

Sara Jose

Interviewed by James Hurst
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Corpus Christi, Texas

Transcribed by James Hurst

[James Hurst]: Good afternoon. My name is James Hurst, and I am here with Sara Jose. Today is October 7, 2022, and we are here at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve and Learning Center in Corpus Christi, Texas. Good afternoon.

[Sara Jose]: Hi, good afternoon, James.

[Hurst]: I'd like to start by asking where you're from.

[Jose]: So I grew up in San Antonio, Texas, and um, lived there from about the age of three all the way through high school, and I've settled here in Corpus not far from home in the grand scheme of things, geographically.

[Hurst]: Okay, and was that a rural community or more of an urban—

[Jose]: So San Antonio is, I think, the eleventh largest city in the country, so relatively urban. Um, I lived in the suburbs of San Antonio, so I certainly wasn't living in a high-rise apartment or anything like that, but um, large, relatively suburban, community, um, in Texas.

[Hurst]: Alright, uh, did you have any siblings growing up? Were you an only child?

[Jose]: So I'm an only child, and um, early on, unfortunately, I lost my mom, so a lot of time with me and my dad. [We] were kind of a little team, two peas in a pod, um, spent a lot of time with him outdoors and obviously balancing his needs of working and supporting me, but then raising me without siblings around as well.

[Hurst]: Okay, and was that a main hobby for you as a child? Being outdoors?

[Jose]: Yeah, so I don't know if outside itself was a hobby, but more just a good background to a lot of the things I did. Uh, my dad golfs, so he would golf often in a field behind our house and there was a playground there, so I'd be at the playground, he'd be golfing. Um, together we'd go to put-put or uh, a three-par course and spend time outside, um, even when my mom was around and working. She worked retail, so he would take me to a park on the weekends for picnics. So outside was just kind of where we did things.

[Hurst]: Okay. Where did you go to school?

[Jose]: So, I graduated high school from Converse Jetson High School and then went to college at Texas A&M Galveston, um, majored in marine biology, was really—thought I was [going to] be a shark person, shark researcher, um, watched a lot of Shark Week as a kid, um, finished that degree, realized I enjoyed telling people about science cutting and being involved in the more educational aspect. And so later I went on and got a Master's from Texas Tech University in informal science education.

[Hurst]: What is informal science education?

[Jose]: So most of us are a part of a formal education system whether we realize it or not. If you went to a K-12 school, if you went to a university, that's what we consider formal education; in the classroom as most of us picture it. If someone says they're a teacher, you probably picture a formal educator. Um, informal is anything, what we call out of the classrooms, so nature centers, museums, aquariums, zoos, all the nature preschools. There's lots of other places education happens, and so those are usually informal. Sometimes the term is also 'free-choice learning,' so whether you can choose to be there or not.

[Hurst]: And at what age did you decide that that was the area of focus that you were interested in, or your passion?

[Jose]: Yeah, so like I said, the marine sciences and the ocean have fascinated me from a very young age, so in eighth grade, we had to do a project, research a potential major and a potential university, and that's actually when I discovered A&M Galveston. Um, [I] did apply and looked at some other campuses, but kind of, was on that track and had that as [a] plan, and then probably my sophomore or junior year of college was when I realized education maybe [was] where I was being drawn to. Um, A&M Galveston is a direct part of College Station, so you can't get a double-major in education while you're doing marine biology without moving to College Station. [I] did really want to be in school longer, so when I left, I took an internship, that was partially helping [to] take care of an aquarium, and partially teaching to kind of figure out what I wanted to do next, and kind of cemented that the education side more than maybe the animal-care side, um, was what I was really passionate about.

[Hurst]: And did anyone outside your family have an influence on that decision?

[Jose]: Um, I don't think anybody was like, 'Hey, don't you like this?'; 'Isn't this cool?', um, but I was, again, that only child, single parent, um, spent a lot of time in daycares and around other caretakers helping, um, take care of other people's families, while, you know, so they could—I could be with someone while my dad worked. So I think I've always had strong educator models around me but I don't think I knew environmental education was a I don't think I could have named that as a field until I got well into college and started seeing where this could go and what kind of jobs I might be able to get.

[Hurst]: After you graduated college, what was your first professional role?

[Jose]: Yeah, so I mentioned briefly that, an internship, and it was a year long. It's now a fellowship at the University of Georgia's Marine Education Center and Aquarium in Savannah, Georgia. So it's a yearlong program. They usually take four interns or fellows, and they work their way through caring for the aquarium, teaching their school-year programs, and then teaching summer camp. Um, my first sort of fulltime job after that permanent was here in the Corpus Christi area. I worked for the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries program, and I was an educator at their Nueces Delta Preserve.

[Hurst]: Okay, and that directly preceded your time spent here as—

[Jose]: Correct. So when I first came over to work at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve, I came as our Recreation Coordinator. I did not come—I got hired under a previous Preserve Manager, but that was the only other organization I worked for before I came to work for the city—and the—as a part of that for the Preserve.

[Hurst]: Okay. And as we discussed, we are here at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve. What is the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve and Learning Center, and can you talk about, uh, a little bit about its founding?

[Jose]: Sure, so the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve is a municipal nature center, so all of our staff here work for the city of Corpus Christi. Uh, we are in the Parks and Recreation department. It's a hundred-and-sixty-two acre area where our public is welcome to come out, uh, recreate, dog-walk, jog, just take a walk, bird-watch, nature photography, play on the playground, come into the learning center and explore. Um, the city started buying property in 2008, and um, prior to that, there was [an] Oso Creek green belt conservation awareness plan. Basically the city just sort of put into writing, "We know the city needs recreational access to Oso Creek and Oso Bay," so as opportunities to either set aside land or purchase land [came] up, they wanted to make sure the entire waterway did not get developed. There was going to be some sort of public access, and so when the three properties that are here at the Wetlands Preserve became available, um, they purchased it and then eventually developed into the nature center that most people who visited would see today.

[Hurst]: Okay, and for someone visiting for the first time, what can they expect to see when they step foot through the entrance here.

[Jose]: Yeah, so, weird space. We actually have several entrances, so it would depend on which one they're using. Um, if you're arriving by car here at the Wetlands Preserve, you're [going to] come in by a twenty-four-foot tall public art piece called *The Great Heron*, um, designed by Dixie Friend Gay. It's a steel, great blue heron sculpture. Um, it's usually our indicator when people call, or, "Am I in the right place?" "Well did you see the giant bird?" If not, you know, it gets you there. Um, so [the] city is really interested that it has public art pieces at most of their bond projects, so um, and usually recognizing the space that it is, so, for a nature center, we have a large bird. Um, but they'll come in, park—our building, our Learning Center that you and I are sitting in today [is] not actually immediately adjacent to the parking lot, so sometimes people kind of look around, they see our mulch-beds, they're trying to figure out exactly where to go, but we also have some walk-in entrances. So if they walk in, they're [going to] get a map, um, not a paper-copy, but [an] orientation trail-map I—there's a sign at every [entrance], a sense of the rules so that you understand that while we are a part of the parks department, the rules here might be a little different that you're used to. "Stay on the trails," "Respect the wildlife," those kinds of things. So, really interesting that not everybody who is familiar with this place and loves it has the same welcome perspective depending on which direction they get to enter the property.

[Hurst]: Okay, and you mentioned birds. Philip Pryde of San Diego, California, created the "America's Birdiest City" contest twenty-two years ago, and Corpus Christi has won this contest several times. What environmental characteristics bring such a diverse quantity and quality of birds to Corpus Christi, and why is Corpus Christi winning this contest?

[Jose]: Yeah, so Corpus Christi is really uniquely located in what's called the central flyway. Um, most people who look at birds and bird migration in the U.S. think of us as having three

flyways. Um, most of our birds, not all, migrate from Central and South America, you know, to the northern latitudes. They go north in the spring, spend their summers wherever their appropriate habitat is breeding, and then return south this time of year, fall, and spend the winter at the lower latitudes. So we're in the central. Birds don't love to fly over mountains. They're more than capable of it, but, obviously, the more altitude they can save, the better. And so if you picture the country as a funnel, Corpus Christi is right there at the bottom of it, um before you get to the gulf. You know, we have water on the one side, and the mountains in Mexico, on the grand sense of the scale, are not that far away, and so it kind of helps funnel. We're also really lucky to have several different habitat types. You know, again, we just mentioned [that] we're right next to the Gulf. We have marshes, but we have thornscrub, we have urban area, and so Corpus really can encompass these different habitat types in a relatively small space. So about six-hundred species in a normal year are seen in Texas. There are more that have been documented rarities, and the birds who quote-unquote "get lost," um, but Corpus, or, here at the Preserve, we've documented two-hundred-and-seventy-seven of those about-six-hundred regular species of birds. Um, and so, again, even here, there's a microcosm of that. We've got some prairie, we've got some open bayfront, we have plenty of healthy thornscrub, we have the urban building next to the neighborhood, and so you can get a lot more than you might if you had only one habitat type, and then benefited by where we are on the globe of being sort of subtropical and in that flyway.

[Hurst]: And is there, um—has it always been that way, or is that there due to human involvement here in the city, preserving the natural habitat.

[Jose]: So, um, it probably always has been that was always—I mean, Corpus Christi obviously, where it is in the flyway—excuse me—has always been a thing. Obviously, we're not moving, geographically. Um, habitat types [are] probably a bit of a mixture. You know, we always have been near Chaparral, and you've got the big King Ranch, and the expansive areas that were here. The marshes have been here. But holding those habitats in-tact probably allows us to keep that bird diversity more so than adding bird diversity through our conservation practice. It's probably continuing to allow species to be able to here, at least seasonally in their respective habitats.

[Hurst]: Okay. What is the most common bird species you might see here at the Preserve?

[Jose]: Well, much like almost anywhere in town, it's probably a northern mockingbird. Um, but people come here to see some other things. So from late April to early July, maybe a little bit later, we get lots of visitors coming to look for painted buntings, which are one of our

more—most colorful songbirds. Um, the males have blue heads, red chests, green backs, um, beautiful song, and while they're not rare, they do require certain specific habitat types. And so the Preserve and our water feature is one of the best places to see them locally. Um, certain times of the year, I can tell you which bench to sit on, and if you're quiet, one's going to show up. Um, we're also one of the places in town with a semi-regular group of groove-billed ani, which are one of the fifty-ish species that are known as South Texas specialties. If you're trying to get an extensive bird list, we talked about number[s] of bird species when you don't want to leave the country. Um, there's about fifty species between Victoria, Corpus, and south to the valley. They don't go any further north than that. Um, so common in Mexico, common in Central America, but if you're birding in the U.S., you need to come all the way here to see these. So groove-billed ani is one. We do have a small family group on the Preserve, so that's one people are often looking for. Um, sandhill cranes are here in the winter, um, so some resident birds, some migratory birds, um, but as far as most numerous, probably cardinals or mockingbirds, um which most people might expect.

[Hurst]: Okay, and I've noticed along the hiking trails there are signs that are cautioning you to look for rattlesnakes. Um, what other sorts of land animals—

[Jose]: Yeah, so “likely to see” obviously depends on the day. Um, most animals, while not afraid of humans, don't really want to expose themselves to a thing that seems larger than they are, and we are larger than most of the things here. Um, but we do have a few deer on-site, um, relatively regular bobcat for early and late walkers. They see them on a semi-regular basis. We know there's a coyote pack. Um, they had pups this year and were often active in the mornings in the summer in the wetlands, moving the pups around and playing and doing all that good—what we think of as “dog play stuff,” but with coyotes. Um, very healthy lizard population, several kinds of lizards. Um, there are fourteen kinds of snakes, only two of which are venomous, um that have been documented on [the] property. So a really heavy variety between the plants and animals. Our visitors, um, our community science project has documented about seventeen-hundred species of plants and animals just here in this hundred and sixty-two acres.

[Hurst]: And in order to preserve that population of species here, what sort of maintenance is done to the landscape? Is it a less-is-more situation where the less people do, the better it is?

[Jose]: Yeah, so we actually do pretty heavy management, um, and if we were a national wildlife refuge or a state park where our core, um, mission was to preserve the habitat, we would probably do even more maintenance. We are, again, a municipal nature center, so at the end of the day, our mission is about the people. We certainly aren't going to negatively impact the habitat, but we are here to serve people. We have a limited maintenance staff. We have three maintenance staff, and that's everything from cleaning bathrooms and keeping the sidewalks swept, to actually doing our management plan. But south Texas has a pretty heavy issue with non-native or invasive grasses, so, here in the preserve, being surrounded by neighborhoods, we cannot burn. Um, our prairie areas would have naturally burned every three to five years, so we do some annual mowing cycles. We put out, um, native seeds when we can and try to give them, you know, that chance—fighting chance to get back in the landscape. Um, [we] do some brush management. This area would not have been as brushy. If anyone listening to our conversation later is like, “I've been out there and there's lots of trees, and lots of mesquite,” most of the shrub species are native but they would not have been here in this quantity. Um, it would have been a lot more open. And so, while we don't want to get rid of it, we do have to certainly manage it and try to maintain those open spaces

for the deer that we talked about earlier. You know, they can't climb trees. They're not going to fight their way through the wall of shrubs. Um, but at this point, most habitats really do require active management, and if you think about it, they've always had active animal involvement. Um, the country had something along the lines of three-million–three-hundred-million bison that were grazers, that were roaming the plains and so, while people weren't out there tilling the soil and starting fires, lightning was, and there were grazers on it. So when we take our grazers off, we have to move cows appropriately, or sheep, or whatever we're doing. Uh, but this idea that we can just walk away from a landscape and do nothing—if all of the wildlife pieces aren't there, that landscape is not going to do what maybe it historically did. Um, people have been on the planet for a long time as well, so, um, there's always been some aspect of that, and so we manage it as best we can with the staff and budget we have. Um, but if we walked away and did nothing, um, it would be a lot of non-native grass and the brush would probably fill in pretty extensively.

[Hurst]: Okay. The educational programs here at the Preserve—of course, this is not just a natural environment. As you said, there are teams working here doing maintenance and providing field trips for kids. What other sort of, uh, programs take place here at the Preserve?

[Jose]: Yeah, so we have a really wide variety of programs. We like to serve—we say we serve K-to-grey, or, you know, from our youngest visitors all the way to, um, our oldest in our community. We have both an education and a recreation program team. We have educational programs for as young as three. Our Growing Up Wild program is a preschool program where we start to get toddlers and their parents just used to being outside exploring. You know, some people have that fear of bugs, or the fear of creepy-crawlies, and we just want to get them used to saying, “It's okay to be outside and watch this ant climb around and, um, see what it does, and we don't need to pick it up, necessarily, but we can watch it.” Um, too, as you mentioned, our school field trips and our homeschool days that we do for both our formal and our homeschool audience, um, up to our lecture series and our wetlands workshops where we invite adults in to dig deeper into certain topics. And then on our recreation side, we've done everything from have a 5k, you know, we want safe places to run. You mentioned when you and I first met that you've run out here, right? No one wants to get run over by a car. We want to look at enjoyable things. Um, we've done yoga out here. We've done some ukulele lessons out here. Um, we have birthday parties, and so, again, what we want is our community to understand that this is a space they can enjoy by saying, “I really like running through these things and maybe seeing some birds while I'm running versus running around my neighborhood and having to worry about being hit by a car.” All of a sudden, you're valuing that natural space whether you can name the birds and plants you ran by or not. And so, we try to offer that diversity—nothing, again, that's going to go against our mission statement of preserving the habitat. Um, but it's pretty easy to say when we say we want you to understand why it's important [that] the space is here, that you be able to do lots of things here.

[Hurst]: And do you yourself take time to enjoy the Preserve when you're not on-duty?

[Jose]: So I try not to come here when I'm not working, 'cause it's very hard to turn off the “Please don't ride your bike,” “Please get back on the trail,” “Oh no, I need to ask someone to mow that next week,” and do that. But I do try to take a chance to enjoy it, um, when I'm here and get out and take a walk. You know, I'm lucky and fortunate to work here on-site and not be chained to my desk all day. Um, but the city—maybe not as a city facility, but we have

a hundred and ninety parks that the city runs. There are three state parks in our region. There are healthy county parks. There are private places like the botanical gardens. So in my recreational time, I do like to go out and enjoy our natural resources, but I don't always come here, just so I can turn it off, and let the things that happen here happen here, um, and actually be able to enjoy my time in nature.

[Hurst]: Are there volunteers here on a regular basis?

[Jose]: Yeah, we have a pretty extensive volunteer program. Um, back in 2018, they, um, did almost eight-hundred hours of volunteer service time in our fiscal year. Um, obviously, COVID, people were not as comfortable being around each other. And so, some of our volunteers are still not comfortable being out. Um, a fair number of them are older. Um, but most of our volunteers help with our education program. So our field trips are anywhere from twenty-five to a hundred kids. You heard me talk about our small program staff. We have one full-time educator and a part-time person who might help them. So, having volunteers to come in and lead those stations, our volunteers assist on our nature walks, just to help point things out, and, um, make sure people can walk at their own pace. Some people want to walk faster, some people want to, you know, stop, and, as we call it, smell the roses, or enjoy. And so, they join us for those things. And then, occasionally, we do have volunteers who help with some of our trail-work if we're working in a dedicated area and need some extra hands. And then we have a high school group who has, um, adopted our park, and they come out quarterly and help with, sort of—not one time, but seasonal—need more hands, re-mulch mulch-beds, or clear an area that we haven't been able to get to in a while. Um, they come and join us in that way.

[Hurst]: So, almost all, uh, age ranges?

[Jose]: Yeah, which is really awesome. High school through—so to volunteer with the Preserve, you do have to be thirteen, and be with an adult. If you're going to be here without an adult, we need you to be sixteen. Just, again, the city, we want to make sure we're taking care of people and we're not opening ourselves or anyone else up to liability. Um, but our regular volunteers, for better or worse, we kind of need them to be available during business hours, um, because that's when we're here and doing our business purposes, and heavily involved in education, normally.

[Hurst]: As Manager, are you intimately involved in the various programs, and volunteer work that goes on here, or is that more of a, uh, something that you delegate to the staff that works underneath your leadership?

[Jose]: Yeah, so our volunteers are onboarded and sort of check in with our Recreation Coordinator. She, um—people can reach out to me, but I'm going to very quickly pass you on to our Lauren. So she does all of our registration, letting them know what opportunities are coming up. But I try really hard to step into our programs, to teach periodically. If I know I've got a group on trails, I want to at least go out and make sure things are going okay. Um, I want to recognize our volunteers, you know, by sight—know that they're here regularly. So while our staff really do have their core areas, and they are giving a lot of the direction to our volunteers, um, I don't ever want to get to the point where I don't say, "Oh, a new volunteer! Who is that?" I would hopefully know their name and kind of know some strengths about them, and have had a chance to be on-site with them a little bit.

[Hurst]: What would say your favorite aspect of this area is? This Preserve?

[Jose]: Um, my favorite part of being here is really watching the community come in. It's really nice to be able to get to know people, get to know their routines, watch kids grow up here, um, notice when someone hasn't been around in a while, and you either send them an email or, whenever you see them on the trails, say, "Hey, how's it been?" you know, "I haven't seen you." Um, I'm a strong believer, both professionally and personally, in that nature isn't somewhere we visit only on vacation. It is a part of our area, our world, our community. Nature is its own aspect, much like your neighbor, your grocery store, your school, and nature. It's in your yard. It's out your apartment window, or whatever. And so, watching our community truly integrate into this space and feel very comfortable here is my favorite sort of thing to experience on a regular basis; to kind of watch that come to life.

[Hurst]: Is there anything specific that you'd like listeners to know about this area and the work you do here?

[Jose]: So what I hope they've gathered from our conversation is that they're invited. I just said, right, I love having the community out here. Um, the Preserve is open every day, seven days a week, unless there's a major hurricane, and we've blocked the gate for your safety and ours. Um, but, although the Learning Center is only open Tuesday through Saturday, eight to five. Parking lot is open daily, seven to seven. Grounds are open dawn to dusk. I want people to feel like they can come out here, and they belong. Um, whether nature has always [been a place] you have been, like me, you went to picnics next to the river with your family. Or you really didn't spend much time outside, you grow up in this hyper-urban environment where maybe you didn't have that opportunity, or maybe your family of origin, you know, has a fear about bugs or snakes or spiders. Um, you can park in the concrete parking lot, you can walk up a very traditional sidewalk to our building, and you can ease your way into it. But I want people to know that they're welcome to be here. They're invited to be here, and I hope that we have some sort of opportunity for them to engage in nature in a way that feels approachable to them.

[Hurst]: Awesome. Well I certainly feel welcome here. I love this place. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today and share a little bit about what this place is, and all the awesome work that you do here. Thank you.

[Jose]: Yeah, thanks for having me. So I've got you—what is your favorite experience that you've had here?

[Hurst]: I love getting away from concrete. I think that Corpus Christi is a beautiful city. Many of the students that, uh, that I'm in class with at Texas A&M University often focus on everything, um, on the commercial aspect of this city. And I like to focus on everything natural. So when I come out here, it's a place for me to escape, to get away from the sound of cars and that's absolutely my favorite part of coming here.

[Jose]: Great, and we love—again, we're here, completely in city limits, all these cool things we talked about, the experiences, the animals, um, I think that's an interesting part of our story. Um, you and I were discussing before we started recording about the fresh water, specifically here at the Wetlands Preserve, is a stormwater drainage ditch. It's an urban, you know, waterway, and yet it is right here next to a natural waterway in Oso Bay, and has made this functioning ecosystem within city limits. You can drive here on the concrete. You don't

have to bring your backpack and three days' worth of food. But then you can come out and get that experience and see these animals that we sometimes think of as living in faraway places. And so, that's a really magical thing to happen and, um, I feel really fortunate to get paid to come here every day and share that with our community and appreciate the opportunity to hopefully share this with future students and let them know they can come on out.

[Hurst]: Absolutely. Yes, ma'am. I hope they do.

[Jose]: Great.

[Hurst]: Thank you.

[Jose]: You're welcome.

[end of recording]