Prepared for Life? The Boy Scouts of America, with James Sy (Ep. 10)

https://houstonnature.com/10

Nivien Saleh: Why is the Eagle Scout such a big deal?

I'm Nivien Saleh, with Houston and Nature.

A friend with management experience once told me this: Assume two equally qualified people apply for the same leadership position. The only difference between the applicants is that one is an Eagle Scout and the other one isn't. In that scenario the hiring manager will likely give the job to the Eagle Scout.

"Wow," I said, "I had no idea!"

Sure, I vaguely knew that an Eagle Scout was a high-ranking boy scout. But why would something you do as a pre-teen and teenager have any bearing on your career as a thirty year-old?

Then I got the opportunity to learn the secrets of the Eagle Scout first hand, from James Sy, a young Houstonian who achieved that coveted title with Houston's Troop 55.

James helped me understand that in a world of television and video games, the Boy Scouts of America are an important venue for nature education. He also has a few misgivings about the organization, which he shared with me. Lastly, James explained why the Eagle Scout is such a remarkable accomplishment.

In a minute I'll share all that with you. First though …

Nature Journaling, with Kristi Pierce

… a quick look at a Facebook group you might be interested in: The Houston Nature Journaling Club. Its admin is Kristi Pierce. Nature journaling, says Kristi ….

Kristi Pierce:… is keeping a record of what you observe in the natural world, it can include the weather conditions , colors, Anything that you see in front of you. And it provides a record of daily occurrences in your own personalized way.

Nivien Saleh: Keeping a record of the natural world is one reason why you might want to do journaling. Centering yourself is another.

Kristi Pierce: You're getting in that state of mindfulness, where you're free from your distractions. It connects you to nature, gives you a sense of place and connectedness with the natural world.

Nivien Saleh: With all the technology that surrounds us, the attention span of children has shrunk. So nature journaling, says Kristi, is especially good for them.

Kristi Pierce: Giving them that moment to observe what they see and pick out field markings on a bird or matching colors from a crayon box even. It's those keen observation skills that get developed through journaling with children and adults.

Nivien Saleh: You don't have to be a sketch artist to do journaling - which is really good for me because I can't draw. But how do you get started?

Kristi Pierce: As you're looking at your observations, think in terms of shapes. What shape is the bird? Is it an oval? And do what they call the 30 second sketch. You're going to look at your observation, blindly draw and you'd be surprised how good your sketch is

Nivien Saleh: Well okay, my sketch really wouldn't be that great. But the idea of filling it out with those portable watercolor pencils sounds enticing.

Kristi Pierce: The fun part of nature journals is looking back and going, "Wow, that's my reflection of what I saw in that moment. That's how I felt." And you remember the sketch where you wouldn't have remembered that day otherwise.

Nivien Saleh: Normally the group would get together in person and explore the outdoors. But for the time being they meet on Facebook. And they welcome new members. So if this sounds enticing to you, look them up. I'll post the link to the Facebook group on HoustonNature.com/10. That's HoustonNature.com and the number 10.

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On to scouting with James Sy!

What exactly is Boy Scouts of America?

Nivien Saleh: You're from the Boy Scouts of America.

James Sy: That's right.

Nivien Saleh: Imagine you speak to somebody who has never heard about the Boy Scouts of America before. What would you tell them what it is?

James Sy: The Boy Scouts of America is an organization for young boys, starting from the ages of seven or eight with the cub scouts. That's the organization that feeds into the Boy Scouts. You start out as a cub scout usually, or you can go straight into the Boy Scouts. It's an opportunity for boys to have camaraderie with each other and to learn life skills as well as

how to preserve nature and survive in the wilderness. That last part is a bit overstated, and that's what most people think Boy Scouts is. But I think it's more about learning compassion, respect, responsibility and honesty with a bunch of like-minded boys. And to_spend time away from school, away from being lazy at home, which is what my parents personally signed me up for.

I was able to go out and be with some of my friends and some of the boys that I've never met before in an unfamiliar territory, kayaking, paddling, hiking, learning how to set up a tent and just sleeping in nature. And it's just an incredibly rewarding experience to thrive out in nature on your own intuition alone.

Nivien Saleh: And learn problem solving, right?

James Sy: Absolutely.

Is Boy Scouts Of American Now Inviting Girls?

Nivien Saleh: Most people will have heard that over the last few years Boy Scouts of America has invited girls to join.

James Sy: That's right.

Nivien Saleh: What does what does that mean for the organization?

James Sy: I haven't had enough exposure to the new era of integration between girl scouts like the girls into the Boy Scouts. So I haven't formed an opinion, but the more conservative parents and scout leaders think that it's flying in the face of convention and that it's not right. And that there are things that boys should be doing that are exclusive to boys. A lot of them point to the fact that the Girl Scouts exist. But honestly I think that it's okay because I don't think it's a boy-girl thing. I think it's valuable for all children to be experiencing the virtues of scouting.

Nivien Saleh: My understanding is that Boy Scouts haven't gone co-ed anyways, right? Girls have their own communities within Boy Scouts of America, and boys.

James Sy: That's right .

But it's like a partnership . I'll take my troop for example. I'm a member of Troop 55 out of Houston, Texas, and St. John the Divine Church. So St.John the Divine Church also hosts Troop 54, which is an all-girls troop. But they're both Boys Scout troops. Or officially Scout troops.

I think the name went from Boy Scouts of America to Scouts BSA .

I think that was done in attempt to minimize the boy part of the name

Nivien Saleh: To degender it a little bit.

James Sy: I would say so

Nivien Saleh: It's a little confusing though.

James Sy: I agree because the boy's still in the BSA.

What's a Boy Scout Troop?

Nivien Saleh: You just mentioned your troop. What role does a troop play in scouting?

James Sy: A troop is a home base for scouting. Your troop is your family basically. It's how you advance. You advance by yourself, but you're aided by your troop. So your troop gives you events to advance, events to earn merit badges. And your troop organizes your campouts and your meetings, and you get to know a lot of the boys in your troop. I would say 99% of the boys in my troop are from the same zip code.

Nivien Saleh: Hmm. Okay So from that area around the school.

James Sy: Exactly. It's actually around a church.

Nivien Saleh: Oh yeah, I heard that from early times on the troops were sponsored by churches very often.

James Sy: Many of them still are. I'd say the majority of them are ... still.

Nivien Saleh: Within the troops there are smaller units, right?

James Sy: That's right

Nivien Saleh: They're called what?

James Sy: Patrols.

Nivien Saleh: And how does that work?

James Sy: Patrols are around seven to 15 boys. And those are subsets of the troop. So for example you would stay in a campsite with your patrol. It's not just the whole troop bunched together. The troops would split into patrols, and the patrol's boys would camp together for the night.

Nivien Saleh: A troop might be maybe a hundred people? And a patrol maybe 10, would you say?

James Sy: I can't really speak for other troops but my troop has more than 250 boys.

Nivien Saleh: 250.

James Sy: That's right. And then that means my patrols are on the bigger side around 15 to 16 boys.

Nivien Saleh: Okay.

And you go about your activities on camp outs with your patrol. You camp with your patrol, you eat with your patrol, you do activities with your patrol, and usually you do lessons and advancements with your patrol.

Nivien Saleh: Over your several year career in the Scouts, do you change patrols or do you stay with the same patrol for most of the time?

James Sy: I can't speak for other troops, but since my troop was so large, we were able to split into new scout patrols, then regular patrols, then the older scout patrols. That nature of being only new and younger scouts is that they're able to all work together to get those first couple of ranks done. And I'd say most scouts drop out before first class.

The rank system goes from scout, which is unranked. Then your first rank is tenderfoot, then second class and then first class. And then there's an astronomical leap between the requirements for second class and those for first class. Most scouts drop out before first class because, one, they're getting older to the point where their school starts to take over their lives, as well as the fact that there's so many requirements, things that you have to learn to achieve that first class rank. Past first class there's star scout and then life scout and an eagle scout.

Nivien Saleh: Hmm.

James Sy: Past first class scout there's a lot less of the the practical skills and more of the self-taught, self-guided. The epitome of that is the eagle scout project.

Nivien Saleh: Hmm. The reason why I asked you about patrols is because you say the troop is your family. But within the troop perhaps a patrol is an even tighter family - sort of your nuclear family. And if you stay with the same people over several years that means that you forge fairly strong bonds within a patrol. Is that correct?

James Sy: Not quite because you actually change patrols. The new scout patrols, by the time they reach second class or first class, they're moved to regular patrols within the troop. I'd say the distribution is 5 percent, 80 percent, 15 percent. So 5 percent is the older scout patrols, 80% is the middle bunch, and 15 percent's new scouts.

Nivien Saleh: Hmm.

James Sy: So most of the troop is in regular patrols. And once a scout gets to life or eagle rank they move up to an older scout patrol. In my troop there are only two of those, whereas there're eight or nine regular middle scout patrols and five or six younger scout patrols.

How Many Scout Troops Are In The Houston Area?

Nivien Saleh: How many scout troops are there in the Houston area?

James Sy: Most scout troops are less than 40 people. My Troop 55 is I think the second largest in the country behind one troop in LA. With that in mind there's gotta be 80 to a hundred troops in the Greater Houston area.

Nivien Saleh: Wow.

James Sy: It's a lot.

Nivien Saleh: Scouting is alive and well in Houston.

James Sy: Absolutely

Nivien Saleh: You're of Chinese descent right? I read about the history of scouting, and I understand that it's a worldwide phenomenon. Do you know if in China you find scouting? ?

James Sy: I'm actually not of Chinese heritage.

My father is Filipino, my mother's from Hong Kong.

Nivien Saleh: Sorry

James Sy: No worries No worries.

The Boy Scouts In Hong Kong And The Philippines

Nivien Saleh: Sorry for misplacing you. In Hong Kong and in the Philippines is scouting strong?

James Sy: I can't speak for the Philippines. But as for Hong Kong as a former British colony, since the Boy Scouts were established in the UK , Boy Scouts is very much alive in Hong Kong - in a similar format to the U.S., except of course there are fewer opportunities to get out into the wilderness .

Nivien Saleh: Yeah it's a tiny area with great population density.

James Sy: Exactly. So I'd say scouting's alive and well in Hong Kong.

Nivien Saleh: And did that play any role in you becoming a scout here because perhaps your parents knew some of that scouting heritage from when they grew up and therefore they thought "Why don't you step in our footsteps?" Or did you learn more about it from your group of people here in Houston?

James Sy: It's more of the latter. I don't think heritage played much of a role in my parents' and my decision to do the Boy Scouts and stick with it. I think it was more because many of my classmates go to the St. John the Divine Church where the troop is held . So they were exposed to scouting at a young age by virtue of being a member of the church. That influenced me because my friends' parents would be telling my parents "Oh is James gonna do the boy scout thing or the cub scout thing?" It was a result of the community around me rather than my heritage.

Do The Boy Scouts Of America Welcome Scouts Who Do Not Belong To Monotheistic Religions?

Nivien Saleh: Yeah that makes sense. Now your troop is sponsored by a church, the Scout Oath starts out with a words, "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law." That makes me wonder: Does Troop 55 welcome potential scouts that are not from monotheistic religions?

James Sy: Christianity is the foremost monotheistic religion that's emphasized by scouting. The influence of Christianity on scouting has lessened over time, but it's still very much there. And it's something that I disagree with, as I believe you can foster a love for the natural world and for these virtues that scouting emphasizes without bringing religion into the mix. To this point: Of course my troop is still held out of a church. And that puts religion in an inextricable bond with scouting. For my troop in particular, because it's so big and there's so many different perspectives and viewpoints and cultures, religion isn't emphasized as much. But I would say that for a smaller troop - say one of 15 to 20 people where all of those scouts attend the church that the troop's held out of - religion would be much more prevalent .

And so to advance upper rank you must complete a court of honor where three adult scout leaders question you about your morality as well as your accomplishments to assess whether or not you're ready to advance. And for my eagle scout court of honor I was talking to my scout master out of Troop 55. And he asked me about religion. And of course I'm a comfortable agnostic. So this posed a bit of a an issue for me. He said there aren't many things that the court of honor will outright reject you for. But one of the things is if you deny religion. So I had to fabricate something.

Nivien Saleh: Well what does it mean: Deny religion? You can't deny religion because it's everywhere. I mean religions exist.

James Sy: I would say deny your belief in or show that you do not have a belief whether it be spiritual or religion or an established religion.

Nivien Saleh: So the issue is following an established religion?

James Sy: The emphasis is on established religion. But I think over time it's been acceptable to have some form of spirituality as well. But I think religion's the underlying goal of the Boy Scouts or an underlying goal of the Boy Scouts. Like you said it's in the Scout Oath, and it's tied into many of the foundations of scouting.

Nivien Saleh: As I read about the history of scouting and found out that it's an international movement I think Baden-Powell the founder of the Scouts made accommodations for other faiths . And I think globally within scouting it works to have different faith traditions, right?

James Sy: Right. Which is why I was alluding to that a spirituality as well as established religion. But I just think that in the U.S. It's more of a Christian thing than anything.

What's Troop 55 Like?

Nivien Saleh: Okay Thank you. What is the scouting experience in Troop 55 like generally? Do you guys have weekly meetings? Do you go camping once a month?

James Sy: I would say that Troop 55 as one of the largest troops in the nation has advantages that aren't afforded to many other troops, and I'm blessed to have been a part of it. We're able to have one camp-out every month for the months that scouting is active. So I think that's from about August until May. And then we have weekly meetings every Tuesday at the church. At those meetings we go over advancement. So it'd be an older scout going up to the front to teach knots or to teach first aid or to talk about one of scouting's virtues like trustworthiness, loyalty, kindness. And the campouts are um well it really depends on where you would go. For example if you if we were going to onto the Padre Island, one of the activities would be swimming at the beach . But of course there's camping at every single campsite. There's never lodging or housing , cause that's cheating.

On the second night of each campout - which is usually Sunday night - it'll be all the patrols gathering around a large campfire - and they'd perform skits. So these are funny little sketches. Each patrol does one. And a lot of them revolve around camp life or the outdoors. It's just a method of releasing energy before sleep. And at that campfire usually the host gives a little speech, our scout master gives a speech, and afterwards the most looked forward-to thing is the cracker barrel. So it's a stash of little snacks and treats that the ...

Do Scouts Roast Marshmallows?

Nivien Saleh: Marshmallows! That's what I wanted to ask you! Are there marshmallows being roasted?

James Sy: I'd say it's less common than you would think. Making smores is an absolute logistical nightmare because you got to source the chocolate and the crackers, you got to make sure kids don't because sugar is very flammable. So I've seen it more than once where a younger scout overcooks their marshmallow, and there's a little fire that burns on the dry grass for a couple of minutes before it's stomped out.

Nivien Saleh: I had no idea that sugar is very flammable.

James Sy: Well I think it's cause marshmallows has pockets of air between the uh this

Nivien Saleh: Yeah

James Sy: Yeah

Nivien Saleh: It sounds like real fun

James Sy: It does. Yeah.

The Merit Badge System

Nivien Saleh: When you came here you showed me your sash with lots of merit badges on it. A feature of scouting is that it has a merit badge system through which you advance in your skill level. Tell me about that.

James Sy: Right. So the foundational merit badges there are 21 of them. And for your eagle scout rank you're required to earn all 21. Of course many scouts do more than 21. I think I have 28 or 29. But I there are about 150 total, and some scouts go the extra mile and get all 150. And that's absolutely just incredible that they're able to do that.

Nivien Saleh: 150 is a lot.

James Sy: It takes a bunch of time. Depending on the badge It can take a year.

Nivien Saleh: Wow.

James Sy: For example for the personal fitness merit badge you have to log all of your physical activity for a couple of months, and then you have to do two physical tests , so it's like running a certain distance, and then you must improve your time on the second run. It's things like that that make these merit badges very difficult - depending on which ones: fingerprinting you can knock out in one afternoon, but personal fitness it'll take you a couple months.

Nivien Saleh: Especially if you don't cheat on the first run you know where you're a little slower than you could be.

James Sy: Exactly. So those merit badges are auxiliary to the main rank advancements. Other than those 21 that are required for your advancement the skills that you learn in your

merit badges often don't overlap with the core rank advancements. There's also - let's see - a programming merit badge or space exploration merit badge that have absolutely no bearing on uh your rank advancement.

Did You Use The Merit Badges To Explore Your Vision For Your Future?

Nivien Saleh: Did you use the merit badge system to explore what you wanted your future to look like? How did you approach the merit badges?

James Sy: Well the way that I approached my merit badges was I went for the ones that I knew a little bit about because there's some studying and research required. I'll use plant science for an example . For the plant science merit badge I had to research native plants, invasive plants to my region. I had to grow a plot of soybeans, alfalfa, and corn or something. I also had to research common like agricultural methods

Nivien Saleh: Cool!

James Sy: But most of them I took my previous knowledge so that I would be able to have more discussion with my merit badge counselor and less research. So I would be more informed right off the bat so that I could get into the actual merit badge portion instead of the preparation portion. But there were some merit badges that I had to prepare for.

Nivien Saleh: And why did you do that? Because you didn't want to do that much research? Because you don't have that much time? Because your school life is already imposing so much on you?

James Sy: Exactly. For the first couple of merit badges usually the troop helps you out with them. The troop sometimes holds events where in one afternoon you can do all of the requirements for, say, the first aid merit badge . And there are also merit badge camps wherein younger scouts over a week are able to earn four merit badges. So obviously that's a very fun way of doing it. But after those first couple of merit badge classes and those merit badge camps it's mostly on the scout themselves to have the initiative to go out and do them. And at that time schoolwork was weighing down on me pretty heavily. That was when I started high school. So there was only so much time that I was willing to sacrifice for scouts that could have gone to my schoolwork.

Nivien Saleh: Yeah of course I mean you can't do everything

James Sy: Exactly

Nivien Saleh: All right. Nature. We talked a little bit about that already.

James Sy: Right on

What Nature Adventures Does Boy Scouts of America Offer?

Nivien Saleh: I read in the Scout Handbook - is it called the Scout Handbook? Yeah: "By becoming a scout you're following in the footsteps of millions of youth over the past century who laced up their hiking boots and set off on great adventures in the outdoors."

James Sy: Big cliché but we'll go with it.

Nivien Saleh: Tell me why it's a cliché.

James Sy: Well the nature exploration portion of scouting is a bit overstated. That's the reason that many boys join, and they're often dismayed that there's less of that and more of just sitting in a church room listening to their scout leaders talk about respect, because as young boys they just want to go out run in the woods and not listen to some adults talk.

So great adventures in the outdoors - when scouts hear that they think "Oh it's like going out to Alaska and surviving by yourself for two weeks!" But it's more of just going out into the forest of Chapel Hill, Texas, and just running around and looking at the birds and stuff. More of it's how you create the adventure around your surroundings rather than how your surroundings create your adventure.

Nivien Saleh: You don't need Alaska if you're just willing to look in the forest of Chapel Hill and just look really closely and you'd be surprised at all the stuff that comes at you. So yeah .

James Sy: That's right.

Nivien Saleh: Um

James Sy: I'll say Chapel Hill is more of like just like grassy hills.

Nivien Saleh: Oh, okay.

James Sy: Yeah I misspoke Not really forests.

Nivien Saleh: I've never been to Chapel Hill. So I wouldn't know.

James Sy: You're not missing much. Sorry to anybody who's from Chapel Hill.

How Important Is Conservation In Scouting?

Nivien Saleh: You say that the great nature adventure is an exaggeration . But how important is conservation in particular - not lacing up your boots and exploring but conserving nature. How important is that in scouting?

James Sy: That's more important than the exploration aspect. Just from an explicit standpoint the life scout and star scout requirements contain a community service portion.

And it was recently changed that half of your community service has to be for conservation-related purposes.

For Troop 55, when we go to a ranch or a bayou for a camp out, there would always be a conservation segment - whether that'd be pulling invasives or going out and clearing brush or what else was there. And that was a requirement. Whereas many of the other activities you could opt out of - paddling down the river - you couldn't opt out of the conservation. So I think there was a huge emphasis on that.

Nivien Saleh: And would you say those conservation efforts are beneficial for the development of a scout or would you rather see more adventure?

James Sy: I think that you can really have both, honestly.

Nivien Saleh: Okay.

James Sy: You can make that conservation effort into an adventure, because with a more enthusiastic worker or volunteer they're gonna have more of a passion to do conservation work. What I'm trying to say is: If you make the conservation work seem like an adventure, which in many times it is, nature will benefit because of it. But if you make it seem like tedious chore, heavy lifting, backbreaking labor, then the scouts are going to tire quickly .

Nivien Saleh: So it's all about leadership, isn't it?

James Sy: I would say so .

Nivien Saleh: You have become you have become an eagle scout. And for that you did a capstone project. Your eagle scout project is about conserving and restoring natural spaces.

James Sy: Absolutely.

What Does Conservation Mean To You Personally?

Nivien Saleh: What does conservation mean to you personally?

James Sy: Well I think conservation is the act of maintaining the state or bettering the state of a natural resource or area to the point where it can persist to future generations.

Nivien Saleh: Okay great. So you gave me a great answer to the question : What does conservation mean? I think what I really meant was: What does it mean to you? How important is it to you?

James Sy: It's incredibly important. I'll explain. Conservation has been with me since I've been very young. My parents instilled in me the values of leaving it better than you found it. That's one of the sayings that they use the most. And that's a saying that I've heard in Boy

Scouts a lot. My parents would always take me out to Buffalo Bayou. They would take me out to Galveston and all along the Gulf Coast. And they would show me the beauty of nature. They told me that there are many things that are happening right now that have been brought on by human development. That means that these incredible beaches and forests and plains and rivers may not be there for my kids and my kids' kids. That really instilled in me a love for the natural world and a sense of duty towards it .

When I was younger I had this same love for the natural world, but I didn't have that sense of duty yet. The Boy Scouts really helped me cultivate that attachment and that vow to protect the Earth that gave us life. And I think that's awesome. That's been a big part of my life for a long time.

An Eagle Scout Project On Buffalo Bayou

Nivien Saleh: The specific project that you did was planting willows on a stretch of Buffalo Bayou. Tell me about that.

James Sy: So I actually have this picture here. I worked with the Memorial Park Conservancy, which is the governing body of the Memorial Park. This is a drone picture. This is Buffalo Bayou South of North picnic lane. See like this bend of the river? After hurricane Harvey you saw a lot of erosion on the Buffalo Bayou because of the floods and the higher volume of water that was coming . The water's whipping around at a very high velocity. If you compare this patch to a patch just just up the bank you see it's night and day. This patch should look like green lush very thick canopy. Right here you see some low shrubs and you see some dead trees, and there's not much ground cover. So the problem with that is that there's nothing to anchor the sediment to the embankment. So as this water comes around this bend, you have the potential for very disastrous erosion.

Nivien Saleh: You have water coming at high velocity. It needs to go around the curve because that's how the bayou is shaped. And as it goes around the curve it sweeps up a lot of that sand that it shaves off. And that's how you get more erosion.

James Sy: Exactly. Once stretches like these become eroded, that affects the urban forest land, which is of course incredibly valuable to the health of the city and to the health of the wildlife within these parks.

Nivien Saleh: And when you say it affects the forest landscape, we're talking about Memorial park.

James Sy: That's right. That's the main urban forest within Houston.

Nivien Saleh: So your goal was to prevent that erosion.

James Sy: That's right. There's some erosion you can see but it wasn't to a point where it was unsalvageable. We were really encouraged by those low shrubs and grasses on the

embankment that still remained. That gave us faith that it was still salvageable, It was still conservable.

Nivien Saleh: And what do you mean by "us"? Who is "we"?

James Sy: Well, I worked at the Memorial Park Conservancy and with their forestry experts. So that's Daniel Walton as well as Ms. Janice Walden, who was my Eagle scout advisor . Her and Mr Walton provided the intellectual backing for the project. Of course I had to do research, but my knowledge couldn't hold a light to what they knew . So we decided on this stretch of the Buffalo Bayou because it was accessible by a large group of scouts. There was a small slope down the Western end of the stretch, where we tied a rope to a tree and we rappelled ourselves down. We just held onto the rope and backed ourselves down the bank.

Nivien Saleh: I tried to go down that bank, and it's hard. There are places where you have to really hold on to stuff or else you just slip down

James Sy: Yeah. For sure.

That rope made it much easier. And those kids are like chimpanzees. They'll just cling onto anything. Those younger scouts, they have so much energy, and just they love to do it.

Making Conservation Exciting For Young Boy Scouts

Nivien Saleh: That's probably part of what makes this conservation project exciting. There's a rope and you can play Tarzan and ...

James Sy: Exactly what I was saying earlier about making it an adventure. We wanted to make it as as fun as possible because if it isn't enjoyable by your volunteers or by your workforce, they'll do a worse job of your conservation project as well as not being as enthusiastic to do it again.

And I think instilling that spirit of conservation into these scouts is one of the most important things that came out of this project. Many of the older conservationists they realize the value behind preserving nature. But these younger scouts haven't really learned that yet. So they're just doing it ... well many of the scouts did it because they knew me, and many of the scouts did it because of their requirements for their advancement.

Nivien Saleh: But we're jumping ahead, because first you told me about how you looked at that stretch of land and how it was prone to erosion. And now we're talking about a whole bunch of scouts going down on ropes. But there was some work in the middle.

James Sy: We can backtrack. We narrowed it down to three sites. And this is the site that was chosen of course because it was accessible but also because the embankment was at a

relatively shallow slope, which would allow the trees that we planted not to be washed away so easily.

Before I started any of this planning, I proposed the project. Initially my project actually started out with cleaning up trash on the Buffalo Bayou. And it evolved into this. And I worked with the forestry team at the Memorial Park Conservancy. They really taught me like what the issues facing this area were .

We went out and we did surveys.

Wee took tree cores. We went out to an established willow tree grove because my project was meant to plant willow trees. So we thought it'd be in our best interest to use nature as an end goal. We were trying to emulate a natural willow grove. So we took surveys of the density of the vegetation within those areas and also the variety of vegetation. Apart from the willow trees we saw green ash trees, box elders, which are very hardy trees that can't really survive in a barren stretch like this. After doing those surveys and after taking cores out of trees to see how long they've been there, we decided on the site, we visited it a bunch of times, and we decided "Okay we're going to plant this much of it. We're going to plant to this extent and in this density."

And one of the most important things is finding the sweet spot. We actually didn't plant trees all along the stretch because the stretch is about - I would say - 200 feet from the river to the where the vegetation started, so to the trail basically. We couldn't really plant at the very bottom because that would get washed away surely,

Nivien Saleh: yeah.

James Sy: There really wasn't enough sediment for the trees to anchor . So we had to plant them farther up, about two thirds of the way up on a 10 or 15 15 foot wide stretch. This 15 foot stretch ran laterally parallel to the river because that's where the trees had the best chance of surviving.

Why Plant Willow Trees On Buffalo Bayou?

Nivien Saleh: Why did you choose willow trees?

James Sy: The first reason we chose willow trees is because they grow quickly, and they're called primary growth. Primary growth is a kind of trailer blazer for the other species. These willow trees were able to take root very quickly and anchor the sediment to the embankment to allow other trees like that green ash and that box elder that I previously mentioned to come in and bring diversity and strength to the sediment.

Nivien Saleh: I understand that to plant a willow tree you take a stick, and then you chop it into a few shorter sticks, and then you just push them into the ground and it'll grow roots.

James Sy: That's right. It's called staking. So actually it works a lot like bamboo. Like bamboo you can chop any part of the the stalk and stick it in the ground, and it'll grow.

The reason that we decided to go with staking is because we didn't have an accessible source of young willow trees that we could uproot and replant, but there was a grove of willow trees beside the railroad tracks that go through the Memorial Park.

That's the site at which the Memorial Park was planning to do a brand new nature center. That was actually the site of a World War One training camp called Camp Logan. And the reason that area couldn't transform entirely into its previous nature like natural forest is because there are concrete foundations laid into the dirt. That inhibits growth. Of course strong enough tree roots can break through the concrete, but it's still an obstacle for smaller trees.

So we were able to go into that grove beside those concrete foundations and take out the willow trees so that Memorial Park could refurbish those foundations and use them for the nature center.

So going back to what I said about the staking: the stakes were about 18 to 24 inches, and they were cut at an angle on one end. This is actually a lot easier than planting trees in the conventional way, with which you have to take a shovel, and you have to dig into the ground, make a big enough hole, keep the trees at a very precise temperature, and you can only keep them in water for so long before you need to plant them. The stakes are a lot more flexible.

The stakes were taken from trees that were mature. We just cut the tree down, a couple boys and I. It was four four older boys and I because I don't think that younger kids have the same responsibility and cognizance of the dangers of using these sharp tools. So four older scouts and I went out on a Saturday morning, and we cut I think 275 stakes.

Um the Saturday after we took those stakes, we went out and planted. One of the advantage of having stakes instead of juvenile trees to plant is that the stakes can survive in a bucket of water for up to two weeks. But we decided that to maintain the feasibility of these stakes we would plant them as soon as possible. And as luck would have it or as fate would have it, the day right after we cut the stakes it was perfect weather to plant.

We went in with almost 30 scouts that day. I was a den chief in the Boy Scouts. That means I led cub scouts, which is like I said earlier the the younger pre-Boy Scouts, if you will, like the preschool. And as many of these scouts were now new scouts in the big boy troop, many of them knew me as their den chief. So I had a lot of them come out, and they were really eager to help - honestly because I did my best to make it fun for them.

Nivien Saleh: Cool.

James Sy: We carried the stakes down - not in like buckets or anything, but we actually made field gurneys. We took two long wooden poles, and then we put a tarp between them. It's the type of thing that you would use to carry an injured person out of a forest, but it was carrying stakes, and they loved it. It was a very mellow five-minute hike down to the embankment. And once they were there, the boys were absolutely chomping at the bit to get to work.

Nivien Saleh: Cool.

James Sy: I was concerned that these kids wouldn't want to work for three hours. And actually we had a bigger turnout than I was expecting. I was expecting only 12 to 14 scouts.

It had rained a couple of days before. The bottom of the embankment was mostly composed of clay. So it was like an ice skating rink at the very bottom. Fortunately for us we weren't planting at the very bottom. But if scouts were to navigate the embankment, they would have to occasionally go close to the edge, and I didn't want 30 scouts down to the edge.

So I decided to have Daniel Walton lead half of the group on a nature hike on the Memorial Park's trails to see if they could find birds or squirrels or just to blow off some energy . And while he was off on that nature hike I took the other half of the scouts down to the embankment using those gurneys that I mentioned earlier. We transported half the sakes down, and we actually finished much quicker than I anticipated.

We actually finished the first half of stakes in one hour. So these are 11, 12 year old boys. And having them man shovels for the whole day to plant in the traditional way I don't think that would have been very productive. But the advantage of the stakes is that they're able to take rubber mallets, which are very safe tools, and they were able to hold the stake perpendicular to the slope and just hammer it in, two thirds of the way in. It was simple work but rewarding and fun.

Nivien Saleh: So while the others were out there birding, your first group basically finished the job.

James Sy: They did almost two thirds of the work. And they didn't complain. One thing you see with these younger scouts doing conservation projects that aren't outdoors adventures or kayaking or hiking is that they tire out very quickly. They lose her attention spans very quickly. And of course I had to remedy that by leading songs and chants . I also ran around telling jokes, keeping their spirits up. And I was doing quality control. I was going around to see if one ambitious scout hadn't taken 50 of the stakes by themselves and put them all into a one-foot circle. So I had to actually uproot some of the stakes and have scouts plant them in a more even fashion. So when that second group came down, there weren't many stakes to finish.

Nivien Saleh: Good. It seems like that was excellent project management on your part. You managed their time, you managed the enthusiasm, you handled the safety. It seems like it was a very well thought-out project.

And the planting happened when?

James Sy: The planting happened on February 2nd of 2020

James Receives An Award For His Conservation Efforts

Nivien Saleh: You won an award for this project.

James Sy: That's right. I had to actually send in an application and a comprehensive write-up to outline the impact, the safety precautions , the environmental precedent.

Nivien Saleh: And the award that you won was the Hornaday award.

James Sy: That's right. The William T Hornaday badge. And that is the highest honor for conservation in the Boy Scouts of America. I think officially it says something about like "for scouts that have showed extensive commitment to environmental conservation in their communities." Since its establishment in the early 1900s less than 2,000 I think had been awarded. Really it was a huge accomplishment for me to get that, because it was just the epitome of my of my conservation work up until that point.

Gaining Leadership Experience Through Scouting

Nivien Saleh: You did something for the environment it is now almost a year later . Looking back, what do you think you have gotten out of the project?

James Sy: Well I think one of the key things is leadership experience. I'd had leadership experience in the troop before. But that was with an outside authority, because the highest position I served in Troop 55 was assistant senior patrol leader. The assistant senior patrol leader's uh authority is really backed by the adult leaders. What I mean by that is: If a couple of boys are being too rowdy during a meeting where we're all supposed to be quiet and listening, and I go over it and say something to them like, "Hey we need to be listening because this is really valuable stuff to learn," and they don't listen to me, I can always call an adult leader to come and validate my authority. But on the slope there weren't any adult leaders. It was just me and 30 boys. And I realized that as a leader it's all a game of balance, between being too lenient and being too tyrannical. Tyrannical is a bit of a strong word, but it fits. If you're too tyrannical, then your volunteers could very well just leave. It's like the social contract theory, if you will. There's a social contract between the leader and the followers that the leaders' authority derives only from the consent of the governed. And that holds true with my eagle scout project.

Nivien Saleh: Of course, they'are all volunteers, right?

James Sy: Exactly

If you're too authoritative, then your scouts or your followers will be very hesitant to listen to somebody who seems to have little respect for his followers. On the other hand, if you're too lenient, you lose your authority. Your words lose their weight, and your followers won't necessarily listen because they're used to getting away with stuff that you've overlooked.

Nivien Saleh: They think they know how to play you.

James Sy: Exactly. So you want to be their friend, but you don't want to be too friendly. On the other hand you want to be commanding but not tyrannical. You want to have this air of authority but you also want to have this sense of camaraderie with your boys. Because at the end of the day everyone's a scout in Troop 55. I'm not an adult leader. I think the age difference between myself and the younger scouts was only six years.

Nivien Saleh: So you really had to work with incentives. You had to make it exciting, make it interesting for your followers for them to follow you willingly.

James Sy: Spot on. And I think that's actually a very pronounced fallacy in the Boy Scout system. My troop's adult leaders are very understanding and very good at what they do. They're great leaders, and they know how to respect the desires as well as understand the characteristics and unique backgrounds of each individual scout. But I've had experience with leaders at some of my merit badge summer camps for the Boy Scouts where they just I I would call it a power trip . And then the older scouts who were still volunteers who are leading many of these classes lost much of their authority because we viewed them as authoritarian like their adult counterparts.

As a scout age isn't a justification for your authority. You need to have a reason for your scouts to listen to you. And there was a myriad of reasons at my project. For one, I'd done the research, and I'd done the preparation. Two I had participated in similar conservation projects that they didn't have experience with. The third thing is that I had intellectual backing from Janice Walden and Daniel Walton at the Memorial Park Conservancy.

What Does Being An Eagle Scout Mean To You?

Nivien Saleh: And you acquired the Hornaday award, which was a great honor, but more generally you became an eagle scout. What does being an eagle scout, which is the highest rank you can achieve in scouting, mean to you?

James Sy: I think more than anything it's just perseverance. Like I said earlier many of the scouts drop out before first class. A very very small minority of scouts that enter scouting as a new scout advance all the way up to eagle. I think it shows the strength of your character as well as how resilient you are to adversity. And of course adversity implies that

scouting is in some way bad. But no I would say adversity in this case is just the commitment that scouting takes over this seven or eight year period.

it took me through merit badges of course, through advancements, I got hung up on many of the necessary required merit badges. I got hung up on many of my requirements. And many times I just had to persevere through it.

As an eagle scout you have that distinction of having stuck with scouting for so long. And I think "stuck with" is appropriate here because scouting is like a moving train, and everybody's just clinging onto the side, right. The ones who don't have the strongest grip or the most mental fortitude, they fall off before the stop comes. The eagle scouts are the ones that hang on all the way until the platform.

Nivien Saleh: You have the strongest grip. Which means that you have discipline, perhaps? Is it a matter of ...

James Sy: I think it's discipline, accountability and perseverance. Past first class it's very much scout-led. Each scout is for the most part in charge of their own destiny.

Nivien Saleh: So in those moments when you persevered,

James Sy: Right.

Why Did You Stick With Scouting For So Many Years?

Nivien Saleh: Why did you? Why not just say, "Oh I don't like this, I want to rather do something else"? Why did you hang on?

James Sy: No I did say, "Oh I don't like this." I said, "Oh,what's the point? What am I going to use this for? " But I guess one of my personal mottos is just, "Finish what you start." So with all the resources, with the time that I dedicated to scouting, all those campouts that I'd gone to, all those meetings that I'd been to, all those merit badges that I'd acquired, it would all just be going to dust if I didn't stick with it. It was a challenge to myself. I was challenging myself to finish the scouting career because if I wouldn't then it would be a black mark on my perception of myself.

Nivien Saleh: Okay I can understand that. And in the end I think you did learn things.

James Sy: Absolutely

Nivien Saleh: Like conservation, leadership, all the things that scouts are supposed to learn, I think you did learn.

James Sy: I think there are scouts that just go through the motions. They adhere strictly to those requirements and do absolutely nothing more. But I think the value in scouting is the

flexibility that allows you to diversify your traits and your characteristics and develop your your virtues. So

Nivien Saleh: Very Greek of you. It sounds very Greek you know?

James Sy: [laughs] Thank you Yeah

Nivien Saleh: Now you're eagle scout. You're kind of done. Is it "Life over"?

James Sy: There's mini-ranks past eagle. You can acquire a palm, but there's nothing that's really big that you have to be doing past eagle. So a palm is: you have to earn a certain amount of merit badges; you have to say active in your troop. So I'd say past eagle that's it's like a mountain top. It's like the eagle's the top, and then like the palm's on the other side of the mountain. It's still really high up, but it's not as high as eagle so you don't have to climb anywhere is what I'm saying.

How Has Scouting Shaped You As A Human Being?

Nivien Saleh: And how has it shaped you as a human being?

James Sy: I think for sure I'm more compassionate, and my perspectives have broadened greatly. I was exposed to so many different backgrounds and mindsets through those 250 plus scouts in Troop 55. I also learned respect, which I needed. I had always been used to respecting adults because as a kid you're always told , "Respect your adults because they're adults," but I also learned how t“ show respect for those who I who weren't necessarily in a elevated position in relation to me.

Nivien Saleh: What role do you envision nature to play in your life In the future?

James Sy: Well I'm actually a high school senior right now. So I applied as a dual major in political science and environmental science. I think that the environmental issue is multifaceted, which is why there hasn't been an easy fix to it yet. The problems that are affecting nature and the world that gave us life , it's an issue that can only be solved when it's attacked by multiple sides.

Nivien Saleh: And that's what you're going to dedicate your professional career perhaps to tackling?

James Sy: Absolutely. My ultimate goal is to be an elected representative. So I hope to run to be the representative of a district or a senator. And I'll use that platform to propose widespread environmental relief bills. And this would include comprehensive carbon taxing, as well as endangered species protection, as well as limiting deforestation and destruction of natural habitats, which I've seen firsthand with the erosion in Houston.

Nivien Saleh: Wow, you're ambitious.

James Sy: That's right. I just think that if you aim high and you fall short that's still higher than if you aim short, if you know what I'm saying.

Nivien Saleh: Yes. It sounds all very exciting. I hope you have a wonderful college career and do well.

James Sy: Me too. I really hope I find my place and find my people.

Recommendations For Parents Who Would Like Their Children To Be Scouts?

Nivien Saleh: If listeners want to enroll their child in scouting, what recommendations would you give to them?

James Sy: Well I'd just say if you're connected with a church it'd be very easy to find out if they have a affiliated scout troop. And if you're not, then it's super easy to just go on the internet, and the Boy Scouts of America has a function where you can search up your zip code, and it'll show you what scout troops are in your area. I actually didn't start by going to Troop 55. I went to a much smaller troop of around 10 to 15 kids, and I didn't like it as much because it seemed too laid back for me. It didn't seem as ambitious as something like Troop 55, which had so many scouts and such an established precedent of helping new scouts through advancements.

Troop 55 really allowed me to flourish. So I would say to a listener, if a smaller troop in a more tight-knit community is something for you, then try out smaller troops. But larger troops offer resources and perspectives and this diversity that's absolutely unique. And it's valuable as a young scout goes through their adolescent life . I would say the majority of troops are actively looking for new scouts.

Don't be afraid of going out there and meeting some new people. And finding the place that will best set you up for success and your scouting career.

Nivien Saleh: Thank you very much.

James Sy: My pleasure.

Nivien Saleh: This is it for today. You can find the podcast transcript and other resources by going to the episode page at https://Houstonnature.com/10. That's Houstonnature.com, slash, and the number 10. If you enjoyed the episode, please share it with a friend. And if

you want to stay in the loop on when future episodes come out, sign up for the Nature memo at Houstonnature.com. For Houston and Nature, I’m Nivien Saleh.