



Turning of the Tide

Connected by a love for the natural world and a commitment to preserve it for their children, three new dads decide to revitalize and steward one acre of salt marsh on the Charleston peninsula. A new kind of conservation group is born.

By Kathryn Davé
Photography by Joel Caldwell

Charleston's saltwater marsh ecosystem is like a sponge—a wild buffer that filters pollutants and absorbs excess rainwater to mitigate flooding; (below) Blake Suárez, co-founder of The M.A.R.S.H. Project, removes litter from the marsh.



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Maybe the most destructive force to the climate is not fossil fuels or deforestation or corporate greed, but futility. As human impact on the planet has worsened, so has the collective outlook. Many of us live with a deep resignation about the state of the world, a sense that it's too late to do anything—so we do nothing. Now, if anyone gets a brief pass on trying to save the planet, it's brand-new parents navigating life in the midst of a global pandemic. But for three Charleston neighbors who had all just welcomed their first child, the moment had the opposite effect. Action, of any scale, felt more necessary than ever before. So they applied the lessons of their season of life: baby steps add up.

Blake Suárez, Joel Caldwell, and Dr. Blake Scott are the founders of The M.A.R.S.H. (Marsh Appreciation and Restoration Society for Happiness) Project, a grassroots and community-based program working to revitalize and advocate for the unique marshland ecosystems in Charleston, South Carolina. It's a long name for an effort that began with a simple question among three new-ish dads. What if we could revitalize and steward just one acre of the marsh in our neighborhood?

In 2022, they planned a casual clean-up of the marsh located across the street from Scott. They invited a few friends. When about 50 eager volunteers showed up, they realized

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the community was hungry for a chance to connect with the natural world. “We saw that a lot of people were itching for the same thing. They just wanna be out in the wild. And this is the closest thing we have to the wild on the peninsula,” says Suárez.

Beyond the peace that the salty air, call of birds, and gentle squish of pluff mud provide, the salt marsh plays an enormous role in protecting Charleston and the diverse wildlife and landscapes that surround her. “Charleston is plagued by daylight flooding,” explains Suárez, “and the salt marsh is designed by Mother Nature to be like a sponge.”

A vast, dynamic buffer between land and sea, the salt marsh ecosystem filters upstream water of pollutants before it reaches the ocean and absorbs excess rainwater, helping to protect shorelines from storm surge, erosion, and flooding. As sea levels rise and Charleston experiences more frequent flooding, the role of the marsh as guardian grows ever more critical. The marsh needs protecting so it can continue to protect us.

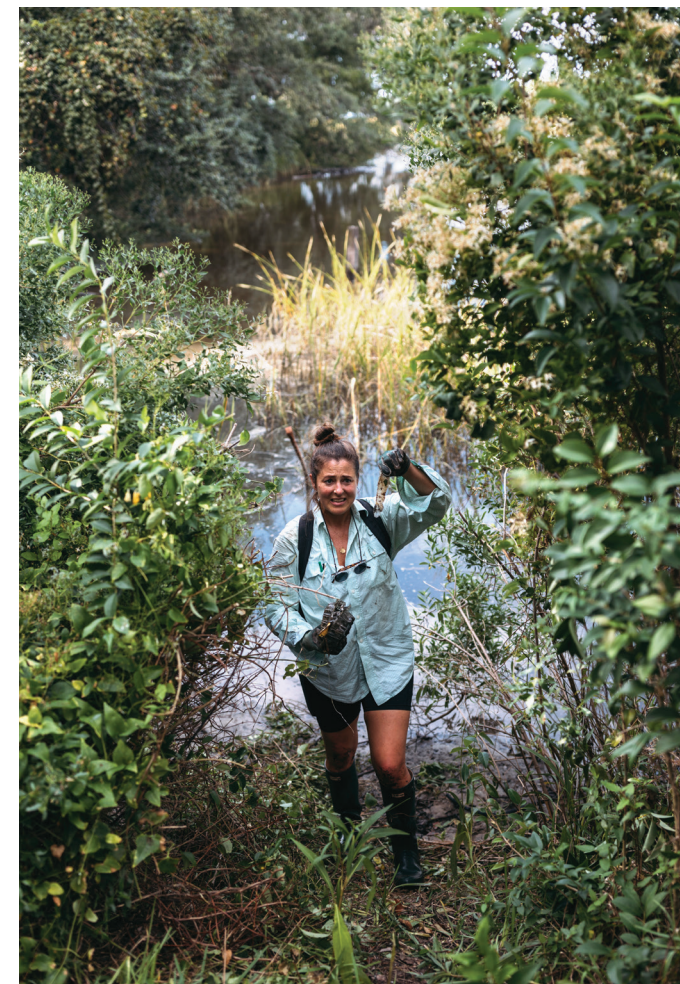
Suárez, Caldwell, and Scott first imagined their efforts as a loose personal project—more of a commitment to spend time out in the marsh and bring their families along than a formal vision for establishing a 501(c)3. They are a trio of friends and neighbors who all happened to have their first child around the same time and all live within a stone's throw of Halsey Creek, one of the last unfilled tidal creeks on the Charleston peninsula. None work in climate science or conservation. Suárez is a graphic designer; Caldwell, a photographer and writer, and Scott, a college professor of international studies. What they share is deep individual passion for the environment that each of them has woven into their professional work: Suárez designing for environmentally conscious brands, Caldwell telling stories for national organizations about the natural environment, and Scott teaching and writing about environmental change.

Along the way, they became curious about the potential of ecological restoration. “In my journey of telling conservation stories, it started to feel like the best conservation story is just . . . things not getting worse,” says Caldwell. “Then I started coming across stories of restoration and re-wilding, stories of things going from bad to better, or bad to pristine . . . and that became my obsession.” During the early years of the pandemic, Suárez, Caldwell, and Scott read Doug Tallamy’s book *Nature’s Best Hope*, which convinced them that the most impactful changes they could make for the climate were the small ones just outside their own front doors.

The M.A.R.S.H. Project is their attempt to apply what they’ve learned. In less than two years since its founding, the organization has led regular waterway clean-ups, planted native plant species to attract pollinators and promote biodiversity, collected native seeds, provided citizen-science monitoring, hosted lectures and educational events, and fostered awareness and advocacy in the community—and they’ve done it all with their little ones in tow. “I don’t remember ever knowing the name of a native plant, let alone its Latin name. But my daughter at three years old was pointing out coreopsis and identifying bugs,” laughs Suárez.

Swipe through photos from T.M.P.’s events and you’ll see tiny girls in pigtails. Bigger kids in muddy boots. And plenty of grown-ups working hard with wide grins. The relaxed, optimistic, and, yes, fun vibe of T.M.P.’s workdays and outreach is very intentional. Caldwell points out that for years,

Whether cleaning up the creek or planting native plants, The M.A.R.S.H. Project volunteers of all ages aren’t afraid to get their hands muddy.



the predominant language of the climate movement has been dismal and alarming, which can leave people feeling paralyzed. “Being an environmentalist doesn’t have to be all heartbreak and sacrifice. What we’re trying to do with The M.A.R.S.H. Project is to say: Everybody can do something and this is what you can do,” Caldwell says.

The decision to share a friendly, accessible approach to ecological restoration is paying off. Thanks to their creative collaborations and actionable optimism, T.M.P.’s efforts are resonating with the local community. With each event they host, the number of volunteers and attendees keeps growing. In response to such traction, last year The M.A.R.S.H. Project was adopted as a program of the Carolina Ocean Alliance, a Charleston-based nonprofit working to protect, preserve, and restore South Carolina’s coastal ecosystems. The partnership was a natural

fit. “We all have the same interest in protecting our waterways, and that really starts at the creek,” says Suárez. Coming under the COA’s umbrella shifted the administrative burden of nonprofit status away from the founders of T.M.P., freeing them to focus on advocacy, awareness, and the actual hands-in-the-pluff-mud work of re-wilding.

The M.A.R.S.H. Project is young, like the children who helped inspire it, and the founders have to fit their eco-restoration work around all the demands of ordinary life. Still, that hasn’t slowed down their dreaming. The M.A.R.S.H. Project has embarked on creating an ecological corridor across the Charleston peninsula: encouraging residents to plant native plants in a vibrant swath of land that will connect creek to creek. The proposed ecological corridor is a perfect example of the small, domino-effect

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decisions the founders believe can transform the landscape over time. “Beyond just putting plants in the ground, we really want The M.A.R.S.H. Project to be an imagination factory,” says Caldwell. “We need people to come together and realize that all is not lost. We need to imagine a brighter future so that we can live toward it.”

Life creates life. In our modern climate crisis, this is the story we so often forget to tell. The carefully restored areas along Halsey Creek are healthy and thriving. All around the neighborhood, traditional lawns have been re-wilded, attracting new choirs of native insects and birds. The three founders of T.M.P. have all recently welcomed their second child, the newest additions to family workdays in the marsh. The community of neighbors and volunteers who support T.M.P. grows more dynamic and strong as time passes—like the marsh itself. It’s not hard to imagine a future like this for yourself, they would say. You just have to go outside and plant it. **V**

Follow The M.A.R.S.H. Project at themarshproject.com and on Instagram at [@marsh_project](https://www.instagram.com/marsh_project).

(below) Volunteering is an all-in experience; (opposite) Blake Scott (far left) and Suárez (far right), two of the group’s three founders, lead a volunteer waterway clean-up initiative.

