LASSOING STUDENTS' IMAGINATIONS

Masi Mejia has South Texas ranchland in her blood

When she was a child, both of Masi Mejia's vaquero grandfathers regaled her with tales of riding horses, herding cattle and hunting on the plains of South Texas. They had already both retired from their cowboy lives on the land, and from hunting as well. Mejia and her little sister were just starting to interact with the natural world around them, catching Gulf Coast toads (*Incilius valliceps*) in their backyard and luring antlions out of their dens with calls of "torito," or "little bull." Thanks to the tales she'd heard, Mejia was always curious about hunting. But there was nowhere she could easily go to do it.

"Texas is a private lands state, so getting access to go hunt was pretty difficult," she said. She signed up with the Texas Youth Hunting Program, a partnership of Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Texas Wildlife Association. She harvested her first buck in eighth grade and was hooked.

More than two decades later, after studying environmental conservation and wildlife science, Mejia is drawing on her own experiences to help young Texans grow their relationship with the outdoors.

WE'RE NOT IN SOUTH TEXAS ANYMORE

Though Mejia was born and raised in Laredo, people often ask if she has family

▲ **Masi Mejia explains to students different types of technology used on East Foundation ranches at the organization's Behind the Gates program.**
Emily Stribling

in Mexico. But her family always lived on the northern side of the Rio Grande since "before Texas became Texas," she said.

In high school, Mejia had grand aspirations of becoming U.S. secretary of the interior and making decisions about the nation's public lands. To study wildlife biology, Mejia left Laredo for Lubbock to attend Texas Tech University in 2009. At the time she started her education, the school—especially her department of natural resources management—wasn't very diverse. "It was not until I left for college that I fully recognized the extent of Laredo's predominantly Hispanic identity," she said.

While the school is now designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, meaning at least 25% of the university's student body is Hispanic, the lack of ethnic diversity within her department 15 years ago was a challenge, Mejia said.

She stayed at Texas Tech until she finished her master's degree in 2016. She studied human dimensions, looking at the factors that influenced wildlifers to enter the field. Mejia found that white men, who make up the majority of wildlife professionals, are often drawn to the discipline because they have a hunting or fishing background. That trend was different across identity groups. "A lot of the smaller groups, like ethnic minorities or women, are drawn to the field because they have an academic science interest," Mejia said.

These findings reflected her own journey into wildlife. When she was 13, a wildlife biologist with the Texas Youth Hunters Program showed her how to field dress a deer. He identified and named all the different parts of the animal's anatomy, and Mejia realized that she wanted to pursue wildlife biology. "The hunt was fine," she said. "But looking at the anatomy was way cooler."

EDUCATING TOMORROW'S ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS

After graduating with her master's in wildlife biology, Mejia moved to Idaho to start a Ph.D. program. She moved back to Texas before finishing, though. "Life happened," Mejia said. She wasn't done with wildlife, though, and landed a job at East Foundation, an agricultural research organization that promotes the advancement of land stewardship through ranching science and education. Across their six ranches, East Foundation aims to demonstrate how profitable cattle ranches and biodiversity can coexist.

Mejia has been with the foundation for nearly a decade. She started as an educator on a two-year contract but was hired full time after her first year on the job. As an educator, she focuses on making the science that East Foundation conducts on their ranches relevant to middle and high school students. "My current role is getting students excited and showing them, regardless of their interests, how wildlife and land stewardship are important to them," she said.

One way she connects with students is through Minecraft, a video game popular among middle schoolers that features ocelots (*Leopardus pardalis*). East Foundation's ranches have about 30 of the roughly 100 ocelots left in the United States. By linking the ocelots on the ranch with pop culture, Mejia can reach her students in new ways. "They're surprised that it's not just this jungle cat, but it's here in South Texas," she said.

▲ **Mejia shows visiting students a preserved Texas spiny lizard (*Sceloporus olivaceus*).**
Jonathan Vail

Helen Holdsworth, the director of stewardship education at the Witte Museum, has known Mejia since she was 13 years old and attended the South Texas Bobwhite Brigade. Even then, she recognized Mejia's strong work ethic, grit and intelligence. Mejia then worked for Holdsworth as a summer student employee. "Although serious when it

▲ **Mejia shows students a green jay (*Cyanocorax luxuosus*), explaining the purpose of museum specimens.**
Jonathan Vail

came to work, she kept her sense of humor under pressure," Holdsworth said.

Now that Mejia is the manager of education outcomes at East Foundation, she and Holdsworth work together on high school education programming. "Working with her now, I admire her work ethic," Holdsworth said. "But I really admire how she is always looking for ways to uplift others."

When students come to East Foundation's ranches for in-the-field learning, the students take a before and after assessment so Mejia can better quantify what the students are learning. This helps ensure that visiting students reach their science standards, Mejia said—evidence that convinces school principals to keep sending their pupils. "It's powerful when you can show that having these students come out to the ranch is important," she said.

JAVELINA CHICHARRONES

Mejia attended her first meeting of the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society in San Antonio in 2011. "It felt right to align myself with the professional organization to reach my career goals," she said. And Mejia has met them. Now, she's the president-elect of the Texas Chapter, one of TWS' biggest state chapters with around 800 members.

In her term, Mejia plans to open up committees so that anyone in the chapter can join. Currently, the executive leadership chooses who's going to be on their committees. "We're such a big chapter, and there are so many people I haven't met who have skills that would be beneficial to the chapter," she said.

Since she first joined the chapter in 2009, Mejia has seen it change in a few ways. The chapter is more diverse, in the backgrounds of its members and in their academic interests. For example, there's now a human dimensions working group, which didn't exist when she was completing her master's degree in the 2010s. Mejia said there's also been a shift in the way chapter members connect with wildlife. "I think there used to be a lot more hook-and-bullet individuals," she said. But now, there are more members who partake in other nonconsumptive forms of environmental recreation, like bird watching.

Mejia herself is still a hunter, although she doesn't go as much as she might like. In January, she harvested a javelina (*Pecari tajacu*) from a wildlife management area near her home. She and her family made javelina *chicharrones*, or fried pork belly. The result? "Delicious," she declared. ■

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