

Pitching Preservation

ALUMNUS TRADES SUCCESSFUL SALES CAREER TO HELP SAFEGUARD TEXAS SHORELINE

By Helen Kaiser



Editor's Note: We originally planned to feature Jerry Mohn in the winter 2008 environmental issue, but Hurricane Ike forced his evacuation from Galveston just as arrangements were made. Despite the destruction, protection efforts lessened impact of the storm surge, and Mohn's efforts to protect the island's beautiful beaches continue.

WHEN IT COMES TO MAN versus Mother Nature, Jerry Mohn '63 has adopted the strength-in-numbers approach. For 10 years, the Galveston, Texas, resident has been building coalitions in the Texas coastal region to promote beachfront preservation. His work as an environmental organizer has helped raise more than \$20 million to defend the area he calls "paradise" against the ravages of nature.

When Hurricane Ike roared through the region last September, Mohn's efforts — and resolve — withstood a supreme test. The third-costliest disaster in United States history, Ike was a Category 2 hurricane with sustained winds of 110 miles an hour when it reached the shores of Galveston. The massive storm produced destructive surges throughout the upper Texas and southwest Louisiana coasts — and an estimated \$22 billion in damages.

Mohn and wife Winkie — Rowena Simms '63 — had fled inland to celebrate their grandson's 5th birthday. The couple have two children and five grandsons in Austin.

It was two weeks before they were able to return to Galveston. They existed without water or electricity for about two more weeks. Fortunately, damages to their home, built to Federal Emergency Management Agency standards, were only moderate.

"We did have about a foot of sand in our yard where the grass used to be," Mohn said.

Elsewhere in the city, there were more devastating reminders of nature's force: Five deaths had occurred, as well as millions of dollars of damage to residential and business areas flooded by the 14-foot storm surge.

Sand socks like this one help protect Jerry Mohn's beloved Galveston shoreline. ALL PHOTOS BY DANIEL CARTER

On a slightly positive note, previous preservation efforts championed by Mohn had an impact. As president of the West Galveston Island Property Owners Association, he had helped establish support for various shore restoration projects, some of which included placement of more than 8,000 linear feet of sand-filled, 15-foot-diameter geotextile tubes in the bay to simulate barrier reefs and reduce erosion.

Ultimately, the tubes — referred to as sand socks or “sausages” — reduced the strength of the hurricane’s storm surge where they were used. “Some of them deflated or rolled over, but they achieved their main purpose,” Mohn says.

The landowners’ preservation efforts date back to Tropical Storm Frances in 1998. After a lifelong career in chemical sales that included forming his own corporation, Mohn was ready for something different. His wife volunteered him for a dune restoration project, and his environmental mission began.

Mohn suggested his subdivision’s group join with others to form the Galveston Beach Erosion Task Force. Eventually, this alliance merged with 18 coastal cities to form the Texas Coastal chapter of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association.

“Rather than compete with each other for funding, we felt we could do more as a group,” he says. Efforts involved seeking technical assistance and funding from state and federal regulatory agencies, environmental foundations and corporations.

Gina Spagnola, president of the Galveston Chamber of Commerce, says Mohn has a “phenomenal” gift for getting people to work together. “When he’s at the table, results happen.”

After a lifetime of making sales, Mohn is still pitching; but the product now is preservation. “He has a real passion for Galveston and for its people,” says Spagnola.

Like many, Mohn and his wife wondered after the hurricane whether they should stay in the area.

When the evacuation order was lifted, “We asked ourselves, do

we really want to go back?” he recalls. “But we knew that whenever we see and hear the gulf, there’s magic there. The sunrises are beautiful, and the sunsets are miraculously outstanding.”

Some geologists have warned that Galveston will continue to be prone to high rates of coastal erosion. Mohn points to manmade projects that have affected natural sand migration. These include the Houston Ship Channel, which benefits the entire region with millions of dollars in commerce, and a sea wall, built after the Great Storm of 1900. It is crucial, he believes, that technology and tax dollars continue to support vital needs of the area.

These days, Mohn works on the next task: a massive sand nourishment project scheduled for October. Along with everyone else on the coast, he also keeps a wary eye on Mother Nature during hurricane season.

Jerry Mohn, Galveston, Texas

B.A., Math 1963

Career: He and his wife started their own chemical importing business. Merged with another “mom and pop” operation to form Chem One Ltd., in Houston.

Notable: Has been a driving force behind more than \$20 million of beach preservation and marsh restoration along the Texas Gulf Coast.

Favorite Wilkes Memory: College sweetheart (and later wife) Winkie as homecoming queen, riding atop a convertible onto the football field, where he was co-captain of the team.



Rebuilding efforts along the once pristine Texas shoreline (above) are under way following the devastation caused by Hurricane Ike (shown below).

