



# LAND STEWARDSHIP AMBASSADORS



FOSTERING THE NEXT GENERATION

By Landen Addison



What if we could take smart, hard-working students from South Texas high schools and instill in them both knowledge and passion for land stewardship and conservation? Well, that's exactly what East Foundation's Land Stewardship Ambassadors (LSA) program is doing.

Spanning the diverse landscapes of South Texas, Land Stewardship Ambassadors bridges different perspectives by bringing together students from Bexar, Cameron, and Webb counties through a partnership between East Foundation and the Witte Museum. While some participants arrive with a lifelong connection to the land, others are discovering the natural landscapes found across South Texas for the first time—yet all leave with a deeper understanding of how stewardship shapes our collective future.

"Land Stewardship Ambassadors is cultivating the next generation of conservation leaders," notes Neal Wilkins, President & CEO of East Foundation. "These students will go on to make decisions that impact Texas landscapes for decades to come, so we're working to equip them with the knowledge, connections, and confidence to become effective stewards regardless of their background or career path."

**The Land Stewardship Ambassadors program stands on three foundational pillars:**

- Increase awareness of land stewardship principles
- Promote civic engagement in today's youth
- Inspire careers that support land stewardship

Since its inception, the program has mentored 221 ambassadors, with 45 bright minds recently working their way through the 2025 curriculum. Each graduate carries forward a simple but powerful message: caring for our land means caring for our future.

## PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND CURRICULUM

San Antonio, Laredo, and Brownsville all have at least one thing in common: the Land Stewardship Ambassadors program meets students wherever they are in their education journey. East Foundation and the Witte Museum have worked together over the years to establish three learning hubs for the program: The Witte Museum in Bexar County, Camp Rio in Cameron County, and the Falcon Bank in Webb County. These partners have a sense of pride that their program isn't

one's typical classroom experience—Land Stewardship Ambassadors students don't just learn about the land; they have a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in a working ranch environment and learn valuable lessons first-hand from various experts.

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"Our program welcomes applications from ambitious high schoolers across South Texas," says Tina Buford, Director of Strategic Partnerships for East Foundation. "The in-person nature of these transformative gatherings means students should be prepared to travel to these central locations. It's this face-to-face interaction—between peers, mentors, and the land itself—that creates the program's distinctive magic."

Once applications are reviewed and participants are selected, students dive into the Land Stewardship Ambassador's 10-session curriculum. Each week, they engage in two-hour sessions that go beyond theory and into practical application. The program covers essential topics including land stewardship fundamentals, conservation history, watershed management, the economics of resource management, effective advocacy techniques, and the critical importance of diversity in conservation efforts.

Students don't just absorb information; they debate real issues, develop practical skills, and connect classroom concepts to the landscapes around them. This hands-on approach transforms their understanding of stewardship from an abstract concept to a potential career path. Upon completing the program, graduates earn a \$400 stipend, but most alumni point to the knowledge, connections, and opportunities gained as the program's most valuable rewards.

## LSA ALUMNI – MAYRENA LUGO

Mayrena Lugo, a member of the 2023 Land Stewardship Ambassadors cohort, grew up in Laredo, Texas, and learned about the Land Stewardship Ambassadors program through her high school. Her attention was immediately caught by the phrase "seeking students

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**LSA ALUMNI**  
**ENROLLED IN COLLEGE CLASSES**  
**THAT SUPPORT/FOCUS ON**  
**LAND STEWARDSHIP**

**14**  
**LSA ALUMNI**  
**IN THE WORKFORCE**  
**WITH JOBS THAT SUPPORT**  
**LAND STEWARDSHIP**

who want to learn about the environment and hone their leadership abilities." This resonated with her existing interest in wildlife conservation.

Mayrena admits that she didn't know much about land stewardship before joining Land Stewardship Ambassadors and wouldn't have been able to offer a definition. However, she saw the program as an opportunity to build upon her interests and gain potential career knowledge—and her instinct proved correct. Today, as a senior at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi majoring in environmental science with a chemistry minor, she's presented her research at both the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society and Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies conferences and completed an internship with Texas Sea Grant.

When asked about her favorite Land Stewardship Ambassadors activity, she quickly recalled a memory of a scavenger hunt at the Witte Museum. "We gained knowledge as we hurried around the packed museum, eager to find out more and answer questions to get puzzle parts. After only meeting two hours prior, the time we had together was filled with laughter and joy."

Mayrena's experience exemplifies how Land Stewardship Ambassadors focuses on education and that the program strives to provide meaningful connections.

She mentioned that the mentorship component particularly impacted her journey. "Masi (Mejia) was super encouraging throughout the program and became a close friend of mine," Mayrena shared. "Interacting with different mentors gave me a sense of understanding of the different roles in land stewardship and conservation."

One of the most remarkable outcomes of Land Stewardship Ambassadors is that these relationships continue to open doors for her professional development. Now approaching graduation, her goal is to secure an internship with Texas Parks and Wildlife or become an Adult Leader for Texas Brigades Summer Camps before pursuing a master's degree.

"Land Stewardship Ambassadors truly expanded my understanding of land stewardship, transforming it from a passing interest to a career passion," Mayrena reflects. "It gave me the tools, mentorship, and connections to pursue my dreams in conservation and solidified my commitment to making a positive impact on the environment."

#### **CURRENT LSA STUDENT – MICHAEL VILLAREAL**

While Mayrena represents a Land Stewardship Ambassadors success story, Michael Villarreal represents



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the program's bright future. Michael is one of the current Land Stewardship Ambassadors students enrolled in the 2025 cohort, and a connection to land stewardship runs deep in his family history.

"My family has a rich history in agriculture," Michael explained. "Both sides growing up were invested in growing gardens for the community or being ranch hands in the fields. So naturally, I wanted to be a part of that as well." But Michael sought more than just participation—he wanted to understand. "I thought to myself, 'How can I be a part of this culture and have better knowledge and understanding of this?'" When a pamphlet advertising the Land Stewardship Ambassadors program crossed his path, he immediately recognized it as his opportunity.

The program's structured approach stood out to Michael. "Each week's topic and projects are very informative and exciting," he shared. "The weekend at the Witte Museum, for example, was very fun and educational. The curriculum that the Land Stewardship Ambassadors staff has for the students is challenging, yet once we go through it, we have a better understanding of what it was and how we can become better land stewards."

Beyond environmental education, Michael credits Land Stewardship Ambassadors with significant personal growth. "The teamwork aspect of the program continues to challenge me and has brought me out

of my comfort zone to be more open and outspoken. I have become a better presenter and public speaker," he reflects. His current project synthesizes everything he's learned, with the added goal of encouraging others to join the program and "get the experience of a lifetime."

Michael's future ambitions highlight how Land Stewardship Ambassadors inspires concrete career pathways. "I plan on getting my PhD in horticulture at Texas A&M University-Kingsville," he says. "After that, my goal is to become a plant scientist at NASA and maybe one day work at a national park." As his time in the program continues, Michael already recognizes its transformative impact. "Once this program is done, I feel like I will come out way differently than who I was when I first started, and that I have to thank the Land Stewardship Ambassadors staff for that."

## THE WITTE MUSEUM

It's evident that the Land Stewardship Ambassadors program changes lives, but East Foundation couldn't do this alone; this program thrives on the partnership between East Foundation and the Witte Museum. Helen Holdsworth is the Witte Museum's Director of Stewardship Education, and she has worked in natural resources, agriculture, and wildlife education for 30 years. Her role is recruiting students from high schools in Bexar and surrounding counties, assisting in hosting each session, and facilitating discussion amongst students.



The students accepted into the program already show leadership traits, whether within their school curriculum or in an extracurricular activity. Throughout the program, they have opportunities to hone those skills through team building, class discussions, and public speaking. The ultimate goal is for them to leave educated about private land stewardship and empowered to be Land Stewardship Ambassadors.

“We continue to communicate with our alumni and keep track of their educational and career paths,” Helen noted. “Some alumni have changed their initial majors based on their experience with Land Stewardship Ambassadors. Many have had no idea about what happens ‘behind the gates’ of a working cattle ranch, but it’s our hope that they leave and share their new knowledge with their communities.”

Helen mentioned that they also look for opportunities beyond the program for Land Stewardship Ambassadors graduates to shine.

“For example, we had a Land Stewardship Ambassadors alumni speak during the Wildlife Seminars at the San Antonio Livestock Show & Rodeo last year.” The program's impact extends well beyond graduation.

As Helen proudly shared, “We’ve seen alumni go on to do remarkable things, and their achievements demonstrate

how Land Stewardship Ambassadors not only educates students about conservation but transforms them into confident advocates who continue to advance land stewardship principles throughout their educational and professional journeys.”

## MEASURABLE IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

As the East Foundation team likes to say, “You can’t manage what you don’t measure.” This principle guides not only their land management but also their educational initiatives.

Although Land Stewardship Ambassador graduates move on to new adventures, they remain a part of the program in many ways. The Foundation tracks how these young stewards carry their experiences forward through ongoing alumni surveys, and the results tell a compelling story: more than two-thirds (67.42 percent) report a deeper understanding of land stewardship principles. This transformation goes beyond facts and figures to a fundamental shift in perspective.

Nearly half of all graduates (44.34 percent) have amplified their civic engagement, applying their classroom discussions directly towards community action. Perhaps most telling, almost 50 percent of alumni are now pursuing educational paths or careers directly aligned with land stewardship, a powerful testament to the program's lasting influence.

Land Stewardship Ambassadors alumni continue to grow and evolve. Today, 32 alumni are still completing their high school journey, 64 have carried these principles into their college education, and 14 have already begun applying their knowledge in professional roles. Each represents a ripple effect of impact across Texas landscapes.

As Masi Mejia, Manager of Education Programs for East Foundation explained, "These numbers aren't just statistics—they're individual students who are reshaping how their generation thinks about conservation." "


## VISION FOR THE FUTURE

East Foundation and the Witte Museum's partnership remains focused on their core mission of developing conservation leaders across South Texas as their Land Stewardship Ambassadors program continues to evolve. "We're not just building a program; we're working to cultivate a movement," explains Wilkins.



One thing's for sure—the program embodies East Foundation's commitment to responsible land management through education—transforming principles into practical skills that our future generations can carry forward. For those inspired by this mission, opportunities exist to encourage students to apply for upcoming cohorts, provide mentorship to graduates, or support the program's continued development.

As Texas continues to face growing challenges at the intersection of development and conservation, Land Stewardship Ambassadors graduates represent a generation equipped with both the knowledge and passion to find solutions that secure our shared future.

Students can apply for the 2026 LSA cohorts in the fall of 2025 on our website at <https://eastfoundation.net/land-stewardship-ambassadors/>. 

# Education



East Foundation has been working hard to expand our education opportunities in South Texas, while ensuring that we are developing future land stewards. Our education programs focus on delivering effective programs in the classroom, on the land, and in partnership with like-minded organizations.

**DURING THE 2024-2025 SCHOOL YEAR,  
OUR EDUCATORS HAVE REACHED:**



# 7,640

**Classroom Students Reached With  
Wildlife By Design Programs**



# 4,324

**Students  
On Ranch  
Field Days**



# 45

**Land Stewardship  
Ambassadors  
Graduates**



# 153

**Teachers Who  
Participated In  
Summer 2024  
Teacher Workshops**



# 3,122

**Students At  
El Sauz and  
San Antonio Viejo  
Behind The Gates**

Our Land Stewardship Ambassadors program is made possible in partnership with the Witte Museum, and the following generous donors:



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