



LAUREN ROSS

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There is a primal force in Barton Springs, in water that bubbles from limestone. On a blistering summer afternoon, the water is cool. We remember that we have, when the world was parched, depended on that flow.

This primal force of the Springs is matched by the fierceness with which Austinites have defended them. Barton Springs has been the lodestone of our moral compass.

When George Cofer brought me into what would become the Save Our Springs referendum campaign to pass strict development limits across the Austin watersheds that recharge the springs, I was a nerdy engineer. Shy. Introverted. I had never been part of a political campaign. I had given public testimony at Austin City Council and they had pretended to listen. But no one actually cared what I thought about anything.

In August 1991, though, engineering was near the heart of the question of how strictly Austin should regulate development to protect Barton Springs. But developers, the real estate community, and the Chamber of Commerce, those aligned against the Save Our Springs citizens' referendum, were the same people who hired engineers. Who could afford to bite a hand that fed them?

If there had been anyone else with engineering credentials willing to do it, it would have been them. If the Save Our Springs citizens' referendum campaign could have been successful without an engineer to speak to the relevant water quality science, it would have been none of us.

When UT's Engineering Dean Gloyna and Civil Engineering Department Chair Dr. Malina released a report about how the proposed Save Our Springs ordinance would, in fact, destroy Barton Springs, the Alliance urgently needed someone to go onto TV evening news and debunk their claims. The campaign manager, Mark Yznaga, called me.

"I can't possibly be interviewed on TV in thirty minutes. I've no one to babysit." Eamon and Geneva were eight and four. I couldn't just leave them at home. I was also a doctoral candidate in civil engineering. Dean Gloyna and Dr. Malina had ultimate authority over whether I would receive my degree.

Yznaga offered, "I'll watch the kids. How quickly can you be ready?"

Despite possible consequences to my professional future, I scrambled into pantyhose, a cream shell, a new cobalt blue silk suit and my mother's pearls. I brushed my hair, scooped up the kids and ran out to Mark's car waiting in the dirt alley behind my house.

As we pulled up to the TV station door, rain poured from the sky.

"You go. I'll park and we'll meet you inside." said Mark.

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I stepped out into inches of water flooding the asphalt, ran for the glass doors and into the frigidly air-conditioned lobby. Before Yznaga arrived with the kids, before there was time for butterflies to get stirred up, I was sitting under blinding TV studio lights. Questions were lobbed at me from the dark behind the huge round camera eye. Mark, Eamon, and Geneva had barely settled into the lobby, when I walked out. For what I said in those few moments, I would be both appreciated and reviled. I felt I was squeezing the trigger of a shotgun without knowing whether it was pointed toward or away from me.

A couple of weeks later, the armpits of my silk shirt were damp and I felt slightly dizzy as I looked from my chair on a platform across a packed room of people. The Real Estate Council of Austin had organized a debate between the Save Our Springs Alliance and the anti-referendum group, Citizens for Responsible Planning. Friendlier groups only asked Bill Bunch and Brigid Shea to speak. RECA thought they would win a debate on technical and legal issues. We were just Austin hippies with only emotional arguments.

The team arguing against the ordinance included the vice president of one of Austin's largest engineering companies, Joe Beal. Even in this debate organized by opponents, though, folks seemed to respond to protecting the Springs. The business arguments were cold, hard, and soul-killing.

When my moments under the spotlight were over, I went home to a tiny 724-square-foot house. I slipped out of pantyhose and pearls, picked up my dissertation research, cared for two small children, and worried about how we would pay our bills. I wiped the bathtub and cleaned the oven. These ordinary activities helped me stay sane as the campaign whirled toward election day.

We won that vote by a solid margin. Sixty-seven percent of voters supported the referendum. On the day of that victory, August 8, 1992, most of us working on the campaign were young, white, liberal, and well-educated. We expected to live long enough to tie a bow on our accomplishments, including keeping the Springs clean and flowing.

Now, at sixty-five, one of the horde of Austin's Boomers, my time and life have mostly come and gone. I'm worried about how Barton Creek and Barton Springs will fare going forward. I drive out Southwest Parkway, Highway 71 and 620 to Mansfield Dam, past a bad hallucination of Whole Foods Market, shopping malls and Bed Bath and Beyond. My mind's eye sees hills covered with nothing but juniper, live oak, and the dusty thin of white limestone soils, but my children's children's children will never know that Austin I knew.

Hand-in-hand with changes in landscape, there are cultural changes that worry me. Social media seduces us from experiences in the analog world. How will a fire be built to preserve what can be touched and tasted when our reality is shaped largely by digital experiences?

There are so many people here from other places. Austin grows quickly and there isn't time to integrate newcomers into our culture. In the end, it isn't laws or policies, nor those we elect that protect Barton Springs. It is values that we share that protect what we hold as sacred.