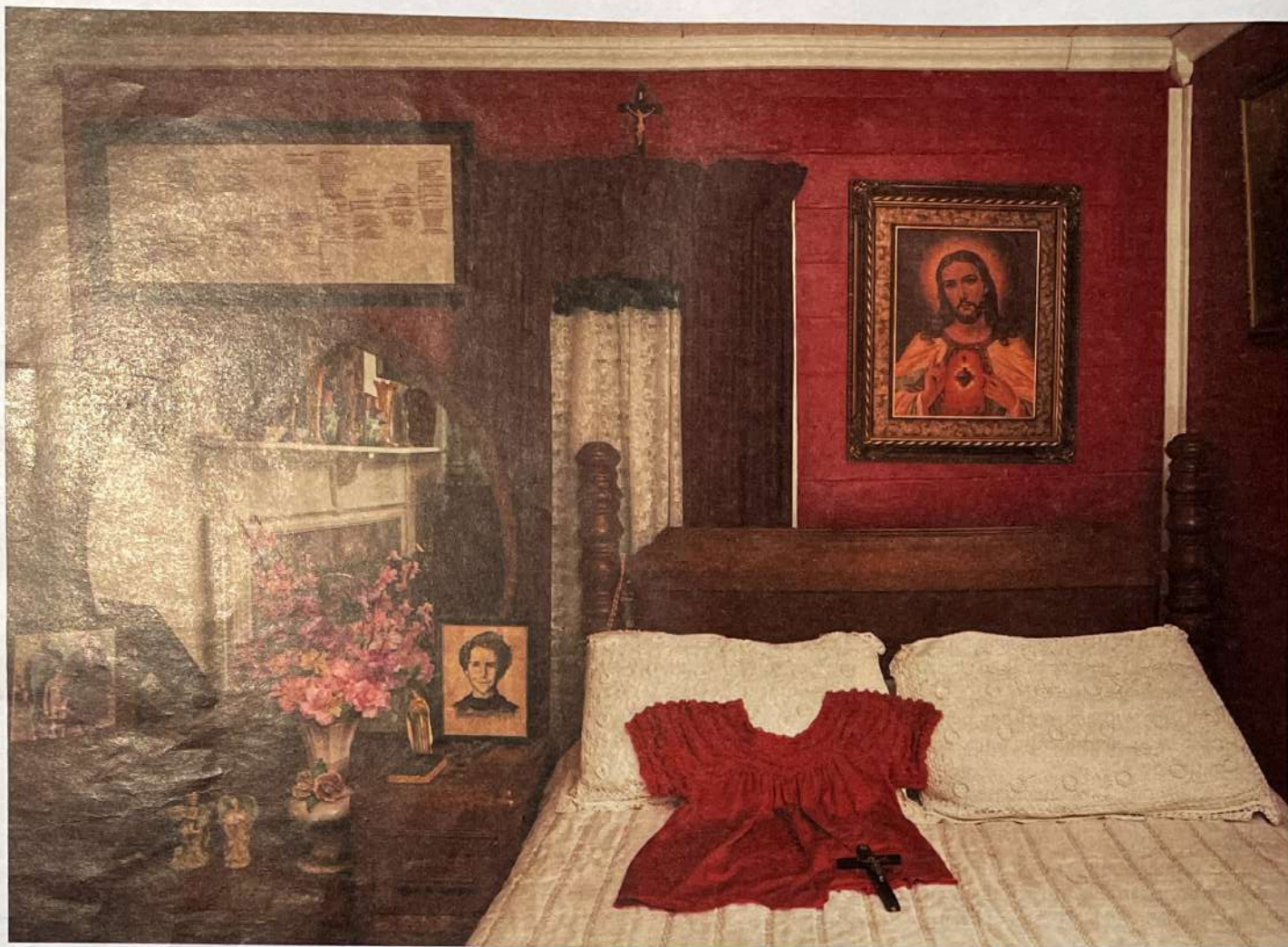
The success of the Mass encouraged Steven Vincent, a prosperous oilman from the southern Acadian town of Gueydan, to commit himself to Charlene's canonization. With his wife, Barbara, he founded the Friends of Charlene to publicize Charlene's story, raise money and organize gatherings. But he needed an editor for what would become the group's most critical function: a newsletter that published accounts of answered prayers. Over time, these collected testimonies would fill an archive that could be used to secure Charlene's canonization — a library of miracles.

When asked by a church colleague to edit the newsletter, Broussard initially declined. She didn't know the first thing about newsletters, and between her teaching obligations and raising three children under age 5 and a teenage stepson, she had no time. But she could not refuse a call to duty. Within a few weeks, she would conclude that it wasn't her colleague who called her to Charlene but God.

Working from her kitchen table on a typewriter, Broussard found herself serving as a Miss Lonelyhearts for the cult of Charlene. A couple of dozen letters arrived a month — at first.

I have always had bladder trouble, developing an infection at least once a year. ... In February of 1988, my husband and I traveled to Richard, La., to visit the tomb. ... From that day on, I have not had any bladder infections. ... I now can wear nylon pantyhose ... and have a feeling of well being that I have not felt in a very long time.

A woman wrote in 1991 of traveling to Charlene's tomb from Massachusetts after reading about her in American Airlines' in-flight magazine; Charlene, she believed, cured her father's



The original furniture from Charlene's bedroom is kept in one of the houses on the Richard family's property. On the bed is the nightgown Charlene was wearing and the crucifix she held when she died at age 12 in 1959. Snippets from the nightgown have been given to followers.

prostate cancer. In the July 1992 newsletter, a correspondent credited Charlene for protecting her father from permanent lung damage after sustained asbestos exposure. In October 1992, Broussard published a letter from a Pine Bluff man who read about Charlene in the *Arkansas Catholic*:

My wife works at a poultry company in town and developed what the doctor called overused muscles. At that time we did not know what was wrong, because the company could not send her to a doctor and we were bound by an agreement to only use a company doctor. ... I promised Charlene if she would help my wife by her prayers, I would write a letter to the Bishop ... to speedily grant her sainthood. ... there is only one explanation for her muscles

to have healed. ... Mary is still working, although we are praying for an easier job.

The accounts worked on Broussard. She began to reflect on her own past. In a 1992 editor's note, she wrote about a health condition that sent her to the emergency room on her 38th birthday. "As I lay on the hospital bed waiting for the doctor to come and take care of me, I could not think of anyone else but MYSELF and MY PAIN. ... Looking back on the event, I realized that God had given me the opportunity to experience intense physical suffering and pain just as Charlene must have felt. ... Now I really know how special Charlene is and will be able to tell others about a lesson learned in humility and suffering."

When Radio Shack transferred her sister's husband, a store manager, to Texas that year, Broussard prayed daily to Charlene to send her sister home. On the eve of their move, Broussard's brother-in-law was offered the chance to work in Lafayette. "That sealed the deal," Broussard says. "Charlene was going to be my friend."

Broussard grew convinced that sainthood was inevitable, though she didn't know whether

it would take decades or centuries. Steven Vincent, the oilman who founded Friends of Charlene, expected that they would not live to see it. Broussard was undeterred. She regularly drove to Richard, where Charlene's immediate family, her childhood friends, Fathers Brennan and Calais and the local parishioners had become a second family to her. "If you're an outsider in that community you know it," Broussard says. "But over the years, I became one of them." She had found, in the rice fields of Acadiana, her own cloistered community.

Broussard delivered every testimony she received to the diocese. A priest assured her that he would keep them in a special file, though he never failed to point out how each fell short of the church's rigorous standards for authentication. Discouraged, Broussard stopped sharing the testimonies. But she didn't dispose of them. She moved in with them. She stored the documents in a filing cabinet and later, when that filled up, in banker's boxes that she stacked next to her boxes of stationery, prayer cards and prayer cloths. She installed the library of miracles inside her own bedroom, beside her bed.

The reforms of 1983 yielded an unprecedented bonanza of saint-making. During his pontificate, John Paul II recognized 1,338 beatifications and 482 canonizations, almost 15 times as many as the previous record-holder, Pius XII, who died in 1958, and more than the cumulative total of the five previous centuries combined. "We're becoming a factory," lamented a historical consultant to the Vatican, in "Making Saints," Kenneth Woodward's authoritative account of canonization in the Roman Catholic Church.

But the immoderation was the point. "In the hands of John Paul II," Woodward writes, "the saint-making process has become a very powerful mechanism for advancing his message" — a message of a popular faith, accessible to all who believed. Saints were one of the most effective advertising tools the church had. They boosted recruitment, enabling the church to tailor its gospel to local populations and specific demographics. And the copyrighting of a saint's name and likeness allowed the church to sell paraphernalia. Benedict maintained John Paul II's pace, and Francis has outdone them both. In his first canonization ceremony he recognized 815 saints.

During this sainthood boom, the United States, which has the fourth-largest Catholic population of any nation, has been left out. No U.S. cause was opened before the late 19th century, and only one native-born citizen has been sainted: the Philadelphian heiress Katharine Drexel (1858-1955), canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2000. Three naturalized American citizens have been sainted, Saint Mother Teresa was an honorary citizen, and several "American" saints were born before 1776 or were foreign citizens living abroad, but this wider draw only emphasizes the scale of the underrepresentation. Canonization is, quite explicitly, a symbolic gesture, meant to draw attention to a heroic virtue, an act of martyrdom, a community. Symbolically speaking, American Catholics have been shafted.

Though there are currently more than 80 American candidates for sainthood, the Acadian community has a special claim to Roman sympathies. Its Catholic population descends from what Cajuns call "*le grand dérangement*": the British Army's expulsion of about 7,000 French Catholics from Nova Scotia in 1755 during the French and Indian War, tearing apart families and killing more than half the population. One of the largest bands of refugees arrived in Southwestern Louisiana in 1765, led by Bonnie's ancestors, the brothers Joseph and Alexandre Broussard.

"Sainthood links the local church to the universal church," says Kathleen Sprows Cummings, director of Notre Dame's Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, who wrote "A Saint of Our Own," about the more than century-old campaign for a patron saint of the United States (leading contenders include St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and St. Kateri Tekakwitha, though each was born before the country's founding).

"The story of the Acadians is the story of how a persecuted minority was transplanted here and created a new culture. Charlene's significance extends beyond the world of sainthood. It's a profoundly American story."

Since 1985, however, the Acadian story has endured a different great derangement. In May of that year Jason Berry published in *The Times of Acadiana* and *The National Catholic Reporter* his investigation into pedophilia charges against Gilbert Gauthé. Berry would later extend his reporting into a trilogy of books that tracked a series of pedophilia cases in the Diocese of Lafayette into the innermost sancta of the Vatican, revealing widespread patterns of abuse and corruption. According to data from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, more than 7,000 clerics have now been "credibly" or "not implausibly" accused of sexually abusing minors in the United States alone.

The evolution of Broussard's relationship with the church corresponded to a broader shift that occurred in Acadiana during the 1990s, as the Gauthé case spurred dozens of other allegations within the region. Though Broussard grew disenchanted with the corruption of the clerical hierarchy, she did not consider abandoning her faith; instead she redirected her devotion to the angelic child who, she was certain, sat at the foot of God.

The diocese, during this time, showed little interest in Charlene. Even the local clergy tended to dismiss the phenomenon, despite the efforts of Brennan and Calais, who continued to ferry parishioners to Charlene's grave, use her story in fund-raising pleas and give interviews. "In my eyes and in the eyes of many, many people, Charlene Richard is already a saint," Brennan told *The Catholic Digest*. "We're just waiting for the church to catch up." Calais still struggles to understand his peers' disinterest. "There were priests who thought me and Father Brennan were crazy," he says. These included, he said, his successor at St. Edward, the Rev. Stanley Begnaud, who has been labeled a "known pedophile" in church documents and is the subject of a lawsuit filed in 2020. (Begnaud died in 1985.)

With no foreseeable path to canonization, the Friends of Charlene held meetings less often, then not at all. "Nothing had happened for 10 years, and people just wondered whether anything ever would happen," Broussard says. "That was the hardest time, just to keep it going." By 1999, the only remaining founding member of the organization, the oilman Steven Vincent, told Broussard that he was leaving, too. He asked her to take over as president. She accepted without hesitation. "I felt that there was something here," she says. People traveled to the annual Mass from all over the world to testify to miracles Charlene had performed from beyond the grave. "That's what kept me going," Broussard says. "All these people came for a reason."

Broussard set about professionalizing the organization. After reading "Making Saints," she

came to understand the process better than any of the local clergy members, including, it would become clear, the bishop. She learned that it was not enough to answer letters and archive testimonials. Successful causes tended to be run like political campaigns, with an administrative office, a public relations arm and a reliable funding stream. This is why most saints were clergy: the orders to which they belonged had the resources necessary to elevate a cause to the Vatican. What Broussard lacked in money and clout, she tried to make up for in effort. She transformed the Friends of Charlene into a tax-exempt organization, established a website and a bulk-mailing operation, assumed the responsibility of planning the anniversary mass and organized a weekly knitting circle, led by a pair of retirees, Louise Giroir and Lydia Babineaux, who together would produce hundreds of thousands of prayer cloths. The work was its own reward — at least that's what Broussard told herself.

Then, suddenly, in 2002, three blessings seemed to arrive in short succession, as if ordained. Michael Mouton, a Lafayette businessman nicknamed Big Mike, had a vision of Charlene Richard while undergoing open-heart surgery. A former programmer for Apollo 11, determined to raise money for an orphanage in Thailand, opened his Bible and a Charlene Richard prayer card fell out. And a local priest, Michael Jarrell, a native of Opelousas, was named bishop.

Big Mike had developed a successful business shipping radiography machines across the Gulf South. While under sedation, he saw Charlene standing at the foot of his bed, a beatific expression on her face. When he awoke, the operation a success, he vowed to dedicate his life to advancing Charlene's cause. He told Broussard that he would devote his offices, administrative staff and \$1 million of his personal fortune to the effort. "We'll run it like a corporation," he told her. If most causes were managed by religious orders, Charlene's could be headquartered out of Performance Medical Group of Lafayette.

The NASA programmer, Reggie Bollich, did not know much about Charlene and had no idea how her prayer card had gotten into his Bible. But his wife, Dottie, had heard stories from her pastor at St. Genevieve, Father Brennan. It occurred to Bollich, as it had to Father Calais, that the Little Cajun Saint might be a prolific fund-raiser — his own little money girl. Within a year Bollich raised more than \$45,000, including considerable donations from Big Mike, and the orphanage, Charlene Richard House, was built in a jungle clearing near Nongkhai.

With the opening of the orphanage, and the growing international attention it drew, Bishop Jarrell seemed persuaded that Charlene was ready for canonization. In 2007, Jarrell designated Msgr. Richard Greene, who 30 years earlier edited a major series of articles about Charlene

Richard for The Morning Star, to gather information for the opening of a cause. At that year's anniversary Mass, to the thrill of the assembled, Greene announced that he was going to begin the sainthood process. Broussard was euphoric. "I thought, this is it!" she says. The unimaginable appeared inevitable.

Greene held a series of round-table meetings with interested parties, among them Broussard, John Daie Richard, Reggie Bollich and Big Mike. Broussard recalls that Greene listened intently to their stories and took dutiful notes.

Someone asked how long it would take for the bishop to respond. Two or three weeks, Greene said. He's a busy man.

What happens if he doesn't approve the cause?

Then we'll just go over his head, Big Mike interrupted.

Several petitioners gasped at the brazen display of hubris in the presence of a diocesan official.

"And that," John Dale recalls, "was the end of that."

They never met with Greene again. Bollich recalls that when the subject of sainthood later arose at a church ceremony, Jarrell said they could not treat it like a corporation — an obvious reference to Big Mike.

In 2012, in an interview with a local writer named Carolyn Thibodeaux for a self-published book titled "Saint Charlene Richard: Her Continuous Consecration to God," Jarrell described the process as "kind of stalled":

Thibodeaux: Is there anything we can do to help?

Bishop: No, I think that at this point, the ball is in my court. It's not like you can just write a letter.

Thibodeaux: How exactly does the Canonization process work?

Bishop: I don't know. But there are books on it.

Thibodeaux: Yes, I've read up on it on the internet.

Bishop: Then you probably know more about it than I do. I'm serious when I say I don't know ...

Thibodeaux: In writing my book, I already knew Charlene was special. I received so many healing stories. She is so deserving of the title, "Saint."

Bishop: Well, I'm glad you judged that. If you were the Pope, it would be done.

Thibodeaux: Are you considering reviewing Msgr. Greene's report?

Bishop: For what purpose, to help you with your book?

Thibodeaux records the bishop's laughter.

"That was a big disappointment," Broussard says of Jarrell's inaction. "A major letdown for everyone. We kept waiting, thinking maybe, surely, he'll take the next step — but he never did."

Broussard nevertheless continued to prepare for a day when some future bishop might champion Charlene. She had learned from "Making Saints" that, as time passes, it becomes more difficult to gather the necessary evidence of a miracle: Witnesses die, memories weaken, documents are lost. It was not enough, she would explain to fellow devotees, to show that a prayer had been answered, even if a stunning reversal had occurred — a sudden recovery from a terminal illness, say, or the conversion of an unrepentant sinner. The Vatican's bar was much higher and seemed to rise each year. The pope could not be embarrassed by modern science. As forensic technologies matured, so did the Vatican's evidentiary standards.

Finalist miracles had to satisfy three primary criteria. They had to be rigorously documented. They had to be verified by objective experts. And they could not be explainable except by supernatural intervention. Father Brennan believed that the story of Tara Roy fulfilled all three.

Tara's parents were parishioners at St. Genevieve. When Tara was diagnosed with Stage 3 colon cancer at age 21, in 1992, Brennan drove them to Charlene's tomb. They returned every weekend, while Tara endured rounds of chemotherapy. Eleven months later, on the anniversary of Charlene's death, Tara visited the tomb, emaciated and hopeless. She traced the engraving on the headstone and caressed Charlene's portrait. "It seemed electricity ran from the tomb through her fingernails and into her entire body," her father told the journalist Barbara Gutierrez. "She had been transformed before my eyes from a washed-out and despondent rag doll into a vibrant and energized young lady with color coursing through her cheeks."

Three months later Tara was free of cancer. Her oncologist at Our Lady of Lourdes testified that her recovery was unexplainable by science.

Broussard was not convinced, however. "I thought it was a great story," she says. "But I didn't know if it could meet the standards of a miracle. She'd had surgery, after all. She'd had chemotherapy."

The other miracle commonly asserted as proof of Charlene's sainthood came from outside the diocese. In 1987 Jean Marcantel was diagnosed with a high-risk pregnancy, and arranged to give birth at a hospital in Lake Charles where she could be attended by a prominent obstetrician.

When the baby was born, the delivery room fell silent. "This is a mongoloid child," the obstetrician said finally, using the jettisoned term for Down syndrome. He indicated the newborn's prominent forehead, flat features, the ears set below the eye's lateral canthus, the single crease across the palm of her hand.

The nurses moved the baby to a darkened isolation room. Jean was brought to the recovery room, where she was surrounded by other mothers and their healthy babies. She began to pray for the strength to raise a disabled child. She thought

back to her own childhood in Richard, where she was friends with one of Charlene's sisters. She did not believe in miracles, but after praying to the patron of lost causes and the patron of childbirth, she prayed to Charlene.

Jean awoke to the sight of her puzzled pediatrician. He told her that the baby showed no signs of Down syndrome. When her obstetrician was summoned, he burst into tears. Finally the child was brought in, her features transformed. Jean didn't leave her daughter's side for six weeks, fearful that her condition would reverse. Today that baby, Angelique, is a nun in Tanzania.

The Marcantels did not tell anyone what happened at the hospital except, belatedly, their priest. At his suggestion, Jean sent a confidential account to the diocese, stipulating that it should only be used if it helped Charlene's cause. Broussard was not sure it would.

While Broussard culled her library of miracles, the cult of Charlene Richard continued to grow. Reggie Bollich, the NASA programmer, who in his retirement was ordained a deacon, helped to open Casa Charlene, a homeless shelter in the Colombian Andes, funded by Cajun parishioners. The Charlene Soup Kitchen in El Tigre, Venezuela, followed. Pilgrims, not all of them Catholic, began traveling to the St. Edward cemetery from Brazil, France, the Philippines, Australia. The canonization of Charlene Richard had become a global concern.

Still Broussard worried she wasn't doing enough. She had kept the organization alive, preserved every testimony and mailed tens of thousands of prayer cloths, but Bishop Jarrell would not be moved. If she couldn't convince him of Charlene's cause, how would she convince a postulator, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints or the pope?

In 2016, after 14 years, Jarrell resigned. His successor, the Rev. J. Douglas Deshotel, was born in Basile, 20 miles west of Richard. Months after his consecration, Deshotel accepted an invitation to Charlene's 2017 anniversary Mass — the first bishop to attend since 1989. These were promising signs, but Broussard was wary. Like so many of his predecessors, Deshotel was soon engulfed by the church's scandals, as priests in the diocese were charged, arrested or convicted of serial sexual abuse of minors, possession of child pornography and the molestation of an altar boy. In 2019, after resisting calls from journalists for three years, Deshotel released the diocese's list of known sex offenders (though withheld the names of accused nuns, religious-order priests and schoolteachers). Deshotel did not attend another anniversary Mass, and Broussard heard nothing from the diocese about the prospect of Charlene's canonization. But at the 2019 Mass, Monsignor W. Curtis Mallet, the diocese's vicar general, pulled Broussard aside in the sacristy of St. Edward, just before the ceremony began.

"I want to let you know that the bishop is considering opening Charlene's cause," he told Broussard. "But we have to move quickly."

The bishop wanted to make the announcement soon, he said. If Broussard could produce a formal letter of petition, the bishop would designate Charlene a "servant of God": The sainthood process would finally begin. Mallet warned her not to tell anybody.

Before she could respond, Broussard was called to the pulpit to give her introduction. As she gave her customary speech about Charlene's exemplary suffering, she tried to disentangle the emotions that overwhelmed her. She realized what she felt most of all was not joy or relief. It was fear. She understood immediately that what had been, for decades, a work of private obsession, would be taken from her.

"For all this time," she says today, "I'd been alone. I'd had the support of the community, but as far as the association, I was secretary, treasurer, president. I did everything myself, so that I could make sure that it was done right. But I knew once Charlene becomes a servant of God, she no longer belongs to the community. She becomes the property of the diocese. I would have to relinquish control. The church would be in charge, absolutely."

At a ceremony at the diocese's Immaculata Chapel on Nov. 17, 2021, in an unprecedented spree of canonical enterprise, Deshotel opened the causes for Charlene Richard and another candidate, August Pelafigue, an Arnaudville schoolteacher known as Nonco who embraced a life of rural poverty. (The cause of a third Cajun candidate, Ville Platte's J. Verbis Lafleur, a World War II chaplain who gave his life to save fellow prisoners of war, was opened a few months later.) "Our culture needs a young saint," Deshotel said. "Now more than ever."

Broussard calls Charlene's designation as servant of God the high point of her life, though even in the moment her elation was tempered by a profound sense of loss. "I knew it was coming to an end for me," she says. "I had the satisfaction that I had done everything that I had been asked to do, just to keep it going. But I knew I would not be able to see it through."

After the ceremony she turned over her entire archive. The diocese sealed it from public view. The postulator, Father Luis F. Escalante, directed Charlene's siblings to sign over possession of their sister's corpse to the church. In June, St. Edward's Facebook page advised parishioners that Charlene's tomb had come "under the protection and stewardship" of the diocese. Any item left on the tomb would be reviewed to determine whether it honored "the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church." Broussard was not invited to attend the exhumation of the corpse, nor were any community or family members, apart from immediate siblings.

After the exhumation, St. Edward's young pastor, the Rev. Korey LaVergne, called Broussard

into his office and told her not to tell anyone what had happened. "If anyone asks you why the grave looks like it does, it's because we're just doing improvements," he told her. "It's technically not a lie, because we are going to do improvements. But you cannot tell them about exhuming the body."

One thing was plain: After decades of apathy, discouragement and belittlement, the Diocese of Lafayette had developed a very serious interest in Charlene Richard's successful, and expeditious, canonization.

Bishop Deshotel confirmed as much. The Diocesan Chancery, a compound of four brick buildings arranged around a simple courtyard at the eastern fringe of Lafayette, was once a seminary where he attended high school (Gilbert Gauthier was his classmate). Deshotel's wood-paneled second-floor office was his sophomore study hall. With its potted ficuses, leather couches and broad, tidy desk, it could stand for a judge's private chambers or a senator's regional headquarters.

The bishop has an amiable, unprepossessing manner, with a slight stoop and a twinkly smile. He served as a priest in Dallas for nearly four decades, long enough to lose his accent but not his Cajun sympathies; his closest friends are his old high school buddies from Lafayette. Deshotel is as circumspect about miracles as are most high church officials. "There are many kinds of miracles," he said in an interview. "It's not all spectacular physical healings. There are also miracles of a change of heart or a conversion." He noted the miracle of accepting the human condition: of making peace with the implacable cruelty of suffering. What is more miraculous than reconciling oneself to the certainty of death?

"A person who starts looking into Charlene's story might ask what inspired her to be able to do that," he said. "They might think, Maybe I should look a little bit deeper into what faith is, and what was behind her being able to accept her illness."

St. Charlene would help the church too, Deshotel acknowledged. A Cajun saint, particularly a lay saint, would "validate the rich faith of this Acadiana community." More important, it would serve as "a catechetical tool for me and for the priests of our diocese." Charlene would help the church "appeal to the youth in our diocese, who are called in all kind of directions by secular society." Charlene would serve as an excellent recruitment tool, Deshotel maintained, especially for the young people of Acadiana.

With the young people of Acadiana, the church needed all the help it could get.

Several months ago Bonnie Broussard received bad news from Rome: The postulator had rejected the top two miracles from papal consideration. Tara Roy's cancer cure was thrown out because, as Broussard had feared, the fact of her medical treatment meant that a scientific explanation could not be eliminated. Angélique Marcantel's miracle was disqualified by a genetic test.

The Tanzanian missionary had traveled by bus 18 hours to a clinic in Dar-Es-Salaam that analyzed her DNA. To the postulator's disappointment, no extra chromosome was detected.

This finding did not surprise the Marcantels. Of course there wasn't an extra chromosome — why would God, in His perfection, leave it behind? But they have taken it well. The Vatican's validation "is not necessary for me," Jean says. "It doesn't change my belief."

The postulator is pursuing a new tranche of miracles, among them a miraculous Covid cure and the case of Troy Hebert, a real estate broker in Lafayette whose childhood cancer was cured after he and his mother met a stranger at Charlene's grave who they believed to be an angel. But discussions of forensic investigations only accentuate how far the ecclesiastical class had traveled from the true believers in the rice fields, who require no expert witness, no genetic test to prove Charlene is a saint. There is nothing the Vatican can do to strengthen their conviction, or weaken it.

"I'm a scientist," says Bollich, the Apollo 11 programmer. "I'm always skeptical. I need facts. But you reach a point where factual becomes irrelevant. I believe that prayer can make a difference in whether a person lives or not. Does it happen often? No. But there are people who have been healed through prayer to Charlene. That we know. We've seen it."

Father Calais found the whole process embarrassing. "The guy from Rome doesn't know anything about Charlene Richard," he says. "I was not impressed by him at all. I didn't see any enthusiasm in him."

As Jean Marcantel puts it: "It's more important for the hierarchy of the church to have these proven miracles than for the people who experienced them. You know what they say: If you don't believe, no proof is sufficient. If you do, no proof is necessary." She laughed. "I wouldn't want to be in Father Escalante's shoes."

Broussard herself has moved on. After turning over her life's work to the diocese, she announced her resignation as president of the Charlene Richard Foundation. She has dedicated herself to caring for her young grandchildren. "I will always love Charlene and will do whatever I can do to help her cause," she says. "But the fire for me has been put out." Having spent decades battling indifference and dissuasion, waiting for the diocesan hierarchy to embrace the cause, she can't bring herself to hang on as a junior functionary.

Besides, Broussard believes that she has already achieved her goal. Charlene won't be forgotten. She is not yet a saint, not officially, but she has attracted a global cult that transcends not only Acadiana but Catholicism. She inspires faith, devotion and acts of healing so profound that they appear miraculous. What the Vatican wants, what the diocese desperately needs, Bonnie Broussard is powerless to give them. She gave them her papers, but she can't give them that. ♦