

Gaylen Beatty, *Restoration Champion*

by Carolyn Myers Lindberg



Growing up in Los Angeles, Gaylen Beatty remembers how hard it was to spend time outside because the air pollution would sting her eyes. Every day she drove to school and passed by a deep canal but it was so degraded by garbage and sewage, she didn't even know it was the Los Angeles River. Even the experience of going to the beach was tainted by all the trash and water quality warning signs. Looking back, Beatty says all of those experiences changed the way she related to the natural world.

Despite what she saw outside her front door, Beatty soaked up news about the area's polluted air and water and became interested in finding out how she could make a difference. Her real education began in college in northern California, where, for the first time, Beatty experienced living near healthy forest and ocean ecosystems. She began to shift from being a child who hated to go on family camping trips to an adult who loved to hike and spend hours in natural spaces.

Graduating with a degree in oceanography, Beatty's first job took her to a program along the east coast that exposed kids to nature curriculum, such as marine biology, forest ecology and conservation. She recognized herself in each child as they experienced the transformation from city kid to outdoor explorer.

Beatty says she knew her main goal at this point was to support a space for all people to be comfortable outdoors. While directing a Youth Corps program in Vermont in 2001, she felt she needed to escape the harsh winters and find a new adventure. Beatty chose to move to Portland, a city she felt would give her the opportunity to make a real difference in people's lives. After working for a few years at the local Camp Fire organization, she was hired part-time by 3 Rivers Land Conservancy in 2004 while she finished her masters in Science Education at Portland State University. Her master's work centered on how to create paradigm shifts to affect environmentally responsible behavior change. When Beatty was asked to create the Backyard Habitat Certification Program (BHCP), as part of the West Willamette Restoration Partnership, it seemed like a natural progression of her work and education.

Beatty says the process of creating BHCP was a collaborative one. While she provided the social science behind a program encouraging urban residents to restore their backyard habitats, others helped with the mechanisms and structure of the certification process. Her early work was to identify the barriers to getting people engaged in restoration and found that most people were interested in doing the work, they just didn't know how to get started. BHCP could provide the "how-to." Next, Beatty connected with folks in the community who were already doing restoration work, like Robin Vesey and Robin Jensen in SW Portland, to learn about their successes and challenges and listen to their ideas and wisdom. She explored the neighborhoods and got to know the other partner organizations who were involved in restoration activities. Once the program was designed, she spent most of her time getting to know people, listening and learning.

West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District was one of the early supporters of BHCP, donating \$10,000 for a pilot program. As a matter of fact, Beatty says, former manager Jim Robison was the one who came up with the first design of the program's certification sticker. Later, the Columbia Land Trust and the Audubon Society of Portland would sign on as main program sponsors.

The program had two goals for the first 3 years; "engage 25 residents and certify eight." Keeping goals small and realistic gave Beatty the time to tour gardens and talk with residents about what worked for them and what didn't. It allowed her to craft a program with the tools to help folks succeed by providing two key things:

- A structure for improving habitat in their own yards, and
- Recognition for their work with lawn signs announcing their certification

Beatty says folks were so proud of their work that they readily posted yard signs. The program spread quickly by word-of-mouth and soon signs were popping up all over the city's west side. People clamored to find out how to sign up for the program.

One of the reasons the program was so enticing, she says, is that it connected people to the land and, for most of us, being able to heal the land is visceral. People told her that the world's environmental problems are so large and overwhelming that BHCP was something small and concrete they could do to help contribute to the solution. She says, "I just feel so honored to be able to hear those stories and to support so many people who've gone through the journey-it's just so powerful."

A Natural Resource Conservation Service scientist told her that he learned more about biodiversity in his own garden than he did in any large-scale restoration project. Beatty says it's more powerful because "you see it every day, you walk through it every day, and you have years of being present in that space to see the change."

In 2016, Beatty left BHCP for a new adventure as Visitor Engagement Manager for Parks and Nature at Metro. She oversees the volunteer program and works with various teams to support their work in bringing communities to parks and natural areas. There was a lot of weight in founding BHCP and she felt it was time to allow the program and its partners to move to the next level. Just like a child, she adds, you eventually need to let it go for it to grow beyond what you can give.

At Metro, Beatty is again involved in discovering barriers to nature for communities which have historically been disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and lack of daily connection to nature. She says part of that process is supporting Metro's work to advance racial equity and be in conversation with culturally specific community organizations to find out what they are interested in doing in nature. Then, says Beatty, Metro can help design public access and co-create programming so the community will visit these public places in a way that's meaningful to them.

From the L.A. concrete jungle to Portland's natural spaces, Beatty's goal remains to support a space for all people to be comfortable outdoors.