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Together In Faith And Business

Steven and Rita Perrilloux describe their journey of faith and management of Historic Riverlands

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

In 1991, Pastor Steven Perrilloux and his wife Rita were offered a special gift: an opportunity to take possession of a historic church in Reserve, Louisiana. The church was the original Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church, built in 1937 to accommodate the region's Black parishioners who were segregated under the Jim Crow laws in effect throughout the South at the time. A new brick sanctuary was scheduled to be built on the site of the church and the older wood frame structure would have been demolished if it wasn't moved off the lot.

As Steven recounted, “A real estate agent who was a member of the church called me and offered it to me for \$10,000. I didn’t have the money at the time so I couldn’t do it. Then they came back a week later and told me they would give the building to me if I could move it within two months. I said, ‘Yes. Now you’re talking my language.’ and that’s how we accepted the building.”

With the help of two house-moving companies, the old sanctuary building was moved to its present four-acre site on Redemption Way in Reserve. In 1993 it was reopened and dedicated to the Lord by their Pastor Apostle Frederick K.C. Price from Los Angeles, as Riverlands Christian Center, a fully functioning church.

In 2005, the church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and designated a historic landmark along the Louisiana African American Heritage Trail. Today it stands as the Riverlands Christian Center, the focal point of the Perrilloux’s privately owned Historic Riverlands complex, offering music and history tours and educational experiences.

“We have been given a privilege and a platform by God because we were gifted that church,” Rita proudly noted. “It’s like God gave us the privilege of saving a piece of Black history with this church building and we are doing His work in keeping it up.”



Group shot of the Perrilloux family

The Perrilloux’s story together unfolds almost like a fairytale romance. After only knowing each other three months before their marriage, they will be celebrating their 41st wedding anniversary this year. They point to their faith in God as the reason they have been able to maintain a successful relationship. They also share a mutual support system that underlies their business and personal partnership.

As pastor of a loving and supportive church congregation, Steven spends his private time communing with God, studying the Scriptures and preparing for Sunday services.

Rita gives her unwavering support to him while helping make important decisions regarding the site and its facilities, handling administrative functions and other details that allow Steven to follow his vision.

Steven’s ancestry is firmly

rooted in the River Parish region, roughly 30 miles upriver from New Orleans. His father, Clarence Perrilloux Jr., was a certified welder who worked in New Orleans and was an auto body repairman on the side. Steven’s uncle, Marshall Lawrence, a renowned orchestra leader who lived to the age of 102, taught Steven’s father the skills he needed to go into the repair business.

Steven’s mother, Celeste Trepagnier Perrilloux, helped her husband run his repair business. “She was a sharp businesswoman,” Steven said. “She did all the paperwork and prepared estimates and his taxes. And she was an outstanding cook as well.”

After graduating from Southern University in Baton Rouge in 1979 with a degree in Sports and Recreation, Steven went on to supervise the sports program at the Louisiana Training Institute, a state-run juvenile detention center in Bridge City. Soon after leaving there he moved to southern California.

Rita, one of six children, is a native of the Greater Pittsburgh area in Pennsylvania. Her father, Bernard Blackburn, was a carpenter and her mother, Frances Blackburn, was a nurse. “My dad told us we would starve every winter,” Rita recalled. “He worked mostly outdoors and because



A tour group from France listens to a presentation in front of the Riverlands Christian Center in Reserve, LA

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of the weather he couldn't work year round. So that's how we ended up in California."

Living in various municipalities in the Los Angeles area, Rita joined Crenshaw Christian Center pastored by Reverend Fred Price. Little did she know that, through this church, her path would eventually converge with that of her future husband, Steven Perrilloux, who had come to southern California seeking spiritual enlightenment after experiencing a series of visions in the early 1980s.

As Rita described it, "We were going to the same church in Los Angeles. He went to the early service and I went to the later service and our pastor was going to be the guest speaker at this camp meeting in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I attended with a small group of people who went to support our pastor and that's where Steve and I met."

Their meeting was in July 1982 and they were married on a mountaintop near Yosemite National Park in November of that year.

"Actually, God spoke to Steve's heart that I was going to be his wife and he confirmed it with me. That's why we got married in such a short period of time. It's because we both knew the voice of the Lord. We both were Christians; we both had a relationship with the Lord. And so when God spoke to him that I was going to be his wife and he confirmed it with me, we immediately obeyed God," Rita said.



A talented percussionist and vocalist, Steven performed with a band called Spirit Filled Gospel Group. He and Rita worked in the ministry of their church as volunteers and were superintendents in the Sunday school. Their first three children, Rose, Robin and Steven Jr., were born at Cedars Sinai Hospital in Beverly Hills. In 1987 they decided to move to Steven's former hometown of Reserve and their fourth child, Christina, was born 10 years later.

Today the Perrilloux are the proud stewards of a four-acre spread of land that not only houses the church but also a pre-school that has been accredited with

a four-star rating. "With the birth of our daughter came the birth of Little Leaders Learning Center Preschool," Rita said. The facilities are mostly a family-run enterprise with their daughters, son, sister-in-law and several cousins, along with the assistant pastor, Farrow Freeman, managing or

helping in some way, including with the tours.

Steven's sister, Sylvia Clayton, helps guide the Soul River music tour and she entertains afterward, singing renditions of Billie Holiday classics. Sometimes Steven, a recording artist with three CDs to his credit, will perform on drums and vocals. He recently performed onstage with Meters guitarist, Leo Nocentelli, on the first weekend of the 2023 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

"And so the inspiration for the tours came from the material that we received when we were putting the church building on the National Register," Steven proudly declared. "We could tell a unique story. We're people of color. When you come out here and go to these plantation houses, you're hearing about the people of color and what they did on the plantations. We get a chance to tell you what we learned and what the people of color were doing after they left the plantations.

"So, to preserve the legacy of the local people of color and those others in Louisiana and in the United States, it's really a privilege and an assignment to be able to do this. Actually, we look on it as a God-given assignment to do this because of the way everything transpired," Steven concluded.



Band members from the French tour group perform outside the Riverlands Christian Center

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