



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

Narrator: RICHIE BLINK

Interviewer: LAUREN LEONPACHER

Transcriber(s): KACIE WRIGHT & LAUREN LEONPACHER

00;00;00;02 - 00;00;24;10

LAUREN: My name is Lauren Leonpacher interviewing Richie Blink 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 near the Delta Management Project at Port Saint Philip in Buras, Louisiana. On the afternoon of October 18th, 2021. Do you understand that portions of the tape interview and pictures taken during the interview will be used in publications in a variety of media?

00;00;24;17 - 00;00;24;28

RICHIE: Yes.

00;00;25;13 - 00;00;27;13

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

00;00;27;16 - 00;00;35;07

RICHIE: Sure. My name is Richie Blink and it's spelled R-I-C-H-I-E B-L-I-N-K.

00;00;35;28 - 00;00;38;06

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

00;00;38;18 - 00;00;43;20

RICHIE: Sure. I was born on August 31st, 1986, in New Orleans.

00;00;44;26 - 00;00;46;02

LAUREN: Did you grow up in New Orleans?

00;00;46;10 - 00;00;51;23

RICHIE: I grew up south of New Orleans, about 60 miles south of New Orleans or so, in a little fishing village called Empire, Louisiana.

00;00;53;05 - 00;00;55;09

LAUREN: And where did you live your life as an adult?

00;00;55;24 - 00;01;07;29

RICHIE: Sure. So most of my life as an adult has been spent down here. After Hurricane Katrina, I was in Baton Rouge for a little while on temporary exile, where I was working at the airport and started working on my pilot license and then later on, I came back down home.

00;01;08;27 - 00;01;18;22

LAUREN: It sounds like you've spent most of your childhood and adult life kind of immersed in Louisiana's wetlands. Can you explain your relationship to this ecosystem?

00;01;19;01 - 00;01;49;23

RICHIE: Certainly. So growing up down here in southern Plaquemines Parish, so near the birdfoot delta of the Mississippi River, I spent a lot of time out in the wetlands and ecosystem here as a kid on my dad's fishing boats, and he was a commercial fisherman doing oystering, he was shrimping. Sometimes he would run some crab traps. And so I was able to get a really visceral understanding of how the systems in the delta worked.

00;01;49;29 - 00;02;01;27

RICHIE: And it was sort of this hand-to-mouth existence. The better we understood the delta, the better off we were. And so, from a really early age, I was paying super close attention to how these different links in the chain kind of work together.

00;02;03;04 - 00;02;07;03

LAUREN: Do you have a favorite memory of living or working in coastal Louisiana?

00;02;07;24 - 00;02;31;00

RICHIE: Sure. One of my favorite memories of being in coastal Louisiana is a camping trip I took to the Atchafalaya Basin, and the beauty that was there was just almost impossible to describe. It was like a forest growing out of a lake, but just completely natural and almost untouched. Even though you could tell from the stumps and stuff that we went through there and kind of clearcut it.

00;02;31;10 - 00;02;36;16

RICHIE: But just the way it looks now is just it's like a national treasure.

00;02;37;28 - 00;02;46;28

LAUREN: Is this area... Have you visited that area again later in adulthood? Does it still exist the way that you remembered it?

RICHIE: Even better.

00;02;50;00 - 00;02;55;11

LAUREN: Can you describe your professional relationship with the wetlands and the work that you do?

00;02;55;24 - 00;03;18;02

RICHIE: Certainly. So I run a small business called Delta Discovery Tours, and I'm an outfitter and a ecotourism operator down here in the birdfoot delta, south of New Orleans today. And so, this is my boat. I use traditional Louisiana fishing boats to bring people out into these special places. And I do everything from two-hour dolphin excursions to multiday expeditions into the Mississippi River Delta.

00;03;18;02 - 00;03;21;04

RICHIE: And people from all around the world have come on the boat with me to learn about the place.

00;03;22;22 - 00;03;39;22

LAUREN: Can you tell us about when or why you decided to make your career in this ecosystem, this landscape, and how that affected your decision to be an advocate for protecting our area?

00;03;40;01 - 00;04;03;27

RICHIE: Sure. So growing up, I always knew I wanted to do something to help the coast or fix the coast. And that's always kind of a moving target with some of the sea level projections that we have today. And, you know, eventually life led me to... I was working in the oil and gas industry as a boat captain. I was running supplies and cargo between Venice and platforms in the Gulf.

00;04;04;19 - 00;04;30;15

RICHIE: And the “aha!” moment came to me. It was either Christmas Eve or Christmas night. It was raining and my family's out of town, and I just really remember having the feeling that, you know, I just totally need to change my life and do something that at the end of the day, I can feel really good about. And when my life is over that I'll have a body of work that I can feel proud of and kind of help bend the arc in the direction that I thought was best.

00;04;30;28 - 00;04;52;07

RICHIE: And so, after that, I started doing these sort of guerilla or grassroots culture restoration projects. And to date, I've been responsible for about 25,000 trees being planted. But that was sort of the moment. It was just miserable rain, sitting in the wheelhouse of the boat, and I'm like, “I just got to save the coast.”

00;04;53;28 - 00;05;05;12

LAUREN: What do you hope the future of Louisiana's coastal wetlands looks like and how can we as a community or “we” as in you personally help make that hope a reality?

00;05;06;17 - 00;05;48;05

RICHIE: So I think that... You know, parts of Louisiana culture are just, I mean, they're completely unique to here, right? And we really, really love these things like Mardi Gras and the food that we eat and just even how we inhabit these super narrow stretches of earth here, these old ridges that we're on. And we need to think about Louisiana's coast and having a robust coast is going to work for us and protect us like we think about Mardi Gras and that food, like it's just kind of part of our culture and it's part of our DNA and it's just something that everybody can agree is like really, really important.

00;05;48;25 - 00;06;07;20

RICHIE: And so we have a little ways to get there. We know what we need to do. And we have institutions that are, you know, sort of striving to get there. But I think culturally, it really needs to kind of be baked in us that this is sort of a non-negotiable thing and we need to restore the coast in a way that doesn't impact so many people and really makes it strong.

00;06;07;20 - 00;06;11;14

RICHIE: And we're getting like every cent out of that dollar to do that.

00;06;12;06 - 00;06;21;23

LAUREN: Is there a time when working in wetlands advocacy or in ecotourism has made you feel hopeful for our future?

00;06;22;13 - 00;07;01;18

RICHIE: Yes, absolutely. When I bring folks into places like West Bay or for instance, here, we're in a CWPPRA project right now called BS-11. It's the Delta Management Project at Fort Saint Philip. And when I'm bringing folks into areas that were once wide open water or 14 feet of water, and now they're willow trees behind us and there's a thriving freshwater wetland that's helping to knock down storm surge, it's really excellent habitat. When I'm seeing those people with that sort of “aha” moment and showing them that it is possible and there are examples on the ground and that we can do this if we kind of put our mind and efforts towards it.

00;07;03;14 - 00;07;08;02

LAUREN: Well, thank you for talking with us today, Richie. Is anything else that you'd like to tell us? Anything you want us to know?

00;07;08;11 - 00;07;10;17

RICHIE: I just thank y'all for your time. I really appreciate y'all.

00;07;11;01 - 00;07;11;10

LAUREN: Thank you.