LIFELONG DEMOCRATS Don and Dorothy Williams did something in November they had never done before: They voted Republican for president. Gay marriage, they say, played no part in their votes. "I don't look at none of that," Don says. "Who am I to judge somebody? God is the final judge."

This is blue country, where red country seems like a distant planet. As President Bush's second term was about to get underway, the author left her Watertown home to revisit Louisiana, where she used to live, and found that the people there aren't all that different from the people here.

Or are they?

SEEING RED

By ELAINE MCARDLE

Photographs by GREG PEARSON

They call it "Babyland," this part of the cemetery where Don Williams and I are standing on a December morning, two dozen tiny stone markers spread before us like tiles embedded in the warm earth. We listen to cardinals in the fat, shiny leaves of a magnolia as a hawk glides above. Beneath my shadow lies a granite marker with the enamel photo of a beaming blonde who didn't reach her second birthday, her favorites carefully arrayed around her grave: a set of brightly colored plastic keys, a snack-size bag of Crunchy Cheetos. "That's what's hard for me, the babies," says Williams quietly. "I done buried a lot of 'em." ■ Rose-Neath Cemetery is nestled in a 100-year-old pecan grove in rural Louisiana, where trees soar 60 feet into the air and extend long limbs in an elegiac embrace of the souls below. In fall and early winter, people come from as far away as Arkansas, 40 miles up the road, to glean pecans among the headstones, stooping to pluck and gather in a rite rich with spiritual overtones. "A family, their baby died, they come up here every night and have dinner with him," says Williams, who has worked here for a decade as a gravedigger and groundskeeper.

This past November, for the first time in his life, Don Williams, 49, did something he'd never before even considered: He voted Republican for president. So did his wife, Dorothy, 46, who works in a restaurant busing tables. Their defection was a bad break for John Kerry and a good one for President Bush, who took 57 percent of the state's vote, up from 53 percent in 2000. Louisiana Democrats continued to do well at the state and local level, but for the first time, the state elected a Republican to the US Senate. And it shifted a US House seat to the Republican side, making it five to the Democrats' two. If Kerry stood a chance of carrying Louisiana, as Bill Clinton did in '92 and '96, it would have rested with longtime Democrats, including African-Americans like the Williamses.

I meet with a black woman who's no fan of Bush but voted for him as "the lesser of two evils." A few days later, she calls to ask that I not use her name; her husband, who'd been unaware of her vote, was now angry at her. She'd also just started a small business and was afraid her support for Bush would hurt her in the black community. "But I'm not ashamed of how I voted," she tells me, "and I'd do it again."

I'm not really a Southerner. But to the extent I have roots anywhere, they are in the South. My parents moved to Louisiana when I was 17, and I lived there on and off for a decade. Over the last 20 years, I have returned two or three times a year, and I'm always sad to leave. But I also love the Boston area and cannot imagine living anywhere else. This is my home. Yet after the November election, as Bostonians struggled to understand why Kerry had lost, I heard sweeping pronouncements about the so-called red states – especially in the South – that seemed strangely intolerant of cultural differences and often flat-out wrong. (First among these: that Southerners are stupid.) I went back to Louisiana to better understand what so many up here have been asking: Why did the voters in states like Louisiana make a choice that seems so baffling?

"How could anybody vote for Bush?" I heard time and again. "Who are these people?"

If you want to know, you have to ask them.

I'm sitting with Don and Dorothy Williams in the small home they rent in Bossier City, a twin city to Shreveport, the largest metropolitan area in north Louisiana, with a population of 380,000. They've been together 26 years and have both always lived here, but for Don's Army stint in the 1970s. "Oh, yes, ma'am, I wouldn't leave it," says Dorothy. "Leave me in Louisiana."

Shreveport's racial climate, while far from perfect, has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. For the first time, according to the 2000 Census, blacks accounted for more than half the population. Three of seven city councilors are black, and Don's neighborhood and workplace are mixed. Compared with Boston, the comfortable interaction between the races is striking: In any restaurant or mall, you see blacks and whites sharing meals, talking, shopping together. "Here in Shreveport, I see a lot of different races mixing together and socializing together," Don Williams says. "I didn't see that when I was young."

I ask him for his perception of the racial situation in Boston, a city he admits he's never visited, and he shakes his head sadly. "It seems like the races are real divided up there."

Don Williams reads the *Shreveport Times* every day and watches the nightly news. He scrutinized the election debates, and by the final one had made up his mind. "My first intention was to vote for John Kerry, because I'm a Democrat," he says. "I sat and listened and listened and listened, and I thought to myself, '[Bush] has been at the helm of this war, and he ought to be the one to finish this thing.'" His wife reached the same conclusion. They say they know other minority voters who went for Bush for the first time. "I believe the reason for that, a good percentage of them, was because of the war," Don Williams says. Other issues – the economy, health care, education – were less important, he says.

But what about the failure to discover weapons of mass destruction or to connect Iraq to the 2001 terrorist attacks? I ask. Bush "showed me he was doing goodness by going over and doing things for the women of Iraq and children," Don Williams answers. "Even though children are dying." As for the uncounted deaths of Iraqi civilians, he says, "That's the price of war."

Blacks make up 30 percent of Louisiana's voters. Loyal Democrats, for decades they have

Elaine McArdle is a freelance writer living in Watertown. Her email address is elainemca@hotmail.com.

made it difficult for Republican candidates to win here. In 2004, exit polls indicated that 9 percent of black voters supported Bush – an increase from 2000 that is less than the polls' margin of error. What is clear, however, is that the Republican Party is reaching out to blacks in Louisiana, and that some black voters and state legislators complain that the Democratic Party has taken them for granted.

Polls aside, Don Williams insists there are "a lot of minorities down here that voted for Bush that are Democrats."

He and his wife aren't alone in what mattered to them. When I asked people why they voted for Bush, almost all cited the war in Iraq. Support for the military has always been strong in the South; more people here wanted to enter World War II long before Pearl Harbor, for example.

Kerry's personal history sunk him, says Bernie Pinsonat, a pollster with Southern Media & Opinion Research in Baton Rouge. "The worst thing you can do in the South is appear to be a war protester, or close to Jane Fonda, or against the military. Kerry didn't get that. The Democratic Party didn't get that." He adds, "It was like his whole campaign knew nothing about the South."

The Williamses, raised Baptist, attend church infrequently, although Dorothy Williams watches a Sunday-morning broadcast from a local megachurch, defined as a congregation of more than 2,000 members. Did concern over gay marriage play any role in her vote? "No, no, no," she says, shaking her head vigorously.

"I don't look at none of that," her husband adds. "Who am I to judge somebody? God is the final judge."

On the gleaming waters of Black Bayou, a man in a T-shirt stands in a boat fishing for bass, framed by pine trees on the far shore. The vegetation and wildlife are breathtaking, even in winter: magnolias, cypresses, and 50-foot pines; herons and cranes; beavers; alligators and water moccasins. I'm in a pickup truck, driving down a two-lane blacktop on my way to Shreveport; there are new homes and churches everywhere. Still, there remains a tremendous sense of space and light; between subdivisions are vast expanses of undeveloped land. It's easy to see why issues like conservation don't have the same resonance here: There's an appearance of plenty – to eat and buy; of earth and homes.

Northwest Louisiana is the most conservative part of the state. In contrast to the more Catholic south, it is heavily Protestant, with a strong Evangelical presence. I pass a string of churches: the First Church of God, with a flashing neon sign; an airplane-hangar-sized frame, future home of Asbury United Methodist; and First Baptist Bossier, a megachurch of 7,000 members that broadcasts Sunday services from a 2,500-seat auditorium. A truck in front of me has a bumper sticker: "Got assault weapons? I do!" On another bumper: "1 Cross + 3 Nails = 4GIVEN." A B-52 bomber skims above the rooftops before landing at Barksdale Air Force Base, the area's largest employer and source of 12,000 military retirees in the area.

Strawn's Eat Shop is a diner famous for strawberry pies and a slightly eccentric air: A mural celebrates four black women, Strawn's cooks over the years ("Our own Mount Rushmore," manager Daniel Miles calls it); another shows the bearded guys from ZZ Top and Gandhi with his arm around Marilyn Monroe. I'm meeting Kristi Hylan, a single mom in her early 20s, and her mother, Gay Lea Wingo, 46, who's just finished the overnight shift at the post office, where she's worked for 19 years. Hylan opposes abortion so passionately that when she got pregnant in high school, that option never crossed her mind. Wingo, meanwhile, supports abortion rights. And yet she voted for Bush, and her daughter for Kerry.

"I was disappointed in Bush in his first term," Wingo says. "But the first thing I noticed about Kerry was that he was in the war and then he protested it. That didn't set well with me." Hylan, who works in an administrative job she describes as a lagniappe – a Louisiana term that means a boon or "a little something extra" – argues gently that Bush invaded Iraq under false pretenses. Wingo agrees: "I wanted something different." Then she laughs and adds, "But I know Bush."

Those words are vital to explaining her vote. "I don't know Kerry," Wingo continues. "I don't feel I know him."

In election post-mortems, commentators talked about the relative likability of Bush and Kerry. But Wingo's point is different.

VOTING COUNTERINTUITIVELY, Gay Lea Wingo (left), who supports abortion rights, backed President Bush, while her daughter, Kristi Hylan, who opposes abortion, favored John Kerry. "The first thing I noticed about Kerry," says Wingo, "was that he was in the [Vietnam] war and then he protested it."

LAWYERS Michael Johnson (left) and J. Casey Simpson are friendly despite their differences. While Johnson argued in favor of an amendment to prohibit same-sex marriage in Louisiana, Simpson helped found a gay-rights group.

Seeing Red

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

It's not that she needs to like her candidate – indeed, Wingo says she does not like George Bush. But she needs, at least, to have a sense of who the candidate is, a feeling of personal connection – especially during a war, when she feels imperiled.

"People in the South like to get to know somebody," Hylan says. "You see somebody in the grocery store, and you just wave, because it's the nice thing to do, even if you don't know them. I feel Bush comes across as the person who will wave even if he doesn't know you. Kerry doesn't come across that way."

This may sound shallow to someone not from the South, but theirs is a culture built on reaching out to connect. When you're on a country road, drivers will nod; Hylan hugs me when we finish our interview. Northerners often describe this friendliness as phony, but that's a fundamental misunderstanding of Southern culture. In urban centers, there is a desire to maintain one's personal space; but in Louisiana, a rural sensibility prevails even in cities.

David Otto, 43, an openly gay man living in Shreveport and a professor of religious studies at Centenary College of Louisiana, misses the liberal atmosphere of big cities. But for him it's a question of trade-offs. "You can be in the line in Brookshire's [a grocery store]," he says, "and somebody will inevitably just start a conversation with you."

In Louisiana especially, with its long history of populist candidates, voters need to connect to their leaders, he says. "Populist candidates – those who can capture the lingo and the imagination of the people – tend to be the ones people vote for," says Otto, who voted for Kerry. "Bush ran a campaign in Louisiana that reflected everything you'd ever associate with [former governor] Edwin Edwards and Huey Long. It's not his ideology. It's him. Bush looked like someone you could sit down with and have a Budweiser with, whereas Kerry seemed so 'other,' it didn't even matter what his positions were. He was just so culturally different." This populist appeal was the most important factor in the election, he believes. "What carries [other Southern states] is not so much populism but evangelical Protestant rhetoric," Otto says. "That's not as critical a

focus in Louisiana." (The state is 30 percent Catholic, 64 percent of whom voted for Bush.)

I asked about 10 Louisianans who voted for Bush if there was one Democrat they would have considered voting for. Almost all gave the same answer: the Jewish senator from Connecticut. "Joe Lieberman would've been the man," says David Bierwirth, 31, a union plumber studying to be a history teacher. His co-worker Michael Ebersole, 23, agrees: "He stood behind his word. He told it like it is."

It may seem a stretch – Lieberman the populist – but in the sense of standing firmly behind his message, he is. "Many who voted for Bush are well educated. But they're acculturated, they're Southern," says Otto. "We trust people who are straight shooters, if you will." Kerry seemed ambiguous; Bush promised to make life better without clouding his message with details. "I've never met a populist who waffles on any issue," says Otto.

The plumbers tell me that Kerry did "too much crawfishin'." They laugh at my puzzled expression.

"Backing up," Bierwirth explains – moving backward, like a crawfish.

IN HIS CLASSIC 1961 book, *The Earl of Louisiana*, about former governor Earl Long, the second-most-famous Long brother, A. J. Liebling wrote that here, "Anyone from a society woman to a bellhop will talk politics." Louisiana ranks seventh among the 50 states in voter participation. What has this enthusiastic participation in democracy brought? Dead-last rankings on a host of social indicators. Louisiana is poor. The northwest part of the state is relatively better off, but 31 percent of children in the Shreveport area live in poverty. The state is 50th in the health of its citizens, based on infant mortality rates, cancer rates, and people without insurance. It ranks worst in the country for murders with handguns per capita and for traffic fatalities per miles driven, half of which involve drunken driving. It ranks near the bottom in its education system and long-term economic growth.

There is an easy lifestyle in Shreveport-Bossier: little traffic, a full-time symphony, a highly regarded liberal arts college, a warm climate that allows outdoor sports year-round – golf,

Seeing Red

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

fishing, water-skiing. The average price of a home is less than $150,000. But job prospects are bleak. Besides the Air Force base, the biggest employer is a General Motors plant. The average family income is around $40,000 a year, and one-third of households earn less than $25,000. While the economy has brightened, companies still find Louisiana unattractive because the workforce is not well educated and political corruption is seen to be rife, according to a new study. Parents watch sadly as their children move away for work.

Economic desperation explains why Shreveport-Bossier, despite its traditional values, buckled to the arrival of riverboat casinos in 1994, which brought thousands of jobs. But if Texas legalizes gambling, as has been proposed, the casinos could lose most of their customers, says Michael Johnson, 32, a lawyer for the Shreveport office of the Alliance Defense Fund, a national conservative legal group. "It would be worse than the oil bust of the '80s."

Moon Griffon, a conservative, roasts politicians on his talk show on KMLB, an AM radio station in Louisiana. The biggest concern for his audience is the abysmal state of the state. "The reason is jobs and business, and our political corruption has been really horrible," he tells me. In addition to former governor Edwards, the state's last three insurance commissioners have gone to prison. Moon, whose tag line is "the good ole boys' worst nightmare," says one party has dominated the state for too long. "Huey Long, Edwin Edwards, John Breaux, Mary Landrieu" – two US senators – "I could name a ton more who put together a system that's handicapped this state," Moon says. "Breaux was in there 32 years, and look where we at! He helped himself; he never helped this state."

In an upset, the seat of Breaux, who has retired, was won by a Republican, a conservative congressman named David Vitter, a Rhodes scholar who built his name campaigning against corruption. Voters, including African-Americans, are sick of the state's problems, Moon says. For this and other reasons, he predicts the state will grow more solidly red.

Virginia K. Shehee, 81, a white Shreveport businesswoman – her properties include Rose-Neath Cemetery – and the first woman elected to the state Senate, voted for Bush and Vitter. She doesn't seem much like a Democrat, I say. "And I'm about to leave 'em," she answers. She doesn't care one way or the other about gay marriage, she tells me. But the Democratic Party's refusal to listen to voters is its own fault. "They don't believe anybody could vote for Bush and not Kerry." She scowls. "I've been many times to the East. They think we haven't got enough sense to come out of the rain. I don't know of any place more provincial than New York City or Boston."

"Populist candidates – those who can capture the lingo and the imagination of the people – tend to be the ones people vote for," says David Otto, an openly gay Kerry supporter and a professor of religious studies at Centenary College of Louisiana in Shreveport. "Bush looked like someone you could sit down with and have a Budweiser with, whereas Kerry seemed so 'other,' it didn't even matter what his positions were. He was just so culturally different."

Ed Crawford, 54, of Shreveport agrees: "What surprises me as a Southerner is how relatively provincial the Northeast can be" – for example, the view that any American who supports the war is

misguided or ill-informed. A longtime Republican, from an old Shreveport family that built its fortune on oil and cotton, Crawford could be viewed as a kind of Bayou Brahmin. His is a cultured home: His four sons, one now in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, play violin and cello; his wife, Laura, teaches violin at Centenary College.

An amateur historian, Crawford invokes Lincoln and Washington and cites Plato and recent books about the Middle East. He's bemused at those who regard Bush as dangerous when the world has known despots like Stalin and Mussolini. "I think we often mistake things in our times as being somehow cataclysmic, because our frame of reference is only about 30 years old," he says.

IN SEPTEMBER, 78 PERCENT of voters approved an amendment to Louisiana's constitution that outlawed same-sex marriage and civil unions. But some who supported it insist they do not dislike homosexuals. That, they tell me, would be un-Christian.

This may be a contradiction, but it isn't a surprising one. Southern culture relies on a predictable social order. It will tolerate certain things as long as there's a clear rule forbidding them. "The most law-breaking land, the South was – and remains – the land which insists most on law, written or not," wrote Southern columnist John Temple Graves in his 1943 book, *The Fighting South*. "It was part of their conservatism that there should be rules and that men in general should be bound by them." This cannot portend well for gay marriage being accepted here anytime soon.

I drive into the small downtown area of Shreveport and to the offices of the Alliance Defense Fund, which litigates against gay marriage and abortion. Last month, its local lawyer, Michael Johnson, argued before the state Supreme Court in favor of the amendment against same-sex marriage, which had been struck down as unconstitutional by a state judge after the vote. In his office, a pamphlet sits on the coffee table: "The Truth About Religious Expression at Christmastime," which states, "The bottom line: It's okay to say Merry Christmas, regardless of the legal threats from the ACLU and its allies." A boyish man in a sweater vest, Johnson greets me warmly. Over lunch, he tells me that one of his specialties is in litigating against sexually oriented businesses – "SOBs, we call them" – including a new strip club in Shreveport owned by Larry Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine. "This is a sensitive subject here in the Bible Belt," Johnson says.

He kids me about living in Boston. His father was a firefighter who survived a chemical-plant explosion 20 years ago. "So I've always believed in miracles, always believed God was real and active," he says. He is married, with two daughters, and his third child is due at the end of July. "He or she is about this big right now," he says, holding up a French fry.

"We don't want abortion on demand, we don't want same-sex marriage, and it rang out loud and clear at the polls," Johnson says. He believes most Americans, even in Massachusetts, agree with him, and he wants voters, not judges, to decide. Forbidding same-sex marriage, he says, is "all about defense of a sacred institution. It really is, honestly, that clear-cut to me." I ask what he thinks of Casey Simpson, a local lawyer who argued against him on a school-prayer case. He brightens. "Casey's a great guy!"

J. Casey Simpson, 42, grew up in a family of eight kids in a small Louisiana town where he raised chickens and hunted ducks. Like his brothers and father, he worked on an offshore oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, until a 4,000-pound rotary bushing crushed his right foot. "I can out-redneck anybody in Shreveport," he tells me with a laugh.

It took Simpson until he was 38 to come out as a gay man. Growing up, he says, "The worst thing in the world was to be gay. Death was better. I sure didn't know anybody else who was gay." Now he practices with a civil-rights law firm. "I

misguided or ill-informed. A longtime Republican, from an old Shreveport family that built its fortune on oil and cotton, Crawford could be viewed as a kind of Bayou Brahmin. His is a cultured home: His four sons, one now in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, play violin and cello; his wife, Laura, teaches violin at Centenary College.

An amateur historian, Crawford invokes Lincoln and Washington and cites Plato and recent books about the Middle East. He's bemused at those who regard Bush as dangerous when the world has known despots like Stalin and Mussolini. "I think we often mistake things in our times as being somehow cataclysmic, because our frame of reference is only about 30 years old," he says.

IN SEPTEMBER, 78 PERCENT of voters approved an amendment to Louisiana's constitution that outlawed same-sex marriage and civil unions. But some who supported it insist they do not dislike homosexuals. That, they tell me, would be un-Christian.

This may be a contradiction, but it isn't a surprising one. Southern culture relies on a predictable social order. It will tolerate certain things as long as there's a clear rule forbidding them. "The most law-breaking land, the South was – and remains – the land which insists most on law, written or not," wrote Southern columnist John Temple Graves in his 1943 book, *The Fighting South*. "It was part of their conservatism that there should be rules and that men in general should be bound by them." This cannot portend well for gay marriage being accepted here anytime soon.

I drive into the small downtown area of Shreveport and to the offices of the Alliance Defense Fund, which litigates against gay marriage and abortion. Last month, its local lawyer, Michael Johnson, argued before the state Supreme Court in favor of the amendment against same-sex marriage, which had been struck down as unconstitutional by a state judge after the vote. In his office, a pamphlet sits on the coffee table: "The Truth About Religious Expression at Christmastime," which states, "The bottom line: It's okay to say Merry Christmas, regardless of the legal threats from the ACLU and its allies." A boyish man in a sweater vest, Johnson greets me warmly. Over lunch, he tells me that one of his specialties is in litigating against sexually oriented businesses – "SOBs, we call them" – including a new strip club in Shreveport owned by Larry Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine. "This is a sensitive subject here in the Bible Belt," Johnson says.

He kids me about living in Boston. His father was a firefighter who survived a chemical-plant explosion 20 years ago. "So I've always believed in miracles, always believed God was real and active," he says. He is married, with two daughters, and his third child is due at the end of July. "He or she is about this big right now," he says, holding up a French fry.

"We don't want abortion on demand, we don't want same-sex marriage, and it rang out loud and clear at the polls," Johnson says. He believes most Americans, even in Massachusetts, agree with him, and he wants voters, not judges, to decide. Forbidding same-sex marriage, he says, is "all about defense of a sacred institution. It really is, honestly, that clear-cut to me." I ask what he thinks of Casey Simpson, a local lawyer who argued against him on a school-prayer case. He brightens. "Casey's a great guy!"

J. Casey Simpson, 42, grew up in a family of eight kids in a small Louisiana town where he raised chickens and hunted ducks. Like his brothers and father, he worked on an offshore oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, until a 4,000-pound rotary bushing crushed his right foot. "I can out-redneck anybody in Shreveport," he tells me with a laugh.

It took Simpson until he was 38 to come out as a gay man. Growing up, he says, "The worst thing in the world was to be gay. Death was better. I sure didn't know anybody else who was gay." Now he practices with a civil-rights law firm. "I

Seeing Red

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

didn't know of any other place in Shreveport where I could work and be out," says Simpson, who in October helped found a gay-rights lobbying group in Shreveport. "Most of my gay friends will not even use the word 'gay' sitting here talking like you and I are, because they're afraid someone will hear them."

In a group setting, people are hesitant to show any sympathy to gay rights, Simpson says. In private, he gets more support, like from the 70-year-old woman who leaned over to him at Mass to praise him for wearing an AIDS ribbon. It's those gestures that keep him hopeful that Louisiana will change. He'd love to live in a city with a bigger gay community, "but the work to be done is here, not there," he says. His commitment comes at a price: He can't hold hands with another man here, for example. "I don't even know if you can do that in Boston," he says. "Can you?" I tell him yes. He looks surprised. "That'd be nice," he says.

Johnson, too, has some thoughts on Massachusetts. "Well, you know in our minds, it's kind of the land of Ted Kennedy and John Kerry. Obviously, it's more liberal in its leanings. I don't have a negative view of all the people in Massachusetts. I know there are a lot of good God-fearing people up there, good Christians . . . " He pauses, and then, with a kidding tone, he adds, "outnumbered though they might be."

He jokes that perhaps we should arrange field trips: "If some of our good neighbors in Massachusetts just came down here and spent some time here, they'd realize there are many, many intelligent, articulate, educated people who just happen to believe differently than they do."

"Well, you know in our minds, [Massachusetts is] kind of the land of Ted Kennedy and John Kerry," says Michael Johnson, a lawyer for the Shreveport office of a national conservative legal group. "Obviously, it's more liberal in its leanings. I don't have a negative view of all the people in Massachusetts. I know there are a lot of good God-fearing people up there, good Christians . . . " He pauses, and then, with a kidding tone, he adds, "outnumbered though they might be."

I think about Johnson's words as I fly back to Boston, out of the 60-degree December days and into a city covered in snow. I reflect on this irony: that I love Boston because it is so open-minded and tolerant, and yet it shows little interest in trying to understand the South, a beautiful part of our country, where, as you walk down a sidewalk, a stranger will smile and say, "Hey, how you doin' today?" I think of how these cultural differences have enormous political implications. We ignore them at our peril. BG

contents

24
RED-STATE VOTERS Don and Dorothy Williams at home near Shreveport, Louisiana.

features

boston common

inspirations