



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

Narrator: COREY MILLER

Interviewer: LAUREN LEONPACHER

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00;00;02;17 - 00;00;25;16

LAUREN: My name is Lauren Leonpacher, and I am interviewing Corey Miller 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 Bucktown Marina in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, on the morning of June 2nd, 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;28 - 00;00;26;12

COREY: I do.

00;00;26;24 - 00;00;28;23

LAUREN: Can you please state your full name and spell it for us?

00;00;29;03 - 00;00;34;12

COREY: Absolutely. Corey Thomas Miller. C-O-R-E-Y T-H-O-M-A-S M-I-L-L-E-R.

00;00;35;22 - 00;00;38;09

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

00;00;38;28 - 00;00;46;25

COREY: Yeah. So I was born March 22nd, 1982, at the Ochsner Hospital in Jefferson Parish in Metairie.

00;00;47;03 - 00;00;51;02

LAUREN: And is that where you grew up? Or did you move shortly after that?

00;00;51;17 - 00;01;12;05

COREY: No, I've pretty much lived in in Metairie my entire life growing up. I did go to high school in New Orleans, moved away a little bit and spent some time at LSU in Baton Rouge and then came back here, where I'm currently a proud homeowner in Jefferson Parish in Metairie.

00;01;12;05 - 00;01;28;13

LAUREN: Awesome. So a great example of sticking around. We are interviewing you today because you've been a huge advocate for coastal restoration in Louisiana. So can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in that work and what your daily responsibilities look like?

00;01;29;23 - 00;02;08;16

COREY: Yes. So after I graduated from LSU, I decided to pursue a master's in sociology, and I did so at UNO, University of New Orleans. I was fortunate to get an assistantship there with the UNO CHART – Center for Hazard Assessment, Response and Technology. And during that time, it was not technically planned this way, but I ended up working on a lot of different projects that focused on community resilience,

working with fishing-dependent communities and within all of that, there's a common thread of what's going on with land loss and coastal erosion, coastal restoration.

00;02;09;03 - 00;02;48;18

COREY: So I was very fortunate that I gained a lot of experience during that apprenticeship, and it just kind of naturally flowed into the career that I currently have, which is... My current position is with the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana. I am the director of Community Resilience. In that position, I spend a lot of my time... I kind of jokingly say that I'm the "Coastal Rosetta Stone", so I have to understand all of the science and technical, you know, things that that are involved with plans for restoration and how we choose projects and explain that to everyday citizens and residents.

00;02;49;13 - 00;03;11;08

COREY: But, arguably more important, on the other side is understanding the needs and concerns of the communities here along the coast and being able to translate those to decision makers and translate residents' input into the decision makers hands so that it better informs the way that we're developing projects and addressing these problems.

00;03;11;22 - 00;03;33;01

LAUREN: Yeah, So I mean, something that I think a lot of people know already is, Louisiana has a really diverse group of people from different socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds. What's a way that you work to include their voices in the policymaking decisions or the restoration projects that CRCL works on?

00;03;33;15 - 00;04;26;29

COREY: Yeah, so you're absolutely right. It's, you know... It blows my mind, the diversity and the how many different cultures across all of our coastal communities are represented here in Louisiana. And so first and foremost, you have to spend time embedding yourself in those communities, building relationships and understanding from the on-the-ground perspective, what the needs are, what the concerns are if you're going to actually develop solutions for those communities. So that's a quintessential first step. Beyond that, you know, I spent a lot of time translating different concepts, helping people to understand just what a healthy estuary looks like, for instance, and trying to boil down a lot of that very technical scientific speak into things that the average resident can understand and relate to.

00;04;27;29 - 00;05;01;17

COREY: And then beyond that, it's working to make sure that you're able to capture residents' input in a form and fashion that decision makers can understand. And so, it's spending a lot of time to be able to kind of play that that middleman role of understanding what's going on in the community, understanding what's going on with restoration, matching those opportunities to get people's input into those plans and helping communities have their voice be heard, essentially.

00;05;02;13 - 00;05;12;24

LAUREN: What are some of the reasons that you often find yourself giving to our community members, whether they be coastal residents or Louisiana residents, for why this type of work is so important?

00;05;14;10 - 00;05;46;24

COREY: I mean, it's for the long-term sustainability of our coast. I mean, it's... You know, anyone that's lived in coastal Louisiana for any period of time, you know, the past three years, for instance, they understand hurricanes. They understand that they happen, they're going to happen again. I think more and more people are realizing that, you know... I often hear sentiments of, "Wow, we never flooded like this before." or "Wow, that we've never seen a hurricane that blew for that long of a time and that strong of winds."

00;05;46;24 - 00;06;20;24

COREY: We heard a lot of that after this past year's hurricanes that, you know, hit in the past two years. And so, yeah, I mean, I think that people understand a lot of that connection. But beyond that, it's important for a number of reasons, you know. And I can sit here and list all of the stats about how many, you know, how much tonnage of shipping goes through our ports and through the Mississippi River, or the value of commercial and recreational fishing that we have that's so productive along our coast.

00;06;21;01 - 00;06;37;00

COREY: But at the end of the day, it comes down to being able to sustain our communities and sustain our way of life, our quality of life. And that's something that's very unique, and that's something that that draws people here to come experience that from an international perspective.

00;06;38;10 - 00;07;02;28

LAUREN: So I'm sure as somebody who is constantly thinking of ways to connect with the community or to help preserve and sustain our way of life in our ecosystems, what do you have in your mind for a vision of what a healthy coast would look like in the future for Louisiana? Do you have a goal or even a checkpoint that we can meet?

00;07;03;02 - 00;07;25;00

COREY: Yeah, you know... And the way I instantly kind of think about it is "What is a realistic future of our coast?" It can be a little bit misleading and confusing, I think at times. When we talk about "We're going to restore the coast," because we are never going to be able to put our coast back to an image of 1975 or a map of even 2005.

00;07;25;26 - 00;07;51;14

COREY: The coast has and always will be a very dynamic, constantly changing landscape. And so realistically, we need to envision how we might be able to hang on to as much land as possible into the foreseeable future. And understanding that we have an ongoing and uphill battle to ultimately address climate change as a piece of getting to that goal and that vision.

00;07;52;29 - 00;09;11;24

COREY: You know, and I think everybody has a role to play in getting there. At a minimum, people need to just be aware of what's going on with the coast and what's going on with plans for restoration. You know, talk to your neighbor, talk to your kids, talk to your family and friends. Have this be a topic that is at the top of people's conversation around the dinner table, you know. And if so, inspired and you're able to, weigh in on public plans. Anybody can, for instance, go to CWPPRA and nominate a project that they want to see, that they think is going to help their backyard be more resilient in the long term. So I think we just need to think very practically. But when I view the future of our coast, it's very vibrant, very productive. We're reconnecting the Mississippi River and having natural systems and using every tool that we possibly can get our hands on to help us maintain as much land as possible. And, you know, I envision people even more connected to the wetlands than they currently are, using the resources and the coast and the natural landscape, providing, you know, better resilience for the communities that will remain here.

00;09;12;14 - 00;09;27;05

LAUREN: Is there a specific event or memory that you have in doing this work that you can recall and think about how it made you feel particularly hopeful doing this work and looking forward?

00;09;28;00 - 00;09;54;10

COREY: It's a little bit difficult to come up with a specific "aha" moment, you know. But more generally, when you're able to help someone understand something that they either had a misunderstanding about or you're able to connect someone to a better understanding of what the future will hold and more importantly, that they're able to now see themselves in that future restored environment.

00;09;55;07 - 00;10;31;14

COREY: A lot of times, you know, the plans for restoration, and rightfully so, are scientific based, and they try to de-politicize or make it apolitical, as much so as possible, of a process. And so sometimes, because of that nature, I sense and I hear from people that they feel kind of disconnected from the ultimate, you know, future. And so helping people to understand just what that future most likely will look like and how they can see themselves and their community being resilient.

00;10;32;03 - 00;10;36;01

COREY: It's really powerful to be able to make those connections.

00;10;36;10 - 00;10;47;24

LAUREN: Definitely. Do you have a favorite memory of living in Louisiana's wetlands or spending time as a kid or a young adult in Louisiana's wetlands that you'd like to share?

00;10;48;24 - 00;11;24;21

COREY: Yeah. So I was very, very fortunate growing up that both one of my grandfathers and my father were very passionate about recreationally fishing, crabbing, shrimping. And my grandfather in his retirement had a camp in Grand Isle, and he bought a shrimp boat. And that was how he made a little extra money during shrimp season. And so I was often, especially during the summer, dumped off to "summer camp", as I like to say, and handed off to grandma and grandpa and spent lots of time at their camp in Grand Isle.

00;11;26;04 - 00;11;54;05

COREY: You know, I... Reflecting back on that time, the joy that I got from having, you know, a very small, modest boat with, at first was just a troll motor that ended up upgrading to a small little gas engine outboard. But, my brother and I having our own our own boat, that we could just kind of get out on the water and go fish and throw the cast net and, you know, just really just enjoy the resources of the coast.

00;11;54;18 - 00;12;09;11

COREY: I didn't know it or process it like that back at the time when it was occurring. But reflecting back, it's no wonder why I ended up in the career that I did, growing up having such a wonderful, rich experience and connection to the resources.

00;12;10;03 - 00;12;36;17

LAUREN: Is doing something like that in that area... Is that something that you see being possible without restoration or protection efforts? Or is that something that we.... I mean, we know what happened to Grand Isle within the last year, and it is recovering and we're seeing that it's recovering. But what... What would that memory look like without restoration efforts?

00;12;37;02 - 00;13;09;12

COREY: So I actually spent an extended weekend for Memorial Day down in Grand Isle just recently. And so... While there is a lot of recovery going on, they still haven't repaired the damage to their levee. So you still see a lot of exposed infrastructure that fortunately is going to be repaired. But I believe, if I remember correctly, it's like \$102 million, \$122 million that they're having to spend to get the levee back to the pre-Hurricane Ida condition of protection.

00;13;09;23 - 00;13;33;02

COREY: And so, we have to be very realistic and make hard decisions. And, you know... I do think that Grand Isle is going to come back. But we'd be foolish not to ask ourselves how much is it going to ultimately cost? How are we going to pay for this to continue to occur? Because hurricanes aren't going to go anywhere.

00;13;33;03 - 00;14;04;29

COREY: You know, it might be this summer hurricane season, heaven forbid, but it might not be for another 5, 10, or 15 years until Grand Isle gets hit again. But ultimately, they will get hit again. And so, trying to find mechanisms that will allow us to rebuild those areas that we deem worthy and, you know, that people are willing to kind of put their own skin in the game, tax themselves, perhaps, but find the funding to be able to continue to protect areas.

00;14;06;13 - 00;14;35;07

COREY: That's really going to be one of the tough decisions for a community like Grand Isle. I did happen to go past the childhood camp that I spent much time in and it survived, but that was almost an anomaly on the island. And so, yeah, you know, I think... It's just, people have to really understand the trajectory of where our coast is going, and really come together to make decisions, make plans.

00;14;36;08 - 00;14;53;19

COREY: We need to get better at having pre-disaster plans in place so that the social systems and infrastructure can come back to allow people to rebuild and resume some normalcy and quality of life as quickly as possible post these types of events.

00;14;54;17 - 00;15;17;06

LAUREN: Yeah. Looking forward, is there something that you would want to share with future generations of Louisiana's coastal residents or even, you know, people from around the country or around the world who visit Louisiana's wetlands and appreciate, you know, everything they have to offer? What do you want them to know about what we are doing now to protect this land?

00;15;18;14 - 00;15;47;06

COREY: Yeah, You know, what we're doing now is all about... And I often give presentations to different community groups. And one of the key things that I always want to leave them with is that everything that we have that's going on right now with restoration and flood protection, you know, is buying us time. And it's allowing us to try to hang on to as much land as possible to lessen flood damages for as many people and communities as possible.

00;15;47;20 - 00;16;23;23

COREY: But the harsh reality is that ultimately addressing climate change is what's going to really make or break the future of our coast. And what I mean by that is, if we sit on our hands and don't get serious, and we I mean every single person that's walking on this earth, my hope is that the future generations of people living here in Louisiana really take ownership and have buy in into the role that they can play in addressing climate change in their daily actions.

00;16;24;25 - 00;16;49;09

COREY: Because if we do just sit on our hands and don't do anything, the projections for how fast the seas are going to rise, how much stronger and devastating hurricanes and tornadoes and things like that are going to get are much, much worse than if we get really serious and try to meet some targets, set some targets, and really eliminate the damage that we're doing to our earth, our planet.

00;16;50;05 - 00;16;59;23

COREY: And that's going to take everybody having a, you know, a mental cultural shift in the way that they think about their relationship with Mother Earth.

00;17;01;17 - 00;17;07;00

LAUREN: Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today, Corey. Is there anything else you want to share with us before we let you go?

00;17;07;26 - 00;17;24;08

COREY: No, I just want to encourage everybody to, you know, understand what's going on in their backyard and along our coast and think about ways that they can advance the conversation and discussion and play their own role and keep up the good work.

00;17;25;02 - 00;17;26;16

LAUREN: Thank you.