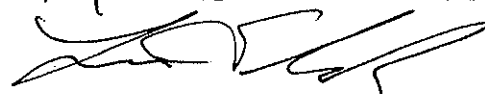


FROM THE DESK OF :
Rep. Lew Frederick


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Charles Jordan



Name: Charles Jordan

Year of Birth: 1942

Institutions or Organizations: The Conservation Fund

Title(s): Chair

Quote: This is not something that people can really understand without being involved in it. We don't have to sell the great outdoors, but we do have to expose people to it. No one can present it the way it presents itself.

Year Quoted: 2010

Unlike many in the environmental field, Charles Jordan's career in conservation did not stem from a childhood fascination with nature, or the guidance of a mentor who exposed him to the beauty of the natural world. Instead, his passion for conservation evolved slowly through his long and distinguished career in public service, especially his tenure as director of Parks and Recreation in both Portland, Oregon and Austin, Texas. Beyond a passion for the great outdoors, Jordan also became convinced that people of color, while notably absent from the mainstream conservation movement, had much to offer—and much to gain from—conservation. Jordan has devoted his career to realizing his dream of a conservation movement that is diverse, inclusive, and vibrant.

Born in segregated rural Texas, Jordan's family moved to Palm Springs, California when he was a teenager. In California, they lived on a reservation, and Jordan had no exposure to the parks and green spaces he would later make his life's focus. He did spend time outside: "For the Black, Latino and Native kids I grew up with, we didn't have parks but we had the desert," Jordan explains. "It was a rich space for kids, and we spent a lot of time out there." He also found a Boys Club and Recreation Center and started playing basketball. He later won a basketball scholarship to Gonzaga University, where he earned a degree in Sociology and Philosophy.

After graduating from college, Jordan wanted to pursue criminal justice but had a difficult time finding work in the field. He returned to Palm Springs and took a job as a gardener. "At that time, there were no professional Black people of any kind in Palm Springs," Jordan recalls. "No public employees, no one working for the city. I was the first. Since there was no public outcry, they hired me as a recreation leader in 1961." With the exception of a two-year stint with the military, Jordan spent the next nine years working for the city as a Recreation Leader, Assistant Director of Recreation, and Assistant to the City Manager.

Jordan's career accomplishments have been that of a pioneer. He left Palm Springs for Portland in 1970, where in an unprecedented four years he went on to become the city's first elected African American, serving as a City Commissioner and later as Fire and Police Commissioner. He left to serve as the Austin Parks Director for five years, but returned to Portland to oversee that city's Parks system. Jordan describes his evolution toward the environmental field in the form of parks and recreation as "unconscious" and "not by design;" nonetheless, by the 1980s he was recognized as one of the foremost parks administrators in the country, and a passionate advocate for green spaces and recreation opportunities for

how conservation fits into all of that. It just does not have that same sense of urgency. We've got to try to come up with ways to make it relevant to people of color, and there's no quick and dirty way of doing that." Over the next two decades, Jordan worked with the Conservation Fund and on a number of other environmental initiatives while still heading Portland's parks.

In 2003, Jordan's friend and mentor Pat Noonan announced his retirement as chair of The Conservation Fund (TCF), and asked Jordan to succeed him. Jordan admits he was surprised and somewhat intimidated by the request—not only would it make him the first African American to head a national environmental organization, he would be succeeding the organization's founder and a renowned figure in the conservation world. "He was so well-loved, a genius...but there was no way I could say no," Jordan laughs. He agreed, and since 2003 has chaired the organization while continuing to live and work in Portland. Jordan notes that the Conservation Fund is a good place to continue his quest to diversify the environmental movement—the organization has a dual charter promoting economic development in harmony with conservation, an initiative Jordan says is an opportunity to make connections between the conservation movement and everyday life in communities of color. Jordan notes that TCF is a somewhat non-traditional group in the mainstream environmental movement, recognized for its ability to effectively partner with outside interests and its efficiency. "We've protected over 5 million acres of land," Jordan says proudly. "We don't have a large membership, but we do have a good working partnership with corporate America and other groups. And 95 cents out of every dollar we get goes into the ground."

Jordan says that even more than mentors, there have been "angels" in his life who have guided him along a career and life path he never foresaw. "There's no way I could have gotten the places I've gotten in my life without angels," he says emphatically. Though Pat Noonan may have been his most important "angel," Jordan has been influenced by everyone from his recreation leader at the Boys Club in Palm Springs to the legendary conservationist John Muir. He has been especially influenced by Muir's ethical credo, and often quotes his famous statement that "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." As well as a personal worldview, Jordan applies Muir's philosophy to his efforts to diversify the conservation movement. He argues passionately that the movement cannot succeed without true participation from people of color. "There are now over 80 million blacks and browns in this

urban youth. Jordan's vision for Portland's park system was widely acclaimed as "bold, visionary, and refreshing", and Portland became nationally known for having one of the country's most progressive park systems. To this day, Jordan still describes urban parks and recreation as his primary passion.

Jordan's connection to the wider conservation movement grew in the early 1980s, when he was appointed by President Reagan to a Federal Government Commission on the Great Outdoors. Working with the commission, Jordan had the opportunity to both see many of the country's great open spaces, and talk to Americans all over the country about it. The experience guided Jordan toward two realizations: first, the merits of the conservation movement beyond parks and recreation; and second that people of color were not turning out at the Commission's meetings. As Jordan became increasingly convinced of the importance of conservation, he also became increasingly concerned about the movement's lack of diversity. "As a person of color, I struggled with the fact that people of color were not coming to these meetings," he says. "It was such a rich experience for me. Growing up in the South, I knew what the land meant to people of color...I know how much we depended on it. I struggled with that contradiction."

A giant in the conservation community, the Conservation Fund's founder and chair Pat Noonan noticed Jordan's dilemma. "He saw my struggle," Jordan recalls. "He said if I came onboard, he would give me a platform to tell my story, and tell it from a black perspective without any constraints." While Jordan began writing and speaking about "the great outdoors" from a black viewpoint, he increasingly struggled to merge what he saw as the "narrow perspectives" of both the parks and conservation movements. "It gave me an opportunity to see the movement whole," he explains. "Unfortunately, the parks movement did not see itself as part of something greater. There was no awareness of the importance of the outdoor movement. That became a charge. I was given a rare opportunity, an additional responsibility that I call an 'ethnic responsibility to ensure that other people of color, especially African Americans, understand the symbiotic nature of our relationship with the land. The environmental movement does not have the appearance of an ally in addressing many of the social issues of today. It is difficult to imagine

country—how can you leave that many people out of a movement and win?" Jordan says. "You can't."

During the course of his career, Jordan has received almost too many awards to mention, including an honorary doctorate and an "England Today" fellowship. He is currently working on a book about his life and work in the conservation movement. He has found writing it to be both rewarding and difficult, but hopes that it will provide insight into the relationship that people of color have had with the natural world and conservation. "Growing up in the segregated South, it's obvious that I saw a different America than my white brothers," Jordan says, "and America saw me differently. So I have to speak from my perspective, while at the same time I've got to be careful not to speak for any other black people. But there is a chance that a lot of other people will feel the same way I do, because no one has really taken the time to look at the environment from the Black perspective."

Jordan is hopeful that efforts to understand the African Americans' relationship with the natural world will facilitate the diversification of the environmental movement. However, he acknowledges that it is a difficult task, one that will require sustained effort by future generations. "The only thing we can do now is worry about the foundation...if we do that, the next generation may want to do the walls," Jordan reflects. However, he says that efforts to diversify will continue to fail if young people of color—and all young people—are not exposed to the great outdoors. "We need young people to see the value of conservation now. But to do that, they need to experience it for themselves. 85% of Americans now live in and around cities. Most of the kids don't have any idea that they own millions of acres of [public] land. And how can they want to protect it if they don't know about it and have never

Jordan advises young minorities interested in environmental careers to get as much exposure to the natural world as possible. Indeed, he believes that exposure to the outdoors is the only way that conservation efforts will succeed long-term. "Find a program close to you and get involved in it," he says. "This is not something that people can really understand without being involved in it. We don't have to sell the great outdoors, but we do have to expose people to it. No one can present it the way it presents itself."

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