# COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

INTERVIEW

CEER
COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENT, EQUITY, AND RESILIENCE

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***Interview by Iris Gonzalez, director, CEER***

Here it is, most “big green” environmental groups do not traditionally organize their work according to an equity frame. Some groups structure issues and solutions around the extraction of nature in relation to the planet but are less comfortable naming the extraction of people and communities. There is an obvious problem with that model and it affects millions. As environmental justice communities and organizers, our work is about the intersection of both and breaking down the false dichotomy of nature versus people. It is about the birds, the frogs, and the bees. It is also about redlining, environmental racism, and the legacy of disinvestment in black, brown, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities. As the coalition director, my hope is that CEER can be a marketplace for people to find partners that are not typically part of their circle to be pushed beyond their comfort zones, share power, learn from one another with a common goal to advance policy wins that improve the lives of people. I sat down with two powerful leaders in Houston’s conversation community to discuss how they approach this necessary work.

Mary Anne Piacentini is president and chief executive officer of Katy Prairie Conservancy (KPC) and spearheads an informal group of conservation organizations that have “set their own table” to advocate for nature-based solutions. While she talks to her board and staff about equity, Mary Anne has been challenged in CEER meetings to think from the perspective of representatives that make up civil rights and social justice organizations. She is known for welcoming the challenges and has become a risk taker who is helping bridge the illusionary divide.

Jordan Macha, executive director of Bayou City Waterkeeper (BCWK), has shown up as an ally of black and brown communities and is not uncomfortable talking about equity in rooms full of white people, or when “nobody is watching.” Jordan embraces intersectionality and is willing to stand in coalition, upholding the broader issues affecting her community.

The Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing, which some call the environmental justice principles, have been adopted by CEER. These principles embody a bottom-up approach that seeks to transform systems and societies while simultaneously encouraging a willingness to transform ourselves. This is long-term work that is not easy, nor does it happen overnight. But through an inclusive CEER, we are planting seeds to make it happen.

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Iris : I've seen the two of you play a leading role as key connectors between conservation groups within CEER and the issues of social justice and equity. This concept of community conservation has been a part of the drum beat in the conservation world for a little while. How did you first make the connection between conservation, justice, and equity in your work?

Mary Anne: I have an urban planning degree, so I’ve always been very interested in cities and people — how they interact, what they do, why they do it. I think that I've been informed by both my own

background and the fact that I grew up in a family that didn't have a lot of access to land, but we had open beaches and lakes that we could go to for fun.

Jordan: As a Houston native, I grew up around the bayous, nature, and urban sprawl that make up our city. When I went to college, my honors thesis focused on environmental justice as a human right, which led me to New Orleans, working with the Sierra Club to establish the Louisiana Beyond Coal campaign, and utilizing that lens of community justice and the environment. In 2017, I moved back to Houston as waterkeeper and director for Bayou City Waterkeeper, with my first day starting the Monday post-Hurricane Harvey. BCWK wanted to demonstrate as a watershed organization focused on water quality, that we weren't just concerned about what was in the water, but how that water was affecting the people that were living with water: in the floodplain, as part of the economy, and, unfortunately, literally *in the water*.

How is equity and racial or social justice named in any of your mission statements or strategic plans?

Jordan: BCWK has a diversity, equity, and inclusion statement on our website that guides our work, as well as benchmarks within our strategic plan to improve our staff and leadership diversity.

Mary Anne: Our strategic plan outlines how we will be inclusive, and we're always looking to address a more diverse audience.

What attracted you to CEER?

Jordan: The ability for CEER to approach recovery with intersectionality has immense value in our region. It's in the best interest of our non-profit community to work with organizations of different missions to further our collective effort to become more resilient and sustainable. As a region surrounded by water, our resiliency lies with working with nature at all levels — floodplain management, affordable housing, solid waste, etc.. Unfortunately, this puzzle piece has been missed in our policies and practices.

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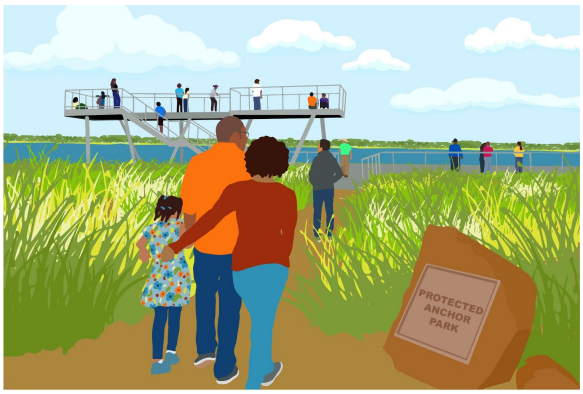
Mary Anne: When I came to the conservancy, I was focused on saving land. I don't think that I necessarily thought about how many people have to be on the land enjoying the benefits (either directly or indirectly) versus just making sure that the wildlife had room to thrive. But land trusts haven't necessarily been involved with diverse groups. Sure, they have bird watchers and hunters and outdoor enthusiasts, but the idea is land trusts should be protecting land to make sure that they benefit the community at large and all members of that community. Scenic viewsheds and being able to see the mountains are nice, but shouldn't we also know that protecting land improves water and air quality and provides local food production and can even help young farmers? One of the reasons that I thought CEER would be good to be involved in, and I'll be really very honest about this — KPC must be relevant to our community if we

are to survive. Sure, we have a strong base of supporters but most of those people are older and whiter than the general Houston population. We need a broad support base. When I started going to CEER meetings




there were times in which I thought, *what am I doing here?* I worried because the land KPC protects is largely a very conservative, very white community, or so it seemed. It's because we never really dug deeply to realize that there was a large population that was just invisible. They were hidden.

### Who did you discover was hidden?

Mary Anne: As much as I think the whole Katy area is pretty monolith and overall white, it isn't. It's got a large Asian, African American, and Hispanic population. But you would think in our little world, most of the people who come to our events, unless they are education and outreach events, are white and old. Yet our pocket prairie program and our educational and outreach programs offered a very different reflection of the community that was younger and diverse.

Jordan: If you looked at the general membership of conservation organizations and said, "This is what America looks like." Everyone would be 65, white, and male.

Mary Anne: Exactly. When KPC started our pocket prairie program for schools, we found that kids in certain neighborhoods were not aware of the impact that their ancestors had on the community at large. They didn't really know about the history of their own people. It might have been the African American cowboys or the Hispanic vaqueros who made up the early settlers to the region. They didn't know that their folks were an integral part of Texas' beginning. We were able to use the pocket prairies to teach science, math, cultural and historical lessons. It started making us not just relevant, but helped us ensure that the students recognized that their stories were an important part of not only who they were but how their ancestors had shaped the development of the greater Houston region. It also made those histories more visible to their peers in school.

### How did you bring CEER and the concept of intersectionality to your board?

Jordan: During my interview process for BCWK, I was clear on wanting to ensure that justice, equity, and intersectionality would be foundational tenets accepted by the board of directors, as well as a guiding lens within our programmatic and organizational culture. Fortunately, my future board members agreed. After I officially joined the organization, we drafted and adopted our first diversity, equity, and inclusion statements. We also made commitments within our strategic plan to diversify our staff, board, and leaders into 2021 and beyond.

Mary Anne: My chairman and I talked about it. We recognized that if we didn't start dealing with people and their needs, KPC was not going to be around very long. One of Houston's most valuable assets is its diversity and the amazing people who live here and bring their culture, their food, and their choice to share that with the larger public.

Jordan: As organizations that traditionally occupy white spaces, we have to be hyper aware of the kinds of spaces we create internally and externally - making them safe and accessible for new and diverse voices within our organizations.

How do you create that safe space in your organization?

Jordan: It's about ensuring that there's a welcoming culture of mutual respect and authentic listening both in the communities we work in, as well as within the framework of our organization. As the executive director, the onus is on me to make sure people feel like they can be honest with one another in the workplace or at board meetings, but also not feel marginalized due to microaggressions that stifle their voice.

Mary Anne: Obviously as the professional head of your organization you're looking at all those things, but when you see that happening, how do you deal with it?

Jordan: I call it out when it happens. Fortunately, that's the relationship that I've built with my board.

Mary Anne: I call it out too but perhaps not so forcefully because it can be a problem for some people.

Jordan: That's part of the inherent problem when addressing systematic oppression and inequity. As executive directors, we have more weight within our board than we often give ourselves credit for. Executive board meetings are typically not public, and within my small board, there is trust with open disagreement. I'll follow up with that person and explain why I said what I said, and why I needed everyone to hear why I disagreed with what was said.

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When we embrace openness and honesty, we can further these tough conversations and be a better organization in the communities we serve. Our leadership and board members should reflect the community we serve. At BCWK, we are actively working to have the demographics of our staff and board be more reflective of the population of the City of Houston, Harris County, and the 10 counties we serve.

How do you create a board that is reflective of the community you serve?

Mary Anne: I think by aiming to make sure that your board, your supporters, your volunteers, and your staff reflect the diversity of the community in which you are working.

Jordan: With the CEER network, I can reach out to my partners, and now friends, and ask, "Who is a leader who cares about

our issues? Who has a different lens than we are using today?" I'm then able to seek these people out and build them into leadership roles within our organization.

Mary Anne: It's not easy especially when you might have not that entrée into the community that you want or need. But if you start with one person, that person is going to know people and then you have a whole community of people who are helping share their vision and thoughts and making your organization better and stronger.

I think part of the magic of CEER is bringing together different types of organizations to the same table to figure out that hard stuff of "You see the world this way, and I see the world this way." That's our biggest leverage point, and also our biggest potential fracture line because it can be difficult to bring organizations with a different perspective to the same table.

Mary Anne: I've been impressed by the collegiality of CEER and the fact that we can agree to disagree. We also tend to move the needle closer one way or the other together. We don't say, "You are never going to understand that." Instead, it's "Let me try to see if I can help you understand why maybe you need to move a little to the left or a little to the right or why perhaps I need to to think about your suggestions in a different light."

What issues have you seen differently because of CEER?

Mary Anne: I love listening to the discussions about transportation because we already knew that transportation was going to be the bane of our existence at KPC — roads going through vacant or conservation lands. Through CEER, we see the North Houston Highway Improvement Project (I-45 expansion project) from Texas Housers' perspective, and it's been enlightening. We no longer look at it from just the perspective that it might actually increase impervious cover and perhaps flooding but what will be the impact on the people who live near the project or who might be affected by the project. Attending CEER meetings has also helped me work harder to always think about my work in new ways - *how do we do a better job? How do we involve more people? How do we reach beyond our natural constituencies?*

What's on the horizon for your organizations that you know CEER will strengthen?

Jordan: I'm really excited about the water justice work that is happening within our organization and its coordination with CEER, particularly our shared efforts to improve water infrastructure in the City of Houston. Houston's water treatment facilities are mostly located in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, and these same communities generally suffer from insufficient to failing wastewater and stormwater infrastructure.

Many of these facilities were placed there after the establishment of those communities, so it's not out of mere coincidence that we find these communities disenfranchised by pollution and lack of resources. It's historically intentional and systematic, and together we are going to address those issues in a forthright and comprehensive way.

Mary Anne: I'm interested in looking at how we might affect legislation at all levels, whether it's ordinances at the city level, county programs and initiatives, or applicable state and federal laws.

This is challenging work, and I appreciate you wanting to be pushed — we need your help in pushing others as well. Thank you for bringing the elephant into the room when no one is watching and having those uncomfortable conversations. Leveraging your power and the tables you sit at to raise awareness is a critical part of how we move forward.

Jordan: I think that is a really important link to always be lifting up. At the end of the day, if we're not doing the work inside of ourselves and within our organizations, our efforts externally are never going to be authentic. ▪

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