



Going Green

Shellye Arnold leads the team rebuilding and preserving **Memorial Park**.

By SAM BYRD



In the summer of 2011, Houston experienced one of its driest years on record, coupled with several weeks of consecutive above-

100-degree days. The result was that Memorial Park lost more than 20,000 trees. For any passer-by, the once-green and lushious spaces looked brown and suffering from deforestation.

While that was a hard blow to the park, it did spark ongoing calls to revitalize the massive urban oasis. The Memorial Park Conservancy knew it needed to bring in a leader who could tap into the city's overwhelming enthusiasm to revamp the area. Enter Shellye Arnold, who was hired in 2013 as president and chief executive officer for the organization.



Shellye Arnold

"The drought was a catalyst for all the changes that would come, and the renewed commitment from the public and private sector for the largest urban park in Houston, and one of the largest in the nation. That led to the desire to expand the Conservancy and grow the organization's role in the park. I was hired to lead that change," she says.

During her tenure with the conservancy, Arnold has expanded the team from three to 60 members and increased the \$300 thousand annual budget to \$30 million. And of course, she was instrumental in developing its master plan, which relied heavily on input from Houstonians as well as scientists. Five key tenets were articulated in that plan: restoring the park's ecological systems and creating greater resiliency; reconnecting

the park's land, waterways, trails, and people; consolidating compatible uses together in appropriate areas; tending to the land and the park's cultural history; maintaining balance through responsible management; and enhancing the overall park experience and amenities.

"The mayor at the time had the foresight to annex Memorial Park into the city's footprint so that they could provide funding for the park, since there wasn't a public funding source. So, we started down that path together.

Nelson Byrd Fields was selected from a highly competitive field of landscape architects for the project. They're research-based, they're good at listening to community feedback, and they've done ecological work in large parks. The master plan was unanimously passed by City Council in 2015," Arnold explains.

With a plan in place, and with the support of project partners Houston Parks and Recreation Department, Memorial Park Conservancy, Kinder Foundation, and Uptown Development Authority, Houstonians are already seeing the fruits of their labor with the recently opened Clay Family Eastern Glades and the updates to the Sports Complex. A land bridge across Memorial Drive and a prairie restoration is scheduled for completion in 2022.

"The Eastern Glades embodies the values of ecological restoration and conservation. It's really an exciting space. We're doing wetland restoration, and we've created picnic space.

We've added 2.5 miles of trails in a lake and wetlands area. It and other projects contain an important aspect of stormwater management. People get to experience and learn about wildlife," Arnold mentions. "Eastern Glades has been met with tremendously positive accolades. People tell me all the time how it's transforming their life. Someone today sent me an email detailing that their friend who is recovering from cancer goes to the Eastern Glades as part of their recovery. It's their sanctuary."

She continues, "We opened Eastern Glades during the early part of COVID-19 before it was ready, because we thought people needed access to this space. We're healing the land, and in doing so, we're healing spirits and people.



Land bridge over Memorial Drive (east view)

People needed this. People still do."

Arnold views the Bayou City's parks as one of its best assets, especially now.

"At this very moment in time, people need a place where they can get out and be safe and healthy. In this time of COVID-19, people value green space and parks more than they ever have," she says. "Further, in a time when there's less and less space where people can come together, and there's great divisiveness between us, parks are places that bring people together. Parks are truly the last democratic place in society. Whether it's the neighborhood park or the 1,600-acre Memorial Park, I hope people care for these places."

Arnold's own background is just as impressive as the park itself. She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of

Texas-Austin and a master's degree in public policy from Princeton University. Arnold spent the first part of her career with the Texas State Legislature, the Texas Department of Commerce, and the U.S. Department of Commerce. She speaks Spanish fluently, which helped when she worked as a volunteer in the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru delivering public-health programs.

From there, Arnold transitioned to a consulting role in industry. She possesses a background in executive leadership and change management from her nearly 20 years at Cisco Systems, Hewlett-Packard, Compaq, and McKinsey & Company.

"I was the first openly gay person who was out at Compaq in the '90s. I did that strategically. I did that based on my own values. It was a difficult and risky career move, and I was a junior executive. And it was before Ellen came out," Arnold notes.

She and her wife, Tina Sabuco, have lived in the same home in Garden Oaks for the last 27 years. During her down time, Arnold volunteers with animal-rescue groups. Until recently, she was serving as a leader for Girl Scout Troop 21, the nation's only Girl Scout troop composed of women with differing learning abilities.

For more information on the Memorial Park Conservancy, visit memorialparkconservancy.org.