REPRESENTING THE ARTS AND THE ARTISTS:

Ashlye Keaton and The Ella Project offer pro bono legal services and support to local culture bearers

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

PHOTO BY THERESA CASSAGNE

Musicians, Mardi Gras Indians, artists and other culture bearers comprise key components of the cultural tapestry that enhances New Orleans' reputation as a unique destination drawing millions of visitors from all over the globe, in addition to providing entertainment for local residents.

Ashlye with Wardell Quezergue
PHOTO BY JULIA BAILEY

For many of these culture bearers, their skills form the basis from which they derive their income, allowing them to sustain themselves on their art and not have to work traditional 9 to 5 office jobs five days a week.

But, in so doing, those who follow these creative paths as their careers have to treat their chosen occupation as a business. And, like any other business, there are legalities involved that can determine the degree to which the business is successful. This is where The Ella Project comes into the picture.

Founded in 2004 by New Orleans attorney Ashlye Keaton and her business partner, Gene Meneray, "The Ella Project provides pro bono legal assistance, arts business services, and advocacy to the cultural community of New Orleans and Louisiana," according to their mission statement. Over the 21 years of its existence, The Ella Project has helped thousands of creatively talented individuals from New Orleans and elsewhere throughout the state.

Ashlye with Gene Meneray
PHOTO BY MICHAEL BRACY

(left to right) Dr. John, James Carville and Ashlye PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLYE KEATON

"Artists, musicians, and culture bearers are the very people who make this place so special," Ashlye proudly stated. "Ensuring that their work is protected and that they can share their work in a way that is equitable and just, is what we have to do. What's good for the artist is ultimately good for our entire cultural ecosystem."

A native of Hot Springs, Arkansas where her mother was an art teacher and her father was a carpenter, Ashlye gradually made her way to New Orleans after graduating from Hot Springs High School and Auburn University in Alabama. She enrolled in Tulane Law School in the early 2000s, initially specializing in Environmental Law.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLYE KEATON

PHOTO BY JERRY MORAN

Ashlye with Deacon John
PHOTO BY ERIKA GOLDRING

"I always knew that I'd end up here," Ashlye explained. "When I was growing up, my mom used to bring me here and I knew that if I was going to end up anywhere in America, it was either going to be New Orleans, New York or San Francisco. I decided that New Orleans was for me."

The more time Ashlye spent in New Orleans, the more fully her affinity for the local culture blossomed. In addition to Environmental Law, she also took an interest in Intellectual Property Law, earning a certificate in it from the University of Amsterdam. She also taught ballet and tap until the pandemic hit in 2020.

"I always say that culture and environment are inextricably linked," Ashlye said. "In New Orleans we're at the intersection of America's wetlands and the birthplace of jazz. It's no accident that some of our cultural rituals and our artistic genres and our music are informed by the environment around us."

Ashlye with Irma Thomas
PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLYE KEATON

Sensing a need for advocacy in the arts, Ashlye hung out her shingle as a sole law practitioner after graduating from Tulane in 2003 and, the following year, she and Meneray founded The Ella Project.

In its infancy it was a shared program between Tulane Law School, the Arts Council of New Orleans and the Tipitina's Foundation. The plan was to provide comprehensive legal services to artists, musicians and other culture bearers. However, the local cultural scene was upended when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

As Ashlye recalled, "Throughout that time, post-Katrina in particular, what happened was that I became a de-facto liaison between the cultural community and the local government. And so that's where our advocacy really started to happen."

Continuing, Ashlye added, "We were in the process of expanding our services through another nonprofit called Sweet Home New Orleans. At the time, they were providing relief to musicians and culture bearers. Especially housing. They helped get people into homes and helped them pay the bills and get back on their feet."

Over the years since Katrina and the city's eventual recovery, Ashlye and those who've worked with her in The Ella Project can point to a long list of accomplishments that have bettered the lives and careers of many of those in the creative community. A shining example involves the Mardi Gras Indians and photographers who had been taking pictures of them in their decorative suits without their permission and profiting from sales of those photos without compensating the artists.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLYE KEATON

"So what we did was apply (to the U.S. Copyright Office) and have them (the Indians' suits) declared as works of art. As sculptures," Ashlye emphasized. "People were telling us that they weren't copyrightable because they were costumes, but they're not costumes because they are worn over clothing. I was working with the chiefs on this and most of them lost their suits in Katrina. We had to wait until we had a suit we could submit as a deposit copy and we literally had to wait about two years to get a registration form but we did and we were successful. We qualified for copyright registration and protection.

"What's really been cool about all this is that it started out as an adverse situation but over time it's transformed into a larger discussion about their unique artistic expressions," Ashlye continued. "In my experience with many of the Indians, going back twenty years, it wasn't as common for them to be having discussions about their suits as works of art. They were just sewing their suits. Now it's that they're making art and this is high art."

In addition to helping the city's creative and artistic community, The Ella Project also works with inventors to protect their proprietary rights through the patent process and trademark registration and protections. It has also been active in helping artists and other creatives recover unpaid monies that were due them.

The Ella Project played a significant role in helping reform archaic ordinances involving noise after hours, and they helped establish the Mayor's Office of Nighttime Economy. Through that office, the Project advocated for musicians to be able to temporarily park without being ticketed or towed outside performance venues while they load and unload equipment to and from their gigs, especially in the French Quarter.

And so, after 20-plus years of diligence and hard work, where does Ashlye Keaton see herself five to ten years into the future?

"I hope I'm still here, doing this work,' she answered. "By the grace of God, I hope I can be. It's a matter of endurance at this point. Literal endurance. I don't want to leave here and I'm hoping that I don't have to."

Ashlye Keaton lives in New Orleans with her husband Joel Scilley, an artist/woodworker with a PhD in media and cultural studies, along with their pet dog Django. She loves dancing and gardening in her spare time.

For more information about The Ella Project go to https://ellanola.org/ or call (504) 250-0429

Ashlye at the Ogden Museum with Mardi Gras Indian Chief Howard Miller and musicians Craig Klein and Wesley Phillips

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLYE KEATON

Ashlye and Django at home with her husband, Joel Scilley after snowfall in January 2025

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLYE KEATON