



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

Narrator: CHARLES ALLEN

Interviewer: LAUREN LEONPACHER

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00;00;00;17 - 00;00;27;27

**LAUREN:** My name is Lauren Leonpacher, and I'm interviewing Charles Allen concerning his memories, and experiences in Louisiana wetlands, as well as his hopes for a sustainable future in coastal Louisiana. This interview is being conducted on the Bayou Bienvenue Wetland Platform in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, Louisiana on the afternoon of June 2nd, 2022. Do you understand that portions of the taped interview and pictures taken during the interview will be used in publications in a variety of media?

00;00;27;29 - 00;00;29;00

**CHARLES:** Yes.

00;00;29;00 - 00;00;30;20

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

00;00;30;25 - 00;00;35;03

**CHARLES:** Charles Allen C-H-A-R-L-E-S A-L-L-E-N

00;00;35;29 - 00;00;38;27

**LAUREN:** Charles, where were you born? What's your birthday?

00;00;38;27 - 00;00;40;21

**CHARLES:** July 21st, 1973.

00;00;41;00 - 00;00;41;25

**LAUREN:** Where were you born, Charles?

00;00;41;29 - 00;00;46;03

**CHARLES:** Here in New Orleans... I'll just end it there.

00;00;47;05 - 00;00;50;22

**LAUREN:** And we talked a little bit about where you grew up. Did you - you've lived in New Orleans your whole life?

00;00;50;23 - 00;01;10;06

**CHARLES:** Yes. Yes. In fact, I'm originally from Gentilly, a neighborhood known as Voscoville behind Dillard University. Lived there for a number of years, lived in New Orleans East, and then my father moved us down here in the Lower Ninth Ward back in 1980. In fact, he still lives down here on Douglas Street in the Holy Cross neighborhood.

00;01;10;12 - 00;01;26;08

**LAUREN:** So you've been in coastal Louisiana, or at least like proximally in coastal Louisiana your entire life. Can you tell us, you know, we're interviewing you today because you've been a huge advocate for coastal restoration. How did you get involved in this particular line of work, and what does your job look like?

00;01;26;14 - 00;01;50;06

**CHARLES:** Sure. So I would say it all came about in the early aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when so many of us were coming back to the area, trying to put one foot in front the other and keep moving. There was this whole groundswell of voices and activism around closing the MRGO, The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, which is over yonder from where we are.

00;01;50;22 - 00;02;15;24

**CHARLES:** And of course, we were very successful in closing that outlet, but then we also advocated very strongly for a restoration plan for the ecosystem of the MRGO area, which is partly where we are, of course, the Bayou Bienvenue central wetlands area. And thankfully, the Corps of Engineers came up with their version of a plan and how to get the work done.

00;02;16;07 - 00;02;44;25

**CHARLES:** But of course, like a lot of things, you got the plan, you now need the money in the resources to get it done. And then further on, I continued to remain very active. I was working in academia at a center known as the Tulane Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research, and we had a number of research faculty members funded through our center focused on this kind of work, focused on the importance of restoring an ecosystem such as this.

00;02;45;26 - 00;03;11;25

**CHARLES:** There was also various research opportunities where we involved students, and then fast forward some more, I then went to work in local government with former New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, where I advised him on coastal and environmental affairs, and I also directed the office of that same name. So in that work and in that job, I continued to work with advocates on many different levels, as well as in the governmental sectors, you know.

00;03;12;17 - 00;03;47;00

**CHARLES:** And then leading up to the 2012 Coastal Masterplan, we were working very closely with then the director of the state's coastal restoration efforts, Garret Graves, when he was working with Governor Bobby Jindal. And.. So we were working fiercely to basically put language in the plan for the year 2012 that focused on restoration of this area. Thankfully, all that advocacy proved successful because that was the beginning really of a concrete-language dollar-amount figures around how to restore this ecosystem. And even today, the latest iteration of that plan still has a conceptual bit of language in it on how to get this work done.

00;04;00;10 - 00;04;08;08

**LAUREN:** So what's your current position, and what are you actively doing to help sustain this area of your community?

00;04;08;11 - 00;04;35;10

**CHARLES:** So my current position is working as a community engagement director at the National Audubon Society, and our local Audubon Unit is part of a five-member coalition known as the Mississippi River Delta Coalition, or MRD, as we call ourselves. And, so there still remains a lot of advocacy work I'm involved in. Also in particular, engaging communities and communities of color, well, largely here in New Orleans, the African-American community.

00;04;36;00 - 00;04;59;29

**CHARLES:** Through my work, I have engaged a number of African-American faith based leaders, church pastors, and other members of local congregations, fraternities, sororities, you name it. The kinds of organizations and networks where locally a lot of black folks and people of color are active, you know? And, you know, it's like any bit of advocacy work. You basically work through your networks and your relationships that you have.

00;05;00;14 - 00;05;29;00

**CHARLES:** And it's all-around engaging people so that they see themselves in terms of the planning and the work that goes on for restoring this ecosystem in our area. Because, look, everybody is benefiting from it. You know, people of color, white people, you know, you name it. There's no sector that you might say is untouched, is not touched, I should say, by this work and by this ecosystem, you know, and this is our livelihood in southeast Louisiana. You know, this is our fisheries. This is flood protection. This is a whole host of other ecosystem services and benefits. So you have to have full engagement, you know.

00;05;41;09 - 00;05;54;10

**LAUREN:** Absolutely. It sounds like you put a lot of effort into making sure that members of your community from all different backgrounds, particularly the ones that have been historically marginalized, are not only welcome at the table, but encouraged to have a strong voice and participate in policy and decision making. Is there any advice you can share with others who are looking to be better allies with our community members?

00;06;05;14 - 00;06;34;26

**CHARLES:** And I see a whole host of things I could say, but I think what stands out for me the most is just recognize at the outset that this is hard work. As we know, engagement is not easy. It's like working through your family, okay? You'll have your differences, but let's not be disagreeable, okay? Let's just always remember, "What are the common threads and the common bonds and the common goals that we all share?" and just try to always work from there.

00;06;34;27 - 00;06;50;07

**CHARLES:** You know, that's something that you might say nowadays is kind of lost on political discourse and politics, you know, overall. Just never lose sight of that. And, you know, a disagreement today could turn into an agreement tomorrow, you know.

00;06;51;05 - 00;07;07;13

**LAUREN:** So do you have some specific reasons or common threads, like you said, for wetlands protection and restoration that you find yourself using frequently when talking to community members about why they should invest their time and energy in this conversation?

00;07;07;14 - 00;07;44;18

**CHARLES:** Sure. Well, as we know, today is June 6th, second day of the 2022 hurricane season for the Atlantic area. So I always remind people, look y'all, as this natural buffer is restored, this means this cuts off the intensity of storms and storm surge that comes into this area. We don't ever have the luxury, unfortunately, of checking out of a hurricane season for a given year, you know. And as we know, the forecasts each year have shown that the seasons are becoming more active, the storms are becoming more intense, more violent, more destructive.

00;07;45;00 - 00;08;13;01

**CHARLES:** And so, every bit of wetlands we can restore cuts off that effect. And so I try to always just strike from that standpoint. Yeah, we'll touch on the fisheries, we'll touch on the other ecosystem services and benefits. But I find, you know, everybody knows the importance of flood protection. You know, and we all know it's more of a concept around risk-reduction. That's the best way to really frame it. You know, we're

not going to ever just totally whisk these vulnerabilities away, but we just have to, going forward, manage it all better, adapt better, you know.

00;08;25;12 - 00;08;46;23

**LAUREN:** Do you have a vision or a goal that you have in mind, when you are making a plan or when you're working with communities or you're coming up with project proposals, what does a healthy or a sustainable coastline or Louisiana wetlands area look like to you?

00;08;46;24 - 00;09;24;24

**CHARLES:** Sure, sure. I would say a healthy coastal wetlands ecosystem looks like robust activity in terms of restoration work going on 24/7. And we're kind of living through that right now, because if you count the number of projects along southeast Louisiana or southern Louisiana, I should say, that are being undertaken, it's a huge amount, okay. And I try as much as possible to just kind of remind folks that work will always be with us because of the dynamic nature of this ecosystem.

00;09;24;27 - 00;09;44;08

**CHARLES:** And, you might also say, because of how much behind the eight ball we are in this situation. So just look at it as "it's ongoing work". It's got to happen just as we each have to continue to check on our health every now and then. Go get your teeth cleaned. Go to the doctor, go get the oil changed in your vehicle.

00;09;44;26 - 00;10;12;00

**CHARLES:** Oh, go restore the coastline. You know, that's work that's just ongoing. And I also kind of hit home this message, out of that kind of work comes jobs, jobs, jobs, opportunities of all kinds. You know, this kind of work and research funds academia, funds research internships for students, fuels political campaigns, okay! So, it's just a way of our life, you know. We'll never get to a point where we can say, okay, we're done with that.

00;10;12;07 - 00;10;22;25

**CHARLES:** No.. No, no, no. You know, we're kind of behind the eight ball. And like I said, we don't have the luxury of checking out on any given year to say, "no hurricane season this year!" you know.

00;10;23;05 - 00;10;36;04

**LAUREN:** It's yeah. It sounds like despite recognizing the abundance of challenges we face, you have a very positive outlook on what opportunities this work presents.

00;10;36;07 - 00;11;02;19

**CHARLES:** I do. Positive. Realistic. Yes. More than anything, realistic. I mean, just as we have to advocate for other agendas, such as education reform, health care, you name it, this agenda and this body of work is just going to always be with us. And it too, like any other body of work needs advocates, okay? Because there's going to always be some competing agenda that comes along to compete with this agenda.

00;11;02;26 - 00;11;08;19

**CHARLES:** So we just have to remind our political figures, "Ah ah ah, don't forget about this, okay? Don't forget about that." You know.

00;11;09;17 - 00;11;22;04

**LAUREN:** Is there any particular project or collaborative opportunity that you have been a part of that really left you feeling hopeful for our future that you can talk about?

00;11;22;04 - 00;12;08;01

**CHARLES:** Well, relative to this ecosystem right here, this Bayou Bienvenue central wetlands area, which is of course part of this whole MRGO ecosystem. I think about the successes in terms of the closure of the MRGO several years ago, the effort at getting conceptual language in the state's coastal masterplan. That was a huge feat, a huge accomplishment. And the fact that, you know, everybody is still talking about the need to do this, and we feel the state and all the other powers that be, Corps of Engineers, you name it, recognizes the need for this too, you know. When you get that kind of a chorus of folks and activities going on, it keeps me optimistic. Okay. But as we know, time is of the essence. You know, we still have bureaucratic processes we've got to get through. Permitting, you're not going to get around permitting. But maybe we can speed up permitting processes. And just remember, as I said earlier, since this work is going to be with us kind of forever, you know, it's ongoing work,

00;12;32;18 - 00;12;56;17

**CHARLES:** there's going to always be a need for the moneys and the resources to keep it ongoing. So we have to continue to find creative ways to fund this kind of work, you know. Getting perhaps more contributions given to the state coffers and other coffers by industries that also benefit from this, okay? This protects infrastructure of certain industries in this state. And we know, more and more, they need to be involved. They need to contribute among other sectors, you know? So it's just is ongoing. This is with us. You know, this is life here in southern Louisiana. Let's just face it, you know.

00;13;12;16 - 00;13;19;26

**LAUREN:** Speaking of your life in southern Louisiana, is there any fond memory that you hold of spending your time growing up in Louisiana wetlands that you'd like to share with us?

00;13;19;27 - 00;13;43;02

**CHARLES:** Sure. So I can remember many, many years ago being out in an area like this with my maternal grandfather, who really was the first one who engendered in me an appreciation for this kind of ecosystem. He was the first, I would say, environmentalist that I knew of. Now, by profession. this man was a dentist locally, but the guy was well-read. He was well-versed. He was a renaissance man, okay? And he loved to fish. He would bring me out with him from time to time. And every outing with him was a lesson. And I remember he, just basic things like, you know, you shouldn't litter in an ecosystem like this, you know? He would stress the importance of the cypress trees.

00;14;03;21 - 00;14;24;06

**CHARLES:** And he was the very first one to tell me years ago as a child and help me recognize how the cypress trees were dying in this ecosystem. You know, I would be like, "damn, how do you know all this?" You know? But that's how he was. He was just well read, very much in tune with life. And yeah, he was an environmentalist, I would say.

00;14;24;06 - 00;14;54;21

**CHARLES:** You know, he was an environmentalist, renaissance man, through and through, you know? A classy man, actively engaged, politically speaking. And as I then matriculated through high school, college, graduate studies, I more and more became an.. Oh, you might say, subject matter courses, especially when I got to graduate school, I got a master's in public health with a concentration in environmental policy. And I remember taking the classes, the science based classes, and the policy classes, and thinking back on my conversations with my grandfather, you know. So that's really I would say, how it all got started from me many years ago, you know.

00;15;09;14 - 00;15;19;03

**LAUREN:** Well, it sounds like he presented you with a really special opportunity to maybe to be that person for other people in our community that didn't have that familial access.

00;15;19;05 - 00;15;40;25

**CHARLES:** That's right. That's right. And he always had a way of breaking things down in very simple terms. He used to always say, "Speak simply, don't use a lot of big words unless you really have to, because not everybody in this world knows all the big words. And so you need to reach people. So be able to," he said, "be versatile in how you engage people."

00;15;40;25 - 00;16;03;15

**CHARLES:** But he was never one about dumbing down the information. You know, don't dumb it down, and be truthful and honest. You know, he was another one who always stressed how to speak to people in power, okay? And don't let them use big words or try to dumb you down or make you a fool. No, no, no, no, no. You remind them who hired them. You did. He was he was a giant to me. He really was. And my dad, who still living is like that. My paternal grandfather, my namesake, Charles Allen Senior, was very much like that. I just come from a bunch of giants who didn't sleep, okay? They were like, "What? You didn't vote today? We'll get out of here!" You know, we about go vote, go do this, go do that. You know, get other people to vote. So, yeah.

00;16;39;25 - 00;16;58;03

**LAUREN:** It sounds like they set you up for success, and maybe unbeknownst to them, helped kind of set their community up for success too, by fostering this passion for a healthy ecosystem, both like culturally and ecologically. So thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today!

00;16;58;04 - 00;16;59;10

**CHARLES:** My pleasure. My pleasure.

00;16;59;12 - 00;17;04;08

**LAUREN:** Is there anything else you'd like to share with any of our community members about the work that you do?

00;17;04;27 - 00;17;19;14

**CHARLES:** Just to stress the point, remember, there'll be disagreements in this kind of work, like in any work. But don't be disagreeable. Don't lose sight of the common goals, the common bonds, the common themes that really should bind us all together. You know.

00;17;20;06 - 00;17;22;21

**LAUREN:** I think that's absolutely a hopeful note to end on.

00;17;22;23 - 00;17;24;16

**CHARLES:** Thank you. I appreciate it. My pleasure.