

I'm Ben Hulsey.

I'm probably the least qualified board member that Houston Audubon ever had. Certainly, one of the few whose bio didn't end with, "...and he's a really good birder." Now, that's changed since, but I was the vanguard. And the only reason that I am on the board is because I sat next to Flo Hannah one time at a wedding reception. I had just retired, and she was asking me what I was doing. I told her one of my goals was to learn the birds in my backyard, and some other things that I talked about. She knew I was interested in the outdoors. And the next thing I knew, I had a call from Flo, and I think Peggy Boston, who happened to be head of the search committee at the time, who I knew from tennis, asking if I would interview. And I interviewed with Joy Hester and Jim Winn and our executive director at the time, and walked away thinking, "Neat organization, but I have no idea how I would fit into it." *[Laughter]* And I got a call saying they wanted me to join the board. And the rest is history.

It's hard to remember much about it, other than, y'know, I was nervous to be there, 'cause I didn't know very many people there at all. I didn't really understand a lot of the terminology that was used; a lot of nomenclature that was foreign to me. And I tried to just keep a low profile and not make an idiot out of myself, 'cause I really didn't know much about the conservation community or birding, and mainly just listened. And at the time, that board meeting and a few others, a lot of the focus at that time was on cash flow management – we were in the middle of a recession – how were we gonna meet budgets, and that sorta thing. So I felt a little more comfortable in that area than I did with discussion of what was going on in the sanctuaries and programs. But I wasn't scared off, I guess that'd be the short.

There were several important people, to me, in the organization that really helped to integrate me. And the first and foremost was Flo Hannah. And Flo just took me under her wing, so to speak, and took me out almost every week with one of the groups that she was going with, and made sure I knew the people, that I knew the areas that they were, that I got introduced to birds – and if you're with Flo, with the native plants, which seemed a disproportionate part of the whole organization. It wasn't something that I was expecting. And that was just an amazing introduction, was through Flo's eyes. And then Jim Winn and Joy Hester became great friends and really important mentors at the time. Got involved initially with lots of groups that did bird surveys; that was really important to my understanding more about not only birds but the pieces of property that we had.

Well, as far as sanctuary experience prior to that, the only one I had was High Island. And Ellen Red, who was a part of this organization for a long time, took a group of people from my church there like ten years before, and that had been my only experience. And it was sort of an "ah-ha" moment for me, bird-wise, like it is for a lot of people, where we just saw some spectacular birds. First Scarlet Tanager I ever saw, and all that sort of thing. So maybe I should've included Ellen Red in my list of previous mentors, but she was very important. And that was my first experience with the sanctuary. I didn't even know this sanctuary existed here at Edith L. Moore, and that was one of my first comments to the board, was, "Why?" *[Laughter]* "We've got 150,000 cars a day that go by the place, and yet most people don't know that it's here." So as a businessman, that seemed to be an anomaly.

I made it intentionally. I think by the time I had finished my second year, I'd probably visited more sanctuaries than anyone else on the board. And that was just because some of 'em are

very remote, and you've gotta be very intentional about visiting. But again, just not to be embarrassed, because I was so far behind everyone else. Anytime there was an opportunity to go visit a sanctuary, I did it.

By that time, I had watched Jim Winn and Joy Hester and Mary Carter operate and was a part of the team. I was president-elect for two years before that, so by that time, I knew what the job entailed. And my job was made so much easier by the work it had done before, and getting us through to that point. And with Helen on board, it was just a different organization – like I say, much more likely to be pulling together as a staff, for example, instead of independent pods that were working, kinda people doing their own thing. There was one message and one goal, and that made it really easy. And I would say I worked with Helen a lot because of that.

Well, again, I came from a business background, so I really did not want to get into the financial side of things, the development side of things here. But it turns out that that's where I started, just 'cause there was such a need, given the hurricanes, the droughts, the recession – all the things that happened during the first few years of my board term. That's where I was needed the most, and where I felt the most comfortable, so I did spend maybe a disproportionate amount of time with that, where I felt comfortable. And again, where I could do the most good, I thought.

Actually, the financial side was pretty well organized. It wasn't a matter of needed tender, loving care. It was a matter of just needed focus, and I didn't add a whole lot to the program, other than just the ability to read it and agree or disagree. We've been blessed with great support staff for accounting and bookkeeping, and the only things we asked for that were different – and Jim Winn was passionate about this during his administration – was better tools to measure cash flow, and to give us a feel for where we were, just because it was so scary at the time. But we worked our way through, and I think they would have done that fine without my help. That was just where I felt most comfortable being. The only other areas were more organizational, because of my experience in business where I could see things that could be improved, and eventually got me interested in that, but that wasn't the most important thing initially.

But it was just incredible, when I came aboard, to realize how much the organization depended on volunteers. And in the continuum of nonprofits, this was beginning to be a more mature nonprofit, where it started out like most do as 100 percent volunteer, and then built layers of staff, to the point that by the time I got off the board, there was pretty much a complete layer of staff over the volunteer base and become a completely mature organization. But the volunteers themselves were just as needed as ever, and probably a larger group than ever. But that's always been a major part of the organization. You can't do what we have to do with just staff.

Beginning with my term, I think, began a new era for Houston Audubon. We had just hired Helen Drummond; we'd just hired Richard Gibbons. We had just been through a period of hurricanes and recessions and droughts, and the loss (retirement) of Winnie Burkett – a lot of people put that in the same category – and we were ready to go. And we did, we did some great things. From that point forward, I don't think we've ever taken a step backwards, and I'm really proud of all the things we did during that time to keep moving the organization forward in a way where we really pulled together.

That first year of the time that I was present, we did so many things. We had Richard and Helen on board. We entered into the ten-year strategic plan for the organization that not only had a great product at the end of it, but just the process alone brought in all kinds of people that bought into the product, and knew more about the organization, and really helped us move forward. That was a major thing. Very specific goals that helped us over the next few years and kept us from just reinventing the wheel every time we got together. I thought that was great.

The commitment that same year to become a part of the Land Trust, to seek Land Trust accreditation – that also resulted in an awful lot of people working, but that was something that sorta hummed in the background for several years. We didn't receive accreditation until 2017, I think, but the process, again, was just as important as the product, where we had people putting spotlights in every nook and corner of the organization, and looking at processes and accounting practices and programs and everything, and dusting everything off. And we came out of it a much cleaner, tighter, neater organization as a result, and with an awful lot of people who knew a lot more about the organization than before. And again, another way just where we were all pulling on the same team, so that was a really good one.

I think all boards talk about the need for diversity of all kinds. I mean, all boards want younger people to come up, not just old, retired people, not just oil company people, not just this – There's gotta be a mix, and we talk about it. I've been on several what are they called, nominating committees, and that's always a discussion. You always want to have a diverse board. In fact, one of the things we did in that first year was we modified the by-laws that hadn't been modified for a long time. We not only added two years possible to the term of a board member, but we added two more board members, to the possibility of 13 rather than 11, which gave us an opportunity when we had a good draft class, or we wanted to be intentional about finding a young person, or a lawyer, or whatever we needed at the time. It allowed us the flexibility to do it, and that was a good thing for the organization, I think.

I actually donated money towards a Birdmobile, but in the interim I found out at one of the meetings that there was a couple that was looking for something interesting to donate money to, so I pulled Helen and Jessica Jubin, who was the person at the time that handled development, aside and said, "Look. If you can sell them on the Birdmobile, you can have the other money for general funding, and you get a two-fer." And they promptly called the other couple and got the donation, so that is officially their donation, not mine. But I was glad that my money was leveraged. It's always better if you can get two for one."

Let's see. In 2017, there was a group that was put together to analyze the needs of High Island from an infrastructure standpoint. We had a lot of things going on, including a very generous gift from the McGovern Foundation of over \$2 million that included, among other things, a canopy walkway, bathrooms for Smith Oaks. But we had a lot of other needs at the same time – housing needs, native nursery needs, maintenance needs. There's all kinda things sorta came up at one time. So we thought we needed to look at it, instead of piecemeal, to look at it all at once, and even engaged the services of an architectural firm, and were able to map all this out, and spell out the square footages we need, and then put dollar values on all that – not necessarily place where it needed to be placed, although that was a part of the equation. In the middle of all that, a three-and-a-half acre tract came up that was owned by a bankrupt oil company. That was sort of right in the middle of High Island, and it checked off like four or five of the boxes we were

trying to check off at a fraction of the price of building everything new. I'll have to say I've never seen Houston Audubon act faster on a project. In fact, from a business standpoint, it's frustratingly slow, normally, on anything; it takes a long time to get anything done. But this one, boy, it moved fast, just because we recognized how important – we'd already done the homework and recognized how important it was. So anyway, the property was purchased, and it became the place where we primarily housed our staff members, where we housed most of our maintenance equipment, where we had a new natives nursery for down there, where we have an RV park where we can keep RV volunteers down – It just checks off so many boxes, and for me to get involved financially was just a no-brainer. I love things like that, that do so many things, that's an investment that's so highly leveraged. It was an easy decision to donate the money.

My interest in photography and my interest in birding sort of grew together. You really can't separate the two. Originally when I was talking to Flo Hannah about what I intended to do, I not only intended to learn all the birds in my back yard, I wanted a photograph of every bird in my back yard, and I bought a lens that I thought would accomplish that. And so that's how it all started, I really didn't count a bird unless I had a picture of a bird, so I wanted to photograph every bird I saw. And then that led to wanting to know what every bird was, and so it really kind of grew up together. I used the photography as a way of learning about birds. Didn't necessarily have as a goal being on the cover of *National Geographic* or anything, but as it turned out, like any photographer, you eventually want better and better photography, which usually means not just more knowledge, but better equipment, so I reached a point with equipment that I could, it was possible to get good photographs. But I've never called myself a photographer. I know how to take good pictures of birds, and that's really been my only goal. And it's served me very well. I thoroughly enjoy going out, and nowadays sometimes not even with the camera. I've become a birder – a long time! But it's one of the most important things I do now, and it's substituted – Y'know, fishing was my outdoor passion before. It hasn't completely substituted that, but it's become my number-one passion. And even the number-one travel interest is in birding.

I never was a lister. I didn't think about it, I would say, for the first eight or nine years that I birded. I kept lists, because a lot of the things I've done involved lists, and filed 'em away. But like I said, my lists were my photographs. If I didn't have a photograph of the bird, I didn't count it. But eventually I had so many friends that were into listing, it was just out of curiosity more than anything else I started entering – I discovered eBird a few years ago, and started entering some of these old lists, historical lists, into eBird, and have become a lister. I don't know whether I'm proud of that or apologetic about it, but I've become a lister.

I think one of the amazing things about living in Houston, and sometimes you have to look hard for some real unamazing things in Houston, is the confluence of birds, and the numbers of birds, the importance of the area to birds, the fact of whether they're coming or going, where we could be at the far north end or the south end, or they could be residents. And that's a great opportunity, for one thing, to study birds, to observe far more than most people have in their area, far more diverse. But it also creates an obligation, I think, to maintain the habitat, and to make a nice home for them. So I think it's a pretty easy pitch. I think Houston Audubon is very fortunate to be where we are. A lot of people don't have near the kind of opportunity we have to make a difference in bird conservation.

I think it's pretty clear that nobody at Houston Audubon is gonna work themselves out of a job as long as the mission is bird conservation and bird habitat conservation, 'cause both of those curves, by just about any metric, are in steep decline. So we can't keep doing what we're doing. We have to always be upping our game. And if we're going to long term, I think if we're gonna make a difference, we have to look for ways that leverage our work. We can no longer just go out and buy property and manage that property for bird habitat. We have to have an army of people out there who think it's important to do that with us. And maybe with our leadership, and that's gonna be the way we make a difference in the future, is to partner with other organizations, with the community, to get it done. That's gotta be the new paradigm. We gotta have a louder voice in the community to get that done, and all kinds of other things – which we're doing. I think we're on that path, with the education programs and all the things we're doing, that'll be the wave of the future.

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