



“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;03;18 - 00;00;29;01

LAUREN: My name is Lauren Leonpacher, and I'm interviewing Clair Hebert Marceaux concerning her memories and experiences in the Louisiana wetlands, as well as her hopes for a sustainable future for coastal Louisiana. This interview is being conducted at the Port Commission Building in Cameron, Louisiana, on the afternoon of October 13th, 2021. 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;29;03 - 00;00;29;17

CLAIR: Yes.

00;00;30;01 - 00;00;32;03

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

00;00;32;09 - 00;00;41;10

CLAIR: Clair Hebert Marceaux. C-L-A-I-R H-E-B-E-R-T M-A-R-C-E-A-U-X

00;00;41;25 - 00;00;45;22

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

00;00;46;14 - 00;00;53;25

CLAIR: My birth date is September 9th, 1977, and I was born at the Lake Charles Memorial Hospital in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

00;00;54;24 - 00;00;56;10

LAUREN: Where did you grow up?

00;00;56;19 - 00;01;02;27

CLAIR: Right here in Cameron, in the village of Cameron, in Cameron Parish; they often get confused.

00;01;04;02 - 00;01;09;19

LAUREN: Um, did you spend your whole life in Cameron, or did you move or live somewhere else as an adult?

00;01;09;29 - 00;01;17;25

CLAIR: Almost all of it. I lived in Lafayette for 11 years as an undergraduate and graduate student and then as a teacher in Lafayette Parish.

00;01;18;23 - 00;01;22;27

LAUREN: So then would you say you've lived in coastal Louisiana for the majority of your life?

00;01;23;01 - 00;01;25;11

CLAIR: Absolutely. Coastal Louisiana all the way.

00;01;25;26 - 00;01;29;03

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

00;01;29;23 - 00;02;04;00

CLAIR: My relationship with the wetlands and coastal Louisiana is, uh, I think, one that I didn't even realize ever began. I, I think that those of us who live in coastal Louisiana take it for granted. I know I certainly did. The... the amazing beauty, the um... the outcome after hurricanes, all of those situations has played a role in my relationship with the wetlands.

00;02;04;00 - 00;02;55;04

CLAIR: It's a very personal one. Uh... and only as an adult do I think I've, I began to more fully understand how much a part of me, as a person, the wetlands here are. You know, I had a lot of fun, mostly, in the wetlands. As an adult, after Hurricanes Rita, Ike, Laura, and Delta, seeing the devastation of the wetlands they took on a different role in my life, and understanding their vulnerability and how I think I need to use my life as best I can to protect them became.. came much more to the forefront of my experience and my connection to the wetlands.

00;02;56;05 - 00;03;06;04

LAUREN: OK, so I heard you talk about your personal relationship with the wetlands. Can you elaborate a little bit on your professional relationship with the wetlands, and the work that you do?

00;03;06;09 - 00;03;45;10

CLAIR: Absolutely. So professionally, my connection with the wetlands, again, is one of protection. Uh, I don't think my personal role, where wetlands are concerned, can be disconnected from my personal appreciation for the wetlands. And by that, I mean, I live here, I work here, I was educated here, my children are educated here. My role as the director of the Cameron Parish Port means that I'm dealing on a regular basis with companies who choose to locate here to grow their business,

00;03;45;29 - 00;04;25;07

CLAIR: And because. 85% or so of Cameron Parish is a wetland, um, that means the amount of available property to develop without any mitigation is limited. So, more often than not, projects have to begin the wetlands mitigation process. So I deal very often with the owners of mitigation banks, with those seeking to acquire permits that allow them to construct in the wetlands, and very soon after meeting me professionally, those project teams understand the value that I have personally and professionally for the wetlands. And if they didn't already have a respect for it, they leave after having met me, knowing that they should.

00;04;25;23 - 00;05;02;19

CLAIR: Um, they're the world's wetlands, not just ours. And the wetlands serve so many purposes, not only for commercial or recreational uses, which I think people are most familiar with the wetlands for,

00;05;02;19 - 00;05;50;19

CLAIR: they serve as a place for migratory fowl. They serve as a place of tranquility. Birdwatchers, you know, the Ornithological Society, those who are learning early in their life to respect nature and the environment do so in Louisiana's wetlands, whether they were born and raised in them, whether they visited one time. I don't know anyone that I've ever exposed our wetlands to who wasn't in awe of the beauty and the mystery and the solace that they found there.

00;05;51;10 - 00;06;07;12

CLAIR: The wetlands are a magical place. Um, and I'm so lucky that, professionally, I get to support treating them, the way that they should be treated. That's something that I take a lot of pride in.

00;06;07;28 - 00;06;23;24

LAUREN: Yeah, um, it's very clear that you are passionate and compassionate for this area and the people and the resources they offer.

CLAIR: Thank you.

LAUREN: Can you tell us a little bit about how you got started in this career field?

00;06;24;22 - 00;06;57;13

CLAIR: It's a bit of a winding road, and sometimes I feel like a feather that's floated on the winds of life... Um, so I began my career as a teacher. Uh, I don't have an education background. Uh, I earned my undergraduate degree from U.L. Lafayette in English, in liberal arts, and then studied British literature in graduate school, began working at the Episcopal School of Acadiana, and then at St. Thomas More Catholic High School.

00;06;57;20 - 00;07;31;13

CLAIR: I stopped teaching when Hurricane Rita hit because I felt like the people of Cameron, Louisiana, deserved someone who was a native to work for the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help understand it, so that they could get the help that they needed. We had never dealt, as residents, directly with FEMA before Hurricane Rita, and I felt like if I learned the FEMA language that I could help those folks.

00;07;31;23 - 00;08;03;08

CLAIR: Um, so three years at FEMA in individual assistance, and once I was told that my mission was complete at FEMA, I began working for the Calcasieu Parish police jury, and administered millions of dollars in recovery grant funding. That led me to an opportunity with Entergy Louisiana, again, working in disaster management, in some ways. I think anyone who works in coastal Louisiana needs a pretty good leg in their stool, in terms of their career, that exposes them to disaster management and recovery.

00;08;03;17 - 00;08;29;24

CLAIR: So I spent some years at Entergy, and then was asked by the Cameron Parish administrator to come here and handle some economic development matters. And that led me to, to this position. Um, I've been doing this work now for seven years, so never in a million years thought that I would be doing this.

00;08;29;24 - 00;08;44;08

CLAIR: I thought I would spend the entirety of my career in a classroom. I loved doing that. I love literature. Still do. But there was some other plan that the universe had for me, so I'm just walking the path.

00;08;45;04 - 00;09;18;14

LAUREN: It sounds like a pretty important part of your current and previous career path has been acting as a community liaison between these larger entities, whether they be you know, um natural gas industry or federal relief management. Um, can you talk to us a little bit about some of the ways that you've worked to ensure that underrepresented members of our community have had their voices heard and that they've had a seat at the table and get access to the relief that you helped bring to the community?

00;09;18;21 - 00;10;04;09

CLAIR: That's a really important question to ask. As a child, I remember thinking that this was a special place... That when outsiders came in, what I thought was special in a good way was often seen as a negative. This place that I'm from, very similarly to a lot of coastal Louisiana, is isolated, esoteric, I've even heard the word "clannish" used.

00;10;04;22 - 00;10;52;02

CLAIR: Coastal Louisiana in my experience has shown me that the inhabitants of the coast must stick together and protect one another from a lot of things. Um, and so I recognized early on, that it was important that there be someone, not necessarily me, but someone needed to speak for us. Um, most of the community that I tend to help speak for, or interpret for, or ask them if I can speak for them, are our commercial fishermen and women. It's important at the capital of our state.

00;10;52;15 - 00;11;37;23

CLAIR: It's important in the capital of our country. It's important that.. Because they are voters, they are taxpayers. They are feeding our nation. And, sometimes when they speak, they're not heard or they're even muted, or they're disregarded. And I, I can't abide by that. So, oftentimes, I get myself in hot water because, uh, I think it's important to speak for the voiceless, whether they are indigenous, tribal.

00;11;39;01 - 00;11;45;06

CLAIR: ...just trying to eke out a living. Coastal Louisiana is not an easy place to live.

00;11;47;08 - 00;12;19;16

CLAIR: But that doesn't mean that those who live here shouldn't be heard. We drive industries that drive our nation, literally. And so for me, that that's important. You know, when you when you live in coastal Louisiana, you get this amazing opportunity to umm when... when a season is closed, people have always had the opportunity to work in oil and gas or some related industry.

00;12;19;27 - 00;12;53;19

CLAIR: And that wasn't because we were the only users of energy, because we're certainly not. So people could make a living trapping, hunting, commercial fishing, renting boats to promote recreational fishing, charter boat.. It's a whole industry. So my point is, whatever the need was, whoever from a very young age, I'm not really sure where that was instilled in me,

00;12;54;12 - 00;13;10;14

CLAIR: I just felt like, um, if I could do something to... to project the need or the voice for those who couldn't on their own, then I needed to do that.

00;13;11;03 - 00;13;27;05

LAUREN: Absolutely. Is there a time or a memory that you have where doing this kind of work made you feel hopeful? And made you feel like the time and energy that you invested in this place was worthwhile and was making a difference?

00;13;27;26 - 00;14;03;19

CLAIR: Every single time I do something, whether it's a coastal cleanup, or planting dune grass, or connecting people who care about the coast, to those who have created an opportunity for that person to help the coast, it's always somewhere in the back of my mind. Um, I don't... I don't seek out credit, so it's not... it's difficult to find one particular example.

00;14;03;20 - 00;14;29;10

CLAIR: I do remember that um, I guess it's been almost a decade ago now. I was just on the beach, and I saw some people in some matching blue shirts and they had "volunteer" on the back of their shirts, and they had these wonky looking little orange dipples I learned later, and they were planting dune grass. And I just walked up and said, "Hey, what are you guys doing?"

00;14;29;28 - 00;14;59;27

CLAIR: And they explained to me what the effort was, and I asked if I could help, and became a board member of that organization very soon after that. I never really thought about coastal stewardship, or I

didn't I didn't see it as a thing. I just sort of wandered into it. I think that that's part of another part that's taken for granted.

00;14;59;27 - 00;15;32;01

CLAIR: Like we tend to take the wetlands for granted, and also our connectivity to it. So it's sort of like it's already ingrained, or it's... There's this mesh effect? I didn't even realize, you know, I didn't think, "Oh, well, I'm going to be a coastal advocate!" I just... When you live in it, I think it's really natural. It's a natural fit to care about it.

00;15;32;28 - 00;16;04;16

CLAIR: I remember thinking as a kid, you know, wanting to pick up trash on our beaches, seeing litter on the roadside, which are wetlands on our roadsides here in Cameron Parish, and thinking about grown-ups... I mean, like maybe four years old, probably... "Why would they do that?" So, I never distinguished a time in my life where I didn't think, "Oh, well, I need to pick up that trash."

00;16;04;27 - 00;16;28;21

CLAIR: I didn't think that that was helping the wetlands. Never mind industry, never mind this place being possibly the densest network of natural gas pipelines. Like those weren't things I was thinking at the time. But now as a grown up, saying that this is the densest network of natural gas pipelines in the world. Well, they're in our wetlands already. They're there.

00;16;28;21 - 00;17;04;05

CLAIR: So what happens if our wetlands continue to erode? That infrastructure becomes exposed and becomes even more of a threat to our environment. So it becomes a much more serious and urgent feeling to protect our wetlands. Um, so it's multilayered, multifaceted, relationship that I have with this... with our wetlands here.

00;17;06;12 - 00;17;34;00

LAUREN: With that in mind, do you have a vision or a hope—you know, short term, long term—for what the future of Louisiana's wetlands landscape looks like, and how can we make that reality possible with what you would like to see being done differently? Um, for it to be sustainable, for it to be protected.

00;17;35;29 - 00;18;13;26

CLAIR: Again, another really important question. So short term, and I absolutely believe that this is doable. Just yesterday, there was a regional leadership group that I was able to participate in to expand their knowledge about Cameron Parish, coastal Louisiana. And I think that, in terms of what we all can do in the short term, is talk about our wetlands, talk about their importance.

00;18;14;07 - 00;18;58;21

CLAIR: Talk about their beauty. Talk about their vulnerability. Make sure children understand what's at stake if our wetlands are not protected, restored. Um, help people understand what it means that over a hundred years, just as an example, Rockefeller Refuge has lost 11,000 acres.... like 11,000 acres? I can't even imagine what that looks like from a 3000 foot view or a 30,000 foot view.

00;18;59;10 - 00;19;34;08

CLAIR: More than I can really imagine. If children are not taught ownership and the value of their role, whether they live in coastal Louisiana, whether they've ever seen a wetland, whether that's irrelevant. Everyone in the world benefits, from the wetlands in the world. And if we don't teach our children, you know, that song... "Teach," I can't sing, "Teach your children well."

00;19;35;27 - 00;20;22;18

CLAIR: So, the wetlands are so precious, you know, if I haven't taught my son, who's 18, that when he has children, his responsibility to teach his kids, "Don't throw your trash in it. Don't throw your waste in it." That seems so simple. But if we don't model that example so that those who might get the amazing opportunity to see the wetlands one day... if that's not, if that's not shown to them in the classroom, like we should be teaching as a unit how important-

00;20;22;18 - 00;20;49;28

CLAIR: Not just in science class... like take my field literature, the Renaissance. You name any genre of literature, I know this seems completely tangential, setting is always asked. But you know, if we're going to analyze or critique the literature, what's the setting? Well, this is this is my setting.

00;20;53;06 - 00;21;32;14

CLAIR: I think we've missed the mark so much on... It should just be natural, and that makes me sad that it's not natural. It makes me sad that we should have to convince people or... You know, I wasn't a Boy Scout, but my son was, and one of the things that was taught to them was, "Leave whatever it is, if it's a campground, if it's a fire site, whatever... Leave it better than you found it."

00;21;34;15 - 00;21;59;23

CLAIR: And I don't think the generations before me, or mine, quite frankly, has done that with our wetlands, and we should be ashamed. However, there is hope. So long term goals, we can turn that around. We can... Most people don't even know what a wetland is. They don't know the difference between a swamp and a marshland, or prairie marsh or...

00;22;00;27 - 00;22;15;24

CLAIR: And that's okay because we can change that. We can expose them to it and educate them. And, you know, Smokey the Bear is a campaign. We can do that!

00;22;17;27 - 00;22;51;25

CLAIR: I live in a place where there's six alligators for every one person. So it's, it's in my face every day, all day. I can hear the songs in the wetlands from the animals and the frogs and the bugs, and it's all around me all the time. So, again, that's why I think I take it for granted. People like me, and anyone who cares about the environment, needs to commit to educating those who don't know.

00;22;52;23 - 00;22;53;28

CLAIR: That's my long-term goal.

00;22;58;01 - 00;23;45;15

CLAIR: How do... How do we make that happen? This. Um, talking to people who might not know. You know, ignorance can... There is a solution to ignorance. Ignorance just means not knowing. Once someone is no longer ignorant about an issue, then it becomes a choice. So while I can't choose for anyone, I can certainly solve the ignorance part. Um, and I think that's why I went into teaching. Once someone is exposed to information, there's no more excuse. Just do the right thing.

00;23;50;24 - 00;24;03;01

LAUREN: Um, is there anything else that you'd like us to know about your work or your personal relationship with the wetlands? Anything you wish we would have asked about?

00;24;06;05 - 00;24;56;27

CLAIR: No, I think... I think you've done a fantastic job of marrying the two, you know, the personal and the professional. It's um, I guess what I would say is, it's going back to... The conversation that we've had about, you know, so my entire life, I've found myself immersed in the wetlands, and I remember being

much younger, and traveling with my parents and my grandparents, and into metro areas, and being told by my parents and my grandparents, you know, some people never leave the city, never see where we live.

00;24;58;00 - 00;25;21;13

CLAIR: My mom grew up in coastal southern Georgia. So marshland, you know, Southern Isle, the Golden Isles is where she grew up in Georgia. So there's marshland around her, growing up, then she moved to Cameron, Louisiana. My dad spent the majority of his life in Cameron, Louisiana, was just a small child when he came here. So I'm the first generation in my family born here.

00;25;22;23 - 00;25;28;08

CLAIR: And there are people all around me who whose families have been here for seven generations. Like, that's a normal thing.

00;25;30;19 - 00;26;02;21

CLAIR: So I'm new to this area! New to Cameron Parish. (chuckles) My point is, that was... That was such a weird idea to me that, "People never left the city?" like, "They didn't see cows, and alligators, and birds?" And that trip coming home, I remember thinking, like, "The next time I saw an egret, that's really special." And every time I see it, I'm going to think, "Oh, I'm going to slow down and look at it!"

00;26;03;27 - 00;26;28;13

CLAIR: Ah! I'm so glad you asked me this question! Because... So, my son was almost five, and he and I were coming over the Gibbstown Bridge, which is over the Intracoastal in Cameron Parish, and, man, when you come over and all you can see is marshland, wetlands, as far as you can see, and he's in the back seat in his little booster chair, car seat.

00;26;29;12 - 00;26;51;07

CLAIR: And we weren't talking to each other. And he said, "Mom, does everybody think this is paradise?" And I was like, "I was like, I don't know, Jack, maybe!" But it just caught me off guard. Like, he wasn't talking. I wasn't talking. I had never said, "Look at this paradise!" But I was like, "Aw, I got that one right."

00;26;55;02 - 00;27;08;26

CLAIR: So... It's his job next. I just hope, it's not underwater. When, when he, when he has that conversation with his kids, so.

00;27;10;14 - 00;27;20;27

LAUREN: Well, thank you so much for talking with us, Clair. We really appreciate your time and the work that you do to make a difference. It is very valuable to us, and to everyone who has a stake in this community.

00;27;21;01 - 00;27;22;00

CLAIR: Thank you very much.