



CELEBRATING BIRD HEROES

BY AMINA ABDEL-HALIM

Galveston, TX, June 27—For over a decade an amazing mother-daughter duo has volunteered their time, effort, and resources to preserving 2,500 acres of precious coastal habitat in southeast Texas. In doing so, they have saved the homes of many birds and other animals and brought the return of many species that had all but ended their visits to this invaluable stretch of coastline called the John M. O'Quinn I-45 Estuarial Corridor.

Evangeline Whorton and Lalise Mason have been described by one family member as “the Galveston Garden Club gone bad.” But “good” is a much better word for what the dynamic duo has done. They have fought enormous odds to restore 900-plus acres of the devastated land to its original inter-tidal marshlands state, creating natural habitats for birds, wildlife, and recreational, educational, and volunteer opportunities for the public.

Their efforts took root in 1972, when Evangeline moved to Galveston and felt irritated by what she found there. “I got busy trying to improve things,” says Evangeline. “I began finding ways to handle the problems of misuses of land, improper disposal of debris, and pollution that ultimately fouls the water. In 1992 I found fresh inspiration at a Livable Communities Conference, and began to see greater possibilities for our community. We were losing our natural resources, including the diversity of species in the marshes, and our beaches and preserved architectural masterpieces were losing ground too.”

The coastal marshes faced destruction by land developers building canal houses or those creating industrial zones. Also, Interstate Highway I-45 runs right through the marsh, and for years careless passengers have littered the roadway, while others had purposely dumped trash, construction materials, and much larger objects into the marsh. What was once a habitat for birds and other creatures in the 1930s had become a dump for landfill and dredge material.

Evangeline decided to do something about it—and got her daughter involved too. Lalise explains, “Something about this salt marsh—which Mom was getting so involved in—hooked me. The big joke in the family is that I went out and got trained to be an architect, and I've been *unbuilding* things ever since.” She recalled a book she had read in school,

Life and Death of a Salt Marsh by John Teal, and decided to help. “What you read matters.”

Evangeline and Lalise made up their minds to acquire and restore the marsh. Their first step was to gather friends and start a small board of volunteers, which eventually became a group called SCENIC GALVESTON. “It is not evil to stand up tall and say, ‘There’s a right way and there’s a wrong way, quit sitting in the middle on the picket fence, and get out there and do something about it,’” Evangeline states.

Money was important for the project. After losing their original source of state and federal funding, feeling disillusioned and frustrated, the duo determined not to give up. They decided to focus on finding private funders, and as word spread about their project, they began receiving grants and contributions from private donors and groups. Cleaning the land was costly, as they pulled out tons of landfill.

Old tires and tons of tossed out lumber—and even a pizza oven—were small items compared to bigger obstacles like entire buildings and concrete trusses. They discovered huge cement blocks that could not be moved from a middle portion of the land. Today, they remain there, sunken out of sight, but providing small islands where different species of birds now nest and roost. “All of a sudden we have 400 little nesting pairs of Least Turns out there, where there weren’t any before,” says Evangeline.

The visibility of the birds aids in bringing volunteers and naturalists to the area. Lalise describes birds as “winged ambassadors” for

nature: “You’ve become a conservationist if you can help a bird help itself.” Along with Neotropical migrants, many other species have reappeared: the Reddish Egret, White-Faced Ibis, Piping Plover, Oyster Catchers, Peregrine Falcon, Mottled Duck, and the rare Black Rails, to name a few. Less visible creatures, such as the coyote and salt marsh snake, are also drawn to the restored marshland habitat and its resources.

People are drawn to the restored wetlands too. They stop by the highway to take in the natural beauty. Some people ask the team how they can help, and soon count themselves among the many volunteers who pitch in to plant marsh grass by hand. These volunteers have come from many communities around the region, reaching far beyond the local community near the preserve. “We created opportunities for people to come out and to engage with the project—either once, or over and over again,” Lalise explains.

Along the way, many people told the mother-daughter team that what they were doing was impossible, that they could never achieve it. According to Lalise, “On a number of levels, the project we have done is impossible, but nothing is impossible. You take a baby step in your own back yard, and then all roads lead to Rome. The visibility and the power of this project to reach people and fire-up their imaginations—that is what is important, and the birds out there are the visible manifestation of that. The fact is that as we have restored that marsh right along I-45, the diversity of all species—not just birds—has increased.”

The mother-daughter team was “inspired” to take up the gauntlet again in 2000—when they saw a frightening map of future plans for land adjacent to the John M. O'Quinn I-45 Estuarial Corridor. This new survey allowed for industrial zone development of 300 sites on Virginia Point Peninsula—potentially for petrochemical tanks. The team took up this challenge and in 2003 acquired the nearby Peninsula Preserve for permanent conservation.

In their invincible way, Evangeline and Lalise are approaching this scenic preserve project with what they describe as a vision beyond their initial vision—being able to see degraded, spoiled wetland on the I-45 corridor for its possibilities, to have the intentions to make it better, and the will to not give up and to keep working to save the adjoining peninsula. This makes Evangeline, Lalise, and the community of volunteers—those that follow in their footsteps—Bird Heroes.



Lalise Mason isn't afraid to get her hands dirty when it comes to helping birds and other wildlife in the Galveston, Texas marshland she has helped to restore.