

Jim: I'm Jim Winn, and I'm calling Sandi Hoover in New Mexico. I'm in Houston, Texas, today is May the 3rd of the year 2022. The topic today is the history of Houston Audubon. Sandi had a good tenure with Houston Audubon and we are interested to see what she might be able to tell us about those times.

Jim: can I call you Sandi?

Sandi: Sure. The only people that ever called me anything else were angry at me.

Jim: Well, we'll certainly call you Sandi then. I might just mention one thing if I could to start with, I'll tell you what I found in the *Naturalist*, and you can tell me if this sounds about right. I found that you served two terms on the board of directors, you were an executive director for seven years, you served with four presidents, and that's a total of nine years. Does that sound about right?

Sandi: That sounds about right, and it started out as a part-time when I got hired. And what happened was while on the board, it was suggested we do a fundraiser because we were needing more money to pay somebody as an employee.

And after that, we raised about \$6,000, I said, okay, now I want the job because it's going to take so long to introduce anybody else to all this. The little bit of money we've raised would go to that earlier effort of trying to find and get somebody up to speed.

And so, I thought, okay, so I was supposed to be working half-time as the office manager or something akin to that – I was not called the executive director at that point. The guys who had been in charge were afraid to give anybody that name again since it had been misused by the previous employed person.

And at that point, I was working full-time getting paid for half-time at that stage of this situation. My husband would look at me when I got home and say, do you live here?

I haven't seen you in weeks, are you okay, that kind of thing. Because I was spending more time trying to get it organized and working at something other than just a good old boys birding club.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: But it was a lengthy process anyway.

Jim: Well, now you were still working out of the log cabin?

Sandi: Yeah.

Jim: Okay, and just to orient people that aren't thinking about that year, that's before cell phones, is that right?

Sandi: Well, almost, it was '86. So not really before, they were bricks at that point, the big silly things. And limited, as was a computer at that point. We did have some computer stuff at that stage, internet was kind of what's the word I want? Not limited as much as iffy.

Jim: Okay, so did you use e-mail? Do you remember?

Sandi: Yeah, I'm thinking we did.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: Not a lot, there were a lot of things went out snail mail instead.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: But it was a pretty solid beginning I'm thinking. I'm trying to remember actually how we functioned. I know I kept as things grew, I kept adding more computers and attaching them to each other by cables in the office, creating our own LAN. And the office was on the second floor, in the second-floor room at Edith Moore's log cabin.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: That was 10 by 12, ostensibly. The slope on the roof actually made several square feet unusable.

And at one stage we had a volunteer sitting opposite me at the door that was our desk surface, you know how we used to use file cabinets, file cabinets to hold the door up. And Gregg, who was wonderful, she was just a does all and did it well, thank God. She kept us looking good for a long time. She was – Gretchen's mom.

Jim: Okay, well, I don't – I'm not sure I know Gretchen's mom's name. But that's who you're talking about, yeah.

Sandi: Yeah, it's Gregg, it was her nickname, it was Dorothy "Gregg" Mueller.

Jim: Well, let me jump in here if I could just a minute, Susan Billethead has told me a story about working in that office upstairs. And when there was a private call that came in or if you had to make a private call, it

must – she – there must have been a landline phone up there. Because as I understood her, you'd step out onto the roof out there.

Sandi: Yeah.

Jim: And turn your head the other way and that – have your telephone call that way.

Sandi: That's exactly right, and finally, it got to be such a popular place for people who were even working. I mean there were several in there doing things that were essential like being our treasure or being Gregg and helping with all of the myriad things that went on. But some just come in to chat and stand around and like my husband for my birthday gave me one of those sticky signs that says no loitering. Said you obviously need this for the door, so. But it was one of those things where I stepped out onto the roof of the porch several times to have a conversation. Just trying to let everybody go ahead and work without overhearing me.

It was like talk about a transparent office, there was nothing, no other option basically.

Jim: There's one other thing, do you remember Herb Orwig?

Sandi: Mm-hmm.

Jim: Do you remember the story about you and Herb when he first arrived?

Sandi: Probably several, but which one are you talking about?

Jim: Well, let me read it to you. It was printed in the *Naturalist*. And I'm just going to read you parts of it. But it says in those days, the Houston Audubon staff, which was two employees and two or three volunteers worked in the cramped loft of a log cabin. Herb's station was a dark corner where he nearly bumped his head on a shelf when sitting at the computer. "If I were paid to work here," he told Sandi, "I wouldn't take the job because the conditions are so bad."

Sandi: It's absolutely right.

Jim: Now, wait a minute, here's the rest of it. Says not widely known among Houston Audubon members, Herb served Houston Audubon inside as an accountant and bookkeeper and outside as the first volunteer to join what is today's trail work crew. A native Oklahoman with a characteristic western drawl, Herb retired as a financial officer of a company in the oil industry. Former Houston executive director, Sandi Hoover recalls, "He just appeared at Edith L. Moore's Sanctuary one day, probably in early '87, and asked can I hep ya?"

Sandi: Sounds like Herb.

Jim: When I found out he had accounting experience, I almost didn't let him go home that day. That –

Sandi: He was wonderful.

And he and my dad shared the same birthday, so it was not possible to forget him. He was OD (my other dad) as I called him for a long time.

He was just a neat guy.

And he stayed with us for so many years and worked with Don Gray on days when he wasn't in the office helping Don make trails, make boardwalks, clean up things. Everywhere you needed him, he was there. One – I think he and Don were the two mainstays of keeping Edith Moore as a passible place that we could use for tours and show people what the woods were like.

Sandi: They were just marvelous.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: There were others that joined them, so they had a quite a crew after a while. Get out there and find five or six people working on making a trail.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: Better one way or another.

Jim: Was the chickadee nature store in there at that time?

Sandi: Yeah, we were there, well, it started after we did.

It was there for several years and then it moved to independent quarters in a retail location. And one of the comic tragedies about that was during the Easter holiday when we were closed and a squirrel had gotten into the building at that point and couldn't get out, of course, because nobody was there for four days. And so it just wreaked havoc, I mean I could just see it bouncing around the place. It had taken out so many different things, knocking them off shelves, whether breaking things and just tearing it up. And then, of course, we kept big bags of birdseed for sale.

Jim: Oh my.

Sandi: Yeah, you can see what's coming. It's like the little Goldilocks testing every bag, maybe this one tastes better.

Punching holes and eating things and chewing on the edges of the window frames. I mean just tearing around. We put wire over the chimney after that, geez, it made such a mess.

Jim: That's probably a long weekend too, it might have been a three-day holiday.

Sandi: Yeah, it was, that's what I said, I think he was in there four days. He certainly didn't starve to death.

Jim: Oh brother.

Sandi: Friday through Monday.

Just yeah, and it's amazing how much devastation they can wreak too. It looks like a small, innocent animal, ha. That's one of the funnies though, we had a guy call one day and say he just says I give up. I've been trying to get the squirrels in my yard because they're getting across the feeder and eating all the birdseed. He said he's been catching them and spray painting their tails green and then taking them off and releasing them. And he's had 49 squirrels that he'd released in that summer, none of which had a green tail when they came in. *[Laughter]*.

Jim: He had a busy summer.

Sandi: And concerning a woman who called and said how much vodka is too much— is it bad for hummingbirds? She'd been spiking the sugar water to keep it from freezing when it got cold.

Jim: Oh Lord, geez.

Sandi: Yeah.

Jim: Well, let me ask you I think the first president that you served with was Gary Clark, but I'm not sure about that. Because –

Sandi: No.

Jim: Okay, go ahead.

Sandi: It was Pete Peltier. Yeah. He was essentially the compromise acceptable president for the group.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: After I started on the board and then ended up going into office management, that particular annual get-together to vote on slates of officers, it was so divisive that everybody had to go to one side of the back yard or the other to act on their vote. In other words, if you voted for one candidate you had to go over here on this side. If you voted for the other candidate, you went over there.

Jim: Really?

Sandi: Yeah, it was a very tense time, have you spoken with Bob McFarland?

Jim: No, I have not.

Sandi: You need to talk with him.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: Because he was part of the what do you call them, the young Turks at that point, who felt that the existing board should be replaced for various reasons.

And the thing that Bob didn't recognize is that if you're going to have a palace coup, you have to kill the king. And he didn't have that killer instinct. So, he presented an alternative slate of officers for the organization. That created chaos for the election.

Sandi: And so it was a very awkward evening.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: But it brought in a mixture of the two slates.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: Which was not really wonderful.

Jim: Yes, which didn't solve a problem.

Sandi: No, not completely. But we got beyond that. But that's way old, that's '85, '86.

Jim: Yeah, okay, and then the next administration or would have been Gary Clark, is that right?

Sandi: I'm trying to remember what the order is.

Jim: Now, I've got – yeah that's right. But no, it was Ted Eubanks.

Sandi: He's later.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: I think you're right; it wasn't Gary but there's another one whose name is missing right now.

Jim: Well, it's Jane Scheidler. Scheidler was on the board and then Pres while out of town. Difficult situation.

Jim: Jane Snyder and Gary Woods.

Sandi: Gary Woods was the one I was trying to think of.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: I don't remember the order. I do remember that we had an opportunity for a lot of growth that was exciting with Ted. And at one point, I was spending a lot of time as the public face of Audubon with the different kinds of organizations that we worked with in Houston. And trying to get some of them to understand that concreting channels was not the way to go.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: I don't know if you realize, you've got 300 miles of bayou in that city. And what we ended up doing, we, the Audubon Society coming out for let's do detention ponds, let's do ways of stopping people from having to rebuild after every storm.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: And so we've got – we were also part of the Harris County Flood Control Task Force, which was a very effective user organization that was under the auspices of the Harris County flood control district.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: And so we had a chance to be seen as constructive and knowledgeable about what happens with water. And the thing that I'm really proud about that period of time was that in concert with Terry Hershey, we co-chaired the stormwater management conference in 1993 bringing in experts from all over the United States for a three-day conference. And the thing that made it, it was the first one that the Harris County flood control guys had ever gone to in the way of stormwater management.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: And they weren't looking at what was being done anywhere else.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: That's just stupid. There were great strides being made in floodplain management across the US and flood control as well. Terry Hershey and I went to several conferences over a couple of years and from those cherry picked the speakers for our conference. The presenters had to speak well. No matter what you know, if you can't share it clearly, it doesn't matter.

Jim: Yeah, that was the beginning of it, the beginning of an environmental look at it.

Sandi: Yeah. And where it really started was really funny, and this is when I'm going, okay, another name I've forgotten, he was the head of Harris County Flood Control at the time. And he came out after I called and complained about the water that was coming down Rummel Creek, and he came out and looked at it. And we stood there on one of the bridges and talked. And he was saying, well, we can just concrete it all.

Jim: Oh Lord.

Sandi: And I said, no, you can't. I said it maybe works for you but what's it's going to do for that guy? And I was pointing at a soft-shelled turtle that was living right there.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: And it was the first time he'd seen something like that or been exposed to, he'd always been Army Corp of Engineers.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: And he used that as an example in many talks to other people in organizations and saying it was part of his conversion epiphany.

And I thought that little thing, you hadn't thought about what you're doing?

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: Unbelievable.

Jim: Yeah, that's a great story. I mean that's the general public, most of them it's a lot better today, but there's still too many that's –

Sandi: Don't know.

- Jim:* Don't know, yeah, that's great. We have a lot of detention ponds in the city today.
- Sandi:* Yes and many of them are because we fought for no more concrete.
- Jim:* Yeah.
- Sandi:* I was really proud to see some of those go up or go down as you want to say.
- Jim:* Yeah.
- Sandi:* One of the things that made our conference different was it was with Terry's clout to get people. Then I was able to do some of the things around the edges, say okay, there will be no breakout sessions, you can't. Everybody gets to hear everything because otherwise you'll disappear, or you'll listen to the things that you know about or that sound appealing.
- And you won't learn any new technics. Our advantage as I said earlier was that she and I had been going to flood plain management conferences together for a couple of years when we got HCFC to think about a conference. And so we had all these tick marks of people who were knowledgeable about a subject and were good communicators as well.
- Jim:* Yeah.
- Sandi:* I said we're not having anybody who can't speak well because you lose their interest. And we can't afford to do that, we've got too much to – too many important things to be seeing, so.
- Jim:* Interesting.
- Sandi:* Well, and then we prefaced it, that was in '93. And so the night before the whole conference started, there was a nine-inch rain and I-10 went underwater with all the cars on it. We were accused of this setting it up so we would be paid attention to.
- Jim:* Well, that hasn't changed today, so that's interesting.
- Sandi:* No. Yeah, that's – this rain happened to happen between Addicks Dam and downtown. So that it didn't get caught, and so that was just a terrible flood. And we had all of these speakers who'd gotten in and were isolated on high ground, some of the places like at Terry's place and Memorial Park.
- Jim:* Yeah.

Sandi: That area. Which was a little higher, it was just that nobody could get from point A to point B because it was underwater.

Jim: Wow. Timing is everything. There are also at one point while you were executive director, the Wallisville Project started up apparently. You remember that for the Wallisville Dam?

Sandi: No, must have been after I left.

Jim: After you left, okay.

Sandi: '90, because I was gone in essentially in '96.

Jim: Yeah, okay. Well, anything else you want to relate trying to get a sense of the organization during the time that you worked there. And some good stories, and I think we've been getting both.

Sandi: Well, it was a really neat time of growth because when I started it was less than 2,000 people that were members of Houston Audubon. And when I quit it was – and during Ted Eubank's time we got up to 7,000.

Jim: Now, is that national or is that local memberships?

Sandi: Just local memberships.

Jim: No kidding.

Sandi: I mean it wasn't – there were some national members as well, but the total membership for Houston Audubon was 7,000 plus.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: And part of it was because Ted was very outspoken and very knowledgeable – I mean he made good copy.

We had some environment things at the time that also brought attention to us. And they could see that we were doing good work because that was a time of growth in terms of acreage, we owned, leased, or protected in some way. Steve Gast can tell you more about that because he was so helpful and effective. Such an asset.

Jim: Okay. Yeah, we've interviewed Steve. He was very, very, very helpful.

Sandi: Good.

Trying to think what else might be fun or interesting. Gosh, Smith Oaks, have you heard about all of the hassles with the people down there?

Well, this was – and I think he was Smith or something of that ilk, anyway. He was the one who collected money when people went in, and he was collecting it in cash and a lot of it was disappearing.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: I mean I knew darn good and well and I went down, I would drive down on Sunday evenings to pick up the what had happened over the weekend. And when I finally basically called him on it.

Jim: Well now, he was a resident, is that correct?

Sandi: Yeah, beaten up old house right at the edge of Smith Oaks.

Jim: Yeah, okay. He was not a member of Houston Audubon Society.

Sandi: Not really, no.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: He just happened to live there and had been charging people for coming into “his woods”. But when we owned it, then we decided that we would make the payment with badges so that we had an ID. And that became a way to tell that people had already paid or that they hadn’t paid. It let us also track what money we should be receiving.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: And at that point, I can still feel like I’m going to throw up when I even start to talk about it. Because it was when I went into that house because I had to get you the money. And it was Pepto Bismol pink all over it inside. And I called her Sandra of the raven tresses, his daughter was very aggressive. And she, her signature color was pink. And that’s why everything around was pink. And the place was hot and stifling and they were both mad at me and just chewing me up one side and down the other.

And I’m standing there thinking I’m going to throw up, I think I’ll throw up now. And just, no, you can’t do that, you’ve got to be civilized. Anyways, you have the money and run, honey. So it was just terrible experience trying to say I know what you’ve been doing and this change in our routine is going to stop that. Because we’re collecting money over at Boy Scout Woods and so you’ll see people come in with the badge. And they’ve already paid, and they won’t pay you again. And that was not helpful because it was taking away his livelihood.

Jim: Yeah.

- Sandi:* Didn't do anything else that I knew of.
- So they left shortly thereafter, and we brought in a bulldozer and took the building down. And changed the whole format for that place.
- Jim:* Well, Sarah Bettencourt wrote a series of articles about the old timers on the island there, did –
- Sandi:* I don't think she was with us when he was around.
- Jim:* Okay.
- Sandi:* Because that was really early on, that was, jeepers, right after I became – I mean it was almost one of the first things that happened after I became executive director full-time. And it was just grim.
- Jim:* Yeah.
- Sandi:* But the other one for that time was at Edith Moore itself. Because we'd had a lot of vandalism and we'd had a lot of stuff going on in the sanctuary. And the idea was we were going to stop it and we know that most of it came in off of the east, the southeast entrance. And so I went over and locked it, we had decided to do that. Our property, we don't have to let them in there, we can have it open when we want to. And the first day I was “director”, this woman came storming into the cabin reading me the riot act that how dare we lock that gate.
- It's where she took her dog for a walk, and I said yeah, and you leave its poop there too. She was not pleased at all. She was really tacky. And I felt like I'd been gut shot, here's your first morning and you're going to alienated the neighbors and caused a real riot.
- Jim:* Oh brother.
- Sandi:* Yeah, I mean everybody dumped their lawn clippings in that area and it was unmanageable with it that way. Those piles of grass were rotting underneath, and killing native plants
And so that's when one of our best helpers, Annette Walgren Steele, came into being because she lived over there and she said I'll be glad to open it during the day and close it in the afternoon, the evening.
- And so she took over that job and then she ended up being involved with the Texas Wildlife Rehabilitation Coalition.
- Jim:* Right.

Sandi: Which at that point was on our porch. Which is really cool actually, I loved that opportunity to meet baby birds and do what you could do to be helpful and people were always bringing things in anyway.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: I've they had too many hummingbirds die in my hand. But TWRC grew into an amazing organization.

Jim: Well, that's a new story, I hadn't heard that one at all. Yeah.

Sandi: Which, TWRC being on our porch?

Jim: Yeah, TWRC.

Sandi: Yeah, and what we did got better after a while. First the furry animals and birds were on the porch with just some lightweight screening to define the area that was rehab area. After a couple of break-ins, we got heavier stuff because the raccoons could get in and decimate the helpless. A baby bird is a good snack for a raccoon.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: And so TWRC was there for several years before they finally got a place first in the mall and then their own building somewhere.

Jim: Yeah.

Sandi: Carol, what's Carol's last name? Carol Meyer. I'm remembering more than I thought I would. She was one of our board members and she lived in the neighborhood, brilliant woman. If you get her wound up, she might find something else. She knew lots about the really early days.

Now, if you can track down Annette, that's another interesting story.

Jim: Her last name is Steele?

Sandi: Yeah, an E on the end.

Jim: Okay.

Sandi: Annette Steele. And for a while, I don't know if they're still there, they were living in not Tonga, Bali, I don't know, somewhere out there, French Polynesia, they did around the world trip in their 50-foot sailboat.

Jim: Yeah, well, speaking of where they live, do you live in Albuquerque?

Sandi: Yeah, I do.

We moved from Corrales, which is at the north end of Albuquerque, another little private kind of rustic pseudo rural, and by that, I mean almost everybody has a horse or two, and yeah, we're five minutes from Barnes and Noble. So it wasn't like you were really rural. It was quiet and comfy, small-town atmosphere with things like garden tours and Fourth of July parade down the main drag.

But we were downsizing, loved the place we'd built, been there 23 years and it just got to be too much to take care of. Because all of the lots in Corrales are an acre or nine-tenths of an acre, they call it a Corrales acre. And even though it – very little of it was landscaped, it just was a lot to take care of.

Jim: Yeah, I understand.

Sandi: So that's my story, and I'm sticking to it for a while.

Jim: Yeah, well, it's been great. It really has, it's been interesting, educating, and fun.

Sandi: I presume that you've talked to Caroline Callery?

Jim: I have.

Sandi: Good, because – she's a wonderful friend of HAS. Has collected so many dollars for the organization over the years.

Sandi: How about Sandy Elers?

Jim: I have not talked to Sandy Elers, I was going to ask you about her. Is she doing alright?

Sandi: Yes, she's doing great. And Tucson is the better for her being there, as usual, she's into things where she makes a difference. And she's done that both for Tucson Audubon and now for her sorority's goal of educating everybody or something like that. Anyway, raising funds and doing good.

Sandi: If you get to Albuquerque come say hi.

Jim: Well, thank you. I wish we could.

Sandi: But if you need a bird and it's here, just holler. Some of us like to go finding birds and having an excuse to play.

Jim: Yeah, good, okay. Well, Sandi, thanks so very, very much.

Sandi: Okay, great. Good to hear from you.

Jim: Thanks so much.

Sandi: Okay, bye-bye.

Jim: Bye-bye.

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