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Joy Haynes Hester. The positions I've had with Houston Audubon – I started out first doing some volunteer work – volunteer legal work on proposed donation to Houston Audubon, and then, I went on the board. I became president elect after my second year on the board – this was around '99 – and then, I ended up moving over to be executive director, and that ended up being 3 and a half years. And then, I went – after things stabilized, I moved back on the board as president elect, and served as president of the board the six years, which is elect president and then past. It's a six-year commitment. So, it's a total of, I think, 10 or 12 years in those various positions.

Well, actually, I subscribed to the *National Audubon Magazine*. When I got out of law school and moved to Houston, I just – I'd always been interested in birds and had bird feeders at home and enjoyed birding in the neighborhood with my children, and so, I subscribed to *National Audubon*. Well, all of a sudden, I started receiving newsletters from Houston Audubon and – not a very sophisticated affair in those days, but talked about a place called Bolivar Flats. What is that? Because of that communication, I started taking beginning birding lessons through Houston Audubon.

And so, that put me out in the birding community. And one day, I was at Rust Pitman Park – the word got out on Texbirds. We had something called a – listserv called Texbirds, and Texbirds said something about a bird being sighted there. So, I trotted right over there and – I love – birders are so chatty and friendly so, Peggy Boston, who was very active with Houston Audubon, saddled up to me and started chatting and asking questions. And pretty soon, I was giving her my phone number when she learned I was a lawyer, and it wasn't long after I had a phone call from Winnie Burkett asking if I might do some legal – help them with a transaction.

So, that volunteer work – that particular project was a donation of the Carolyn Raizes Davis Sanctuary down on Chocolate Bayou. That Scott Davis was appointed to make that donation. So, that was my first project, and that was what got my attention from the board. Jeff Mundy was the new board president and that led to my being asked to go on the board.

Well, I did real estate work primarily at that time – in fact, almost exclusively. And I had done a lot of land acquisition strictly for Alief ISD and for Exxon, too, or smaller – not big developments, but commercial development of what they called Exxon Shops. So, I was very comfortable taking on real estate, and so that got me in that role, and then, once on the board, I really – I guess, like I said, I think it was only in the second year that then we – there were major changes – without going into details, and we needed – we actually hired someone – our executive director – the board made to hire, and I was on that committee. It did not work out, and I felt really bad about it for the staff who then were leaderless again. And so, when Jeff Mundy asked me if I might help out, I stepped over and started doing that. In the beginning, when I was here – our team was Winnie Burkett, and Mary Anne Weber, and Jeff Mundy, then Flo Hannah when she got added in. I mean, we were tight. We were really a good, tight team, getting things done with volunteers. And I've a special affection for all of them.

Well, Jeff was a very dynamic board president, and every opportunity to save land, to acquire land, he was all for it. So, the Carolyn Davis – that transaction was the first one. The next one followed almost immediately – was a donation by Doctor Clayton and his wife of the Dos Vacas Muertas Sanctuary on Galveston Island. So, that was the next transaction. And in every transaction, there's a lot of visiting the land, talking to the people, and then, celebrating the acquisition – the fun part.

Then, we were going through a lot of building and transitioning of not only of the staff, but the board. And I'm trying to think – probably the next land project – I mean, it was just one after another, and sometimes, several at a time. But the next one – Winnie wanted me to help with the Tyra Tract at Bolivar Flats, which we had 4/7ths interest in. So, then, well, it turned out to be a fairly complicated long, drawn-out, thing. We did a partition where we ended up full owner of – I think it's 400-something acres, and the other owner of the 3/7th was out.

So, that was the next one. And then, pretty soon, the big one – which was acquiring – well, already under way was acquisition in bankruptcy court of 600-something acres of Bolivar Flats, which had started out – Bolivar Flats started out as just a lease with a GLO. And so, we actually didn't own land, except for Tyra Tract. Then, there was another one called the Suderman Tract, which was before me, and I didn't do much with it. But then, the opportunity to acquire what was substantially most of what Bolivar Flats is now was – it became available through the bankruptcy court, and that was under way when I came on.

So, I didn't do much legal work on that. I ended up being involved in the closing, but the fundraising was the big thing there. It was a lot of fundraising that was going on to be able to pay for that. And there was a – we did outreach to the United – everywhere, the whole country – and people really jumped in. So, that was very satisfying. Very.

But then, the bankruptcy court said, "Wow. How about this other 600 something acres across the road here – Horseshoe Marsh?" So, we took that on, and that took us about three years, I think. It was – that was tough. It was over 4,000 lots because it had been – kind of crazy – proposed development there – that a lot of the lots were even under water, under the lake.

But Winnie and I did that side by side, plotting through lot by lot, and she and her husband actually were the ones that – on the ground – to determine which lots – we knew there were squatters there. We knew there was a part we did not want. So, we really cherry picked it. And Winnie and her husband did that on-the-ground work and I was doing the paperwork. Our title – the title opinion from the title company was this thick, and we were plotting.

But, anyway, that was the next thing, and that was all-encompassing. That took pretty much the – anyway, we officially closed on that, and, at the same time, the – as I'm remembering it – the Bolivar Flats portion – we just all closed it at the same time. So, those are the major things. So, what we ran into were – the issues that began to come up for as far as I was concerned – because, in addition to these acquisitions, we were dealing with land that we owned that were problematic. Eagerness to accept land by prior administrations meant that they were really difficult, hard to access, too far away, and just problematic pieces that we need to figure out better ways to utilize.

And one really – one that I really loved doing was we had a tract north of Spring Creek – I think it was Montgomery County – and it was land-locked by a development. And so, we ended up doing a trade with the developer – let the developer have that land-lock plot – and they gave us the land all along Spring Creek that they couldn't build on anyway. So, it was mutually beneficial, and then, we ended up being very involved in the Spring Creek Greenway project and were part of the big ceremonies that ended up being the – when that all came together – and we cut the ribbon. So, that was an exciting project.

At the time that we were acquiring these different lands – and we were – we just felt like we were doing great conservation. We were excited to do it, and we had a strong leader in Jeff Mundy who was all for it. And I don't remember any particular debate on the projects. As executive director, I began to have concerns because I was having to deal with the problematic ones that had been accepted by earlier – earlier boards – and so, the whole issue of – for me, became – and developed during my term was how do we quit acquiring land in such a reactive way and start being more proactive about it? And so, we had some funds available to us for a generous donation made by a woman named Gene Graham that we set up as what we called "The Land Fund" to help us pay for land that we felt like – to help us be able to take advantage of opportunities without having to say, "Wait. Can we – we've gotta raise some money."

We needed to be able to grab – get properties quickly rather than having to raise the funds and lose opportunities that way. So, the whole concept of having a plan – a proactive plan and funds available was what we had in mind. We weren't able to get that project off the ground to actually come up with a land plan. We started that process. We called Linda Shead – she came and consulted with us, and we didn't get that done, but it has been done since.

I'm very please – very pleased to see that Houston Audubon – and just in the recent past – published their – a land plan after they got some funding from the Land Trust Alliance that supported the concept of them having a real plan that included – and here's another topic that I got involved with regarding land for Houston Audubon – which was I was – the whole Land Trust movement was beginning. It was – the Texas Land Trust Council was under the wings of Texas – TPWD. And so, I was asked to be on that. It was actually representing Houston Audubon, but technically, not – but it was with heads of other leaders of land conservation groups.

So, the concept of conservation easements we began to discuss, and whether – do we want – instead of having to go out and buy and own it and manage it, maybe we can save more land by accepting conservation easements. There was a lot of educating to do – educating ourselves, training – and so the current – Helen and more recent boards have done a great job of following that path, and now, Houston Audubon is a certified land trust. So, all that comes out of the wild and crazy days we were just taking it – grabbing land and trying to figure out what to do with what we had. I think it's been a – but, with regard to difference between Houston Audubon and other chapters – I really became aware of that when I went on the National Audubon board. And to say how I got on that board first – it was an elected position. National Audubon's board is set up to have elected representatives from regions.

So, I represented Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico – a ridiculously large – impossible to represent all of them. But when I went on that board – and I was on it for six years, two terms – and it was elected. All the chapters elect them – you know, vote for it. But I became aware that Houston Audubon had more land than any other chapter in the country and it was highly respected. I never had that perspective til I got out of just our world here. And it really stands out from other chapters in its willingness.

And the gutsy ones who started this were the ones that bought High Island. That's where the real – and I'm sure – I hope you've already heard that story – probably from Winnie or others who were here. I wasn't part of it, but I heard about it. But that tradition of being gutsy and

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stepping out and doing it, finding the money, started there and then, we continued in that, certainly, with Jeff Mundy as a strong leader. We had some big disappointments, too.

There was a huge tract next to High Island called the Cade Ranch that just slipped right through our fingers 'cause we're out there competing with developers. And the developer kind of went around us and went to the seller and said, "Oh, we'll just sign this contract. You'll sign this contract." We were trying to negotiate the negative stuff out, but no, it was gone. Fortunately, it was saved later by a conservation fund.

And I'm happy to say, Houston Audubon was able to support that with a substantial donation from our land fund that Gene Graham had helped us set up. So, all the land work – the land acquisitions – were just really exciting, hard work, very satisfying. There's no feeling like standing, looking out over a beautiful coastal prairie or beach or whatever or marshes. It's like, "Wow. It's safe. We did it. It's done."

So, there was just – for me, that was hugely satisfying – and to be able to use my legal skills for something where I felt like was for the good and not just to make money for my client.

One day, Jeff Mundy came here to the sanctuary, and I was outside watering – as much as I had to do, I still was out there watering because we didn't have enough staff. And he said, "No, no. This won't do." So, he set up a lunch with Flo Hannah who he'd heard – he knew her, and he'd heard that she might be interested in working for us.

So, we went and had lunch and we hired her at lunch, and she came to work half time as a conservation assistant, I think she was called. But she was just a huge contribution. So, she's the one that would – if we been any trips down to the Carolyn Davis Sanctuary, different places, she was the one that'd help us manage those sanctuaries better and take better care of them. But she – I think particularly with regard to the Carolyn Davis Sanctuary down in Brazoria County, not far from there, there's a coastal prairie. I've forgotten the name of it. (*Nash Prairie*)

Anyway, she got very interested in coastal prairies, and Mike Lange, with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, was in charge of a Columbia Bottomlands project down there, and so, she got to know him, and Houston Audubon ended up giving US Fish and Wildlife a conservation easement on our Carolyn Davis Sanctuary. So, it's part of that Columbia Bottomlands project. But that work down there, I think, is where she got – began to really appreciate the importance of saving prairies as coastal prairies. And so – but then, the – there was a prairie west of Houston called Saums Road near – I guess not maybe near Katy, but west of Houston, and it was too late. She'd been watching it and then, all of a sudden, it was too late, and it was gone.

It was going to be – I've forgotten the exact particulars. It might have even been Harris County was going to do something with it, but there was no saving it. But she got permission for us to go out there and save the plants and so, it was a huge effort to go out there and dig up prairie plants that were gonna disappear, and they were harder and harder to find. So, that was – became very high recognition cause that brought together not just conservation enthusiasts and other organizations and enthusiasts within it – like Jaime Gonzalez at Katy Prairie Conservancy. We had a meeting here in Houston Audubon bringing those dispirit groups together to talk about, "We've gotta save the prairies. Everyone's been – we've been focusing on everything else, but the prairies need attention 'cause they're going fast." So, the Saums Road was our

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rallying cry – kind of like, "Remember Saums Road. Never again" became the way that this prairie movement began and really, I credit Flo. She is the one who started it.

Well, actually, interestingly, there is – even now – I became aware of it the other day because I went to a little function at a residence on South Braeswood, and across the street is a little pocket prairie, they call it. And someone said, "Did you know your picture's over there?" And I said, "No." And we walked across and there's a – Saums Road plants were there and the story is there in a nice post and very well done. It's been there a long time now and there is actually a photo of me there that I am with her daughter.

So, that's where those plants went. They found homes for them everywhere – pocket prairies, other organizations, and that ability to save and then, to propagate. From there, Flo went to the propagating and then, making those available for our properties as well and making them available to other properties. And out of that came Houston Audubon's Native Plants Nursery that we have here – and I think, now, it's also at High Island. So, Flo's reach has been enormous.

Her imprint's all over everything. But she was kind of publicity shy. It was hard to get her to ever speak in front of a group, but she was the one making it happen.

Katy Prairie Conservancy was very involved in all of this with her, because Jaime – that's where Jaime was then. And so, they were definitely – Katy Prairie Conservancy was very supportive of all of this, definitely. Yeah. And I think, really, kind of took the lead after a while because Jaime – like I said, Flo didn't like to be the one up in front of a group, but Jaime was really good at it.

It wasn't just the city and the Park's Department being negligent and letting weeds grow. A lot of public education that had to go with it. And I think that's still a challenge out there. Yeah. Definitely. The Native Plant Nursery is – it's phenomenal how successful that is and how much demand there is now. So, that – really, there just wasn't much of that happening until Flo and Jaime and others – they're very organized now.

After I did my time on the National Audubon Board and I was also on the Audubon Texas Board, I was kind of exhausted and said, "No more board work for me." But I did go on their land conservation committee and that was – I was very impressed with the work that went on there, because that was the acquisition that's been recently completed – buying the old AMOCO properties that kind of filled out our High Island properties. They added 600 acres, something like that. And that was very complex.

By then, I had gone inactive with the state bar so, the only legal advice I could give was, "You really need to get a lawyer – be sure we got a lawyer on this." So, they did. They had a lawyer working with them on it. They got that completed and it was very – I'm so impressed that they got that done. And then, the improvements that that committee worked on on the plans for the improvements that went there – the elevated walkway, the bathrooms, restrooms – all those things that we always wished we had.

So, I was very impressed with that – the Land Conservation Committee – and the work that Richard – my goodness, Richard Gibbons just was a fantastic leader of that, along with Sam Smith, the board president at the time. He was a strong leader of that effort. So, I participated in all of that, but just as a committee member.

When I first started here, we had volunteer – our bookkeeper was – almost everything was volunteer. And then, over time, those positions were filled with professionals who could – you know, we could rely on for more time. But the volunteers were just critical during my time, for sure, but it seems to me they do a beautiful job now in management of and soliciting and managing volunteers. I think that's one of Houston Audubon's strongest – definitely strongest characteristics that they – and we couldn't have done what we did without volunteers. There's just no way.

Something that I've been very concerned about for years – ethnic and cultural diversity – not to mention women in leadership – these are all the kinds of things that Houston Audubon works on – I know they do, and that we all care about. But I'm very impressed with what they're doing now with their Youth Advisory Council. Oh, my goodness, that is just brilliant. I don't know who thought of that, but I've already had occasion to meet Lucas on a project and I just am very impressed with that. I think – and that's bringing the cultural and ethnic diversity and youth that – not just Houston Audubon, but all conservation organizations need sorely. And that was just a really good move. And I think we have yet to see whether those move up into leadership on the main board. I certainly hope that – that certainly seems logical that they would, and I hope that that is the case, 'cause if that's going to save conservation organizations, we can't just keep being older. And the women have tended to be the worker bees. The women have not tended to be in the leadership. And Houston Audubon's a good example. We're strong women leaders, but just not as many as I would like to have seen on the board. But that Youth Advisory Council – that is just brilliant. Yeah.

So, I'm so impressed with Houston Audubon right now. It's beyond my wildest dreams. Even when I came over here today, I thought, "Oh, all the things we dreamed of – they've happened." And more. And more.

GCBO had been birthed by Houston Audubon early on, and when I came on, they had kind of made a break, and they were new and kind of getting on their feet. But then, the concept – it was a great concept what they were doing – setting up partnerships all over with Latin America and a lot of the Gulf. And so, we – they were forming a new vision, and Houston Audubon – we were just trying to work out a mutually beneficial arrangement. I think there was some wistfulness that – because Houston Audubon – it's like, it took the research arm that we hoped we would have, and we birthed it and it went away. But it's always all for the good.

And what came out of – what I enjoyed, particularly, is that – and we were partnered with – GCBO had partnered us with a group in the Yucatán, and so, we – I took a group of board members, when I was executive director, to – with a GCBO leader, Ian – I've forgotten his last name – and we went to the Yucatán and met with our partner organization down there. It was a fabulous experience going into the research station and the jungles there. And then, out of that came Houston Audubon supporting the Yucatán Bird Festival that they were trying to get on its feet down there. And we went several years and board members – we supported financially, because that's just such an important – the relationship – the birds – the birds there are the birds here. Before they get here, they've stopped, a lot of them, right there in the Yucatán to fly across the Gulf.

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So, conservation down there is extremely important. And so, they were doing a valiant effort to get the Yucatán itself to appreciate that importance and the importance of tourism – bird tourism. And I think that that relationship has kind of gone away, but I felt like it was an important part of what I was doing here anyway.

A concern that I have for Houston Audubon – for all conservation organizations – and especially because of my involvement with National Audubon because the National Audubon has recently gone through a very – a challenging time. They've been challenged a great deal and a lot of heads have rolled, frankly, over the fact that the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity in the organization. We have to do more outreach and bring in communities that have not necessarily shown interest, but you know, it's a two-way street. Anyway, it's gonna take effort, but I think we have to do it.

And I'm happy to say, Houston Audubon is doing that. They're getting started at that. They're being smart about it, and I think they're gonna be successful at it. But it is a challenge for all of the conservation groups, definitely. We're mostly represented by relatively well-off white people – older. I mean, that can't – we can't continue to be effective unless we can enrich ourselves with more diversity.

It's not the thrill that I've learned the earlier stages when you're discovering, and that's the reason it's fun to travel and you get to experience new birds. I think the researchers – the people who are willing to go out and do bird surveys – bird surveys – I established a bird survey and did it for years and I strongly believe in how important that is as outreach to the community and also, for providing data. But I think the part I was really enjoying about that was bringing in the community and getting to know people and spreading the word, because you are seeing pretty much the same birds all the time. It's different – and as we get older, too – and also, it's become – it's a different experience now because we have – instead of interacting with others about where birds are seen, we're interacting with – it's very – it used to mean it's more personal. Now, it's with your phone, with your apps, you know? It's eBird. It's Cornell, those things. And that's interesting, but it's just not as much fun for me as it used to be when it was a much more social, personal, experience with other people having fun together.

I have three grandchildren, and they – two of them in particular – one, in particular – they – the Docent Guild ladies that remembered her as the snake granddaughter, because she came to the summer camps here and she loved the snakes. I have pictures of her with a snake around her neck. One thing that has just been such a joy for me is that I – none of them became birders, but I had a nephew who lives in Washington DC who, when he was like, eight years old, came home from school and was all excited about birds. And his dad – my brother – said, "Well, you know, your Aunt Joy is president of the Audubon" or something that I wasn't – but so, when I – he'd seen an owl in their yard and so, this little boy – my little nephew called me about it. He was so excited.

So, he ended up being – we – the Texas Birding Classic has youth teams so, he came down, several years in a row – he was just a little tyke – and was on – and Stennie Meadours and I took these kids out. She had, I think, children, and we had other children in it. Sara Bettencourt's boy was part of them. Took those kids out and did the birding competition. It was so much fun.

And so, that nephew, he and I, over the years, have had a bit special relationship because he still is a big birder, and is marrying, next month, a woman whose birding brought them together. So, yeah, I've had the pleasure of seeing that – and my grandchildren and this nephew, too. That's really fun to see the next generations get really excited about it. Yeah.

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