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FEATURE



Karla Klay, executive director of the environmental nonprofit Artist Boat, has helped educate both children and adults about the island's wetlands and coastal prairies, as well as preserve more than 800 acres on the West End in the organization's Coastal Heritage Preserve.

KARLA KLAY ARTIST BOAT

An idyllic childhood in the Florida Keys inspired Artist Boat Founding Director Karla Klay to devote her career to educating people about the wilds of Galveston and the plants, birds and animals living in its wetlands and coastal prairies.

"Everything I do is a big thank you for my childhood," Klay said. "I was immersed in nature and held by nature and I'm just so grateful. I don't think people appreciate nature enough, and especially the ocean. Half of every breath we take is thanks to oxygen created by phytoplankton."

Klay had a unique childhood "with sharks in the background and dolphins as playmates," she said. Her parents developed technology to transport live sharks. She took this love of marine environments to a new level in 1997 when she moved to the

island to pursue a Bachelor of Science in marine biology from Texas A&M University at Galveston.

She already had achieved a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Southern Methodist University, and Artist Boat came from her desire to blend art and science to inspire and educate people about marine environments. With no similar organization in existence, she launched Artist Boat in 2003.

"One of the best parts of my job is when nature surprises and inspires me," she said. "At a certain time of year, fog covers Galveston, coating the spider webs on the marshes. You don't normally see them, but at this time they glisten. During migration, we have thousands of indigo bunting birds who land and are exhausted. They fill up their bellies here so they can keep going and it makes me so happy our ecosystem can sustain them. I feel awe when nature sur-

prises me, and feeling awe is such a crucial piece of human health."

Klay's love for nature has been good for Galveston. Under her leadership, Artist Boat has hosted 180,000 members of the public and underserved youth on boat tours, restored more than 60 acres of coastal habitats and created coastal-inspired public art on 50 sites and the Galveston seawall. With its One in a Million campaign, Artist Boat has conserved 898 acres, well on the way to its goal of conserving 1,400 acres from the beach to the bay.

In the next 20 years, she hopes to realize an even bigger dream to have an education center on the island that meets the United Nations' standards of not only educating people but inspiring them to take action to protect the environment. She wants us all to feel awe, she said.

— Shannon Caldwell