



“I HOPE...”: VISIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE IN COASTAL LOUISIANA
A PORTRAIT AND INTERVIEW SERIES FEATURING LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN COASTAL
PROTECTION AND RESTORATION

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00;00;00;17 - 00;00;25;14

LAUREN: My name is Lauren Leonpacher, and I'm interviewing Blaise Pezold concerning his memories and experiences in Louisiana wetlands, as well as his hopes for a sustainable future for coastal Louisiana. This interview is being conducted at the Parish Marina in Chalmette, Louisiana, on the afternoon of May 9th, 2022. Do you understand that portions of the taped interview and pictures taken during the interview will be used in publications and a variety of media?

00;00;25;19 - 00;00;26;07

BLAISE: Yes, I do.

00;00;26;19 - 00;00;28;20

LAUREN: Please state your full name and spell it for us.

00;00;29;04 - 00;00;35;25

BLAISE: My name is Blaise Daniel Pezold. It's B-L-A-I-S-E D-A-N-I-E-L P-E-Z-O-L-D.

00;00;36;19 - 00;00;42;07

LAUREN: If you'd like, you can tell us your birthday and where you were born.

00;00;43;11 - 00;00;49;06

BLAISE: I was born February 15th, 1978, at East Jeff Hospital in Metairie.

00;00;49;19 - 00;00;52;18

LAUREN: Okay, so how long have you lived in coastal Louisiana?

00;00;54;13 - 00;01;17;06

BLAISE: I was born here, and my parents were living in New Orleans. And we moved away a year later and we moved out west to Austin. And then later on, I lived in a bunch of different states in the South, lived out in New Mexico, and I graduated high school in Colorado. And I moved back here when I was 18, and I've lived here ever since.

00;01;17;14 - 00;01;23;15

LAUREN: Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with the wetlands?

00;01;23;16 00;02;05;29

BLAISE: Well, my father's an ichthyologist, and from a young age he would kind of... Well, we'd be working a seine net, and he would have me jump out into the bayou and do, like, a U-shape and bring the seine net back to the shoreline because I was smaller and could float more, I guess. And then my Paw Paw, Frank

Lorenzo Pezold, he just passed in January, he was a part time shrimper. He also liked to crab a lot. And he took me fishing a couple of times with him. So I kind of feel connected in those ways.

00;02;06;02 - 00;02;20;15

LAUREN: Definitely. It sounds like you grew up with the best parts of it. So we're interviewing you today because you have been and are a huge advocate for coastal restoration and protection. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in this kind of work?

00;02;21;18 - 00;02;57;19

BLAISE: Yeah. So I used to be a chef, and after Katrina, the day after Katrina, I was working disaster catering for the linemen and the tree cutters as they were coming back into the city. I kind of saw the worst of humanity and all of the effects of Katrina, and I ended up with, like, a lot of trauma from that experience. And I tried to kind of work through it, and just keep my head down and stay cooking.

00;02;58;05 - 00;03;20;19

BLAISE: And I started to read newspaper articles about Katrina and kind of try to understand why it happened, to deal with the kind of trauma from it. And I started to really get into the environmental end of it and kind of cheerleading the long projects and ideas and trying to understand those ideas more and understand the wetland systems that we have here.

00;03;21;03 - 00;03;32;09

BLAISE: That led me to decide in 2008 to go back to school. And so I went to University of New Orleans and got a degree in Earth and environmental science with a focus in coastal restoration.

00;03;33;04 - 00;03;52;03

LAUREN: Awesome. So is there... It sounds like, you know, this is not where you started or at least what you anticipated doing as your career. Is there anything you'd like to tell young people who are or maybe emotionally, or in a community way, invested in coastal restoration but don't know what path to take to get there?

00;03;53;05 - 00;04;18;18

BLAISE: Yeah, I wandered a lot. I graduated with a 1.9 GPA in high school, barely got out and I think after that year they changed that you had to graduate with a 2.0. When I got my culinary degree, that was the second time I was in college. And when I got my coastal degree, that was the third time I was in college.

00;04;18;18 - 00;04;37;29

BLAISE: So it's not necessarily... It was kind of a circuitous route, but I feel like I was kind of drawn into... I was drawn into cooking when I did that. And I still love cooking, but I felt like I was drawn to do something for my home state and for my community with coastal restoration.

00;04;38;14 - 00;04;44;07

LAUREN: Did you have any mentors that really helped foster your sense of self in this community?

00;04;44;12 - 00;05;11;05

BLAISE: Absolutely. I start with Jennifer Roberts. She worked with me in a nonprofit called Bayou Land RC&D, and she basically was like, "Oh, you're very energetic, like, go in whatever path you choose to work on, as long as we're working on these five things that we have grants for." And so, she was very empowering and that was awesome to work with her.

00;05;12;00 - 00;05;38;28

BLAISE: Joey Breaux with Department of Ag and Forestry, he's also on the CPRA board now. He was very similar, where he was like, "Here's your very wide parameters, stay within these bounds and you're good to

go.” And then I would have to point to Gary Fine. He got me into coastal restoration plants and I still occasionally text or call him like, “Gary, what do you know about this?”

00;05;38;28 - 00;06;15;07

BLAISE: Or “Can I send you this young person that's in coastal restoration and wants to know more about plants and how to grow plants and wetland plants and how to use them?” I'll send them to Gary. As far as the CWPPRA program, I've had a couple of mentors. When I was working in Ag and Forestry, I got called out to drive a boat for Cindy Steyer and Quinn Kinler, and that's how I actually got in the CWPPRA process was through those two. You know, they were working on a project in Little Lake, the LA-39 Vegetation Project.

00;06;15;23 - 00;07;03;15

BLAISE: And I started asking them, “Well, how do you how do you build CWPPRA projects? What are they looking for?” And then I came up with the idea of the Bayou La Loutre Ridge and that restoration in that area. And they said, “Well, you're going to have to add, you know, a couple of hundred acres of wetlands on the back of it. It can't just be only ridge.” And so, they were very good at guiding me. Cindy was another vegetation mentor. Quinn has been that too, but Quinn is more task-oriented and very precise, and I always hope to be as precise as he is. I don't think I ever hit that mark. And then, I'd say Ron Boustany. He has stuck with me in the CWPPRA process.

00;07;03;15 - 00;07;26;13

BLAISE: We've proposed a ton of projects together. Not all of them get funded, but he's always there going, “Blaise, what do you got this year? Blaise, what are we working on now?” And I'll be out with him the next two days, working with him in the boat. So it's... I've had a lot of people I'm forgetting to mention, but those folks stick out the most to me.

00;07;26;18 - 00;07;36;00

LAUREN: Yeah, it definitely sounds like you've got some All-Stars on your team for sure. Can you tell us a little bit about the work that you do now and the program that you're part of?

00;07;36;16 - 00;08;06;19

BLAISE: So I work for the Meraux Foundation out of our Docville Farm campus, and we are a private family-foundation focused on Saint Bernard Parish and bettering the quality of life in Saint Bernard Parish. And so, we focus on four main core things, which are the environment, older people, younger people, and education. And usually, I can hit on 2 to 3 of those in the work that I do.

00;08;08;11 - 00;08;37;19

BLAISE: So, I also work on the Louisiana Department of Ag and Forestry's Revegetation Program. I'll propose sites to them, or I'll contact folks I know locally that are having erosion issues and then bring them to Jeremy Rodriguez. And he goes from there. And then I'll, you know, the last couple of days, for the last couple of weeks, every Tuesday, we'll go out in the boat and work on these projects together, putting the actual plants in the ground.

00;08;39;03 - 00;09;04;25

BLAISE: So I'll do those kind of traditional wetland projects, and then I have other ones where I work a lot with students. So there's a.. Chalmette High's 4H program, they grow black mangroves. We'll grow those out and plant them. I've also worked with Chalmette High's Career Technical Education program at the Nunez Community College Building.

00;09;06;06 - 00;09;26;13

BLAISE: We came up with a prototype of oyster reefs and we built those out. It took four years, but we just put them out right before Ida, and 19 out of 20 made it through Ida intact. And so we'll go, probably

sometime this month, and go monitor those. But I kind of do just about anything that they throw in front of me.

00;09;27;01 - 00;09;52;10

BLAISE: I forgot to talk about the Mississippi River Delta Institute. So that's a program where we teach teachers how to teach about wetlands, how to teach about the river and the coast, and then we have an exchange program with Hamline University and teachers in Minnesota. And so, they come down here for our institute and we bring teachers up to Minnesota for their institute.

00;09;52;25 - 00;10;06;07

BLAISE: And then after the institute, we bring the teachers up to Lake Itasca to go see the headwaters and understand that, you know, it's not just the giant muddy Mississippi that we have here. It's part of a much larger system.

00;10;07;17 - 00;10;22;19

LAUREN: It sounds like a lot of what you do is based on kind of a whole-system approach, like you said. Can you talk about some of the ways that you or the Meraux Foundation works to ensure that underrepresented members of our community have their voices heard?

00;10;23;26 - 00;11;12;15

BLAISE: I think it's always important to have them at the table, but also understand that some underrepresented communities don't have a lot of money and spare time to be at that table. So I think it's super important to have programs for youth within underrepresented communities to achieve education so that they can work in coastal fields, and maybe specific scholarships for them, as far as, you know, career technical education or to programs, you know... There's a lot of coastal programs in our universities at this point, because there's a serious lack of education. But I think, you know, up until the 1960s, most of the people that we're talking about at this point, were not allowed to go to school past third grade.

00;11;12;15 - 00;11;26;04

BLAISE: And that's important to note, within the coastal restoration field. You know, it's... They're not represented well currently. Hopefully in the future they will be.

00;11;27;18 - 00;11;44;29

LAUREN: So speaking of education, how would you explain to somebody who is not informed, who is not educated on the importance of what you do, why coastal restoration or protection in Louisiana is so important on a local level and on a national level?

00;11;46;01 - 00;12;22;19

BLAISE: On a local level, I mean, we can't just hide behind the levees and just assume that that's going to save us. You have to have something in front of them. And our system is essentially dying and, you know, we... When you start to realize, like the scope of the problems that we have on our coastline, it's one where you're kind of... I felt called to it, like it was a call to action, and at times when I look at my projects on a map and I zoom out, I kind of go like, "Oh, no..." You know? "Why did I get that 30 year mortgage?"

00;12;22;25 - 00;12;43;29

BLAISE: You know, it's not a good idea. But I think on a local level, that's probably the.. You know, just going out there and seeing it is probably the easiest way to understand the problems that we face and why it's important locally. You know, before the next hurricane goes and overtop our levees or busts our levees.

00;12;44;11 - 00;13;15;02

BLAISE: I think on a national level, if a foreign country like invaded our country and was taking this much land from our country, we would be throwing billions at it. And I don't think we've gotten the same level of

response because it's an unnatural natural process. And I think it's one of those things where, you know, most Americans have no clue what's going on here.

00;13;15;14 - 00;13;39;11

BLAISE: And once they do understand it, they're like, "Oh, my God, what do we do? I feel overwhelmed." And I think that's kind of how most locals, when they understand it, they either feel overwhelmed or very upset about everything. But I, I think like on a on a national level, you know, we saw after Katrina, like gas prices went through the roof.

00;13;39;28 - 00;14;03;15

BLAISE: They had a lot of supply chain issues here, and which ultimately just, you know, our GDP went in the dumps after Katrina. And I think that's always a possibility of happening if the next hurricane hits us really hard. So I think it's a pocketbook issue, whether or not the Americans know it or not. It will hit them again.

00;14;03;28 - 00;14;11;16

BLAISE: And those type of things are the things we need to look out for in a changing climate.

00;14;11;28 - 00;14;18;17

LAUREN: Can you tell us about what you hope for the future of Louisiana's coastal wetlands and how we can make that hope a reality?

00;14;19;12 - 00;14;43;19

BLAISE: So I've been down the Cubits Gap, and I think that's one of the places that is the most, kind of, beautiful as far as wetlands. And it's the end of the river and there's a lot of sediment pumping in there. It's very fresh, green and vibrant and lots of birds. And I hope that one day Louisiana looks like it does down there, and most of the places along the coastline.

00;14;44;28 - 00;15;10;17

BLAISE: As far as how to get there, I think it's it has to be nature-based solutions. You know, we can't just dredge and pump everything. We can to a certain extent, but the price of fuel consistently goes up. And I just don't think that's a viable option for everywhere. I think in some places it makes a lot of sense, but not for the entire coast and it's super expensive as far as projects go.

00;15;12;02 - 00;15;18;05

LAUREN: What do you want future generations of coastal Louisiana residents to know about the fight against coastal wetlands loss?

00;15;18;28 - 00;15;42;20

BLAISE: I think it's important for them to understand that it's not all lost in that, you know, we can rebound from this. We have to let nature do its thing and kind of get out of the way. But, you know, if we don't do that, we're going to we're headed for another catastrophe. If we if we don't address this kind of issues of letting nature run its course.

00;15;44;06 - 00;15;50;11

LAUREN: Well, thank you for talking to us today, Blaise. We've really enjoyed discussing all of this with you.