

Q & A WITH JASON JORDAN

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

This month's feature: Jason Jordan from the Port of Tacoma.

In his role as director of Environment and Planning Programs at the Port of Tacoma, Jason Jordan ensures that the port uses sustainable practices in its day-to-day activities regarding energy consumption, storm water runoff, and the reduction of air emissions. Under his watch are projects to turn some spaces involved in the port's industrial growth into healthy spaces capable of supporting public access, human enjoyment and an adequate habitat for wildlife.

He and his team have led varied projects around Commencement Bay and the Puyallup River to turn degraded spaces into healthy habitats capable of supporting vibrant social and economic activities. One of those places, the recently created 30-acre habitat site known as Place of Circling Waters, now includes an inter-tidal salt marsh and emergent wetlands.



Q: What in your life prepared you for this work?

A: I grew up in Longview with a close connection to the Columbia River. That involved camping, boating, fishing for salmon, steelhead and sturgeon. I watched the vessels going up and down the river, looked into what they carried, and where they were from. From then on up through some of my high school years, I wrote stories about tugboat drivers, and I tried to get hired on as a spare hand on tugboats.

After high school I knew that academics were not my strength and thought that maybe if I was in the Coast Guard for their two-year program, a tugboat might hire me. Then the Coast Guard program changed from requiring two years to requiring four, and my grandpa said "If you will do it for 4fouryears, why don't you think of college?" To this day, I remain grateful for that push from him. I took a community college course with the professor treating students like adults--refreshing for me--and I began to enjoy the studies.

After achieving ... a master's degree in Public Administration, I worked at a small environmental consulting firm in Vancouver, Washington -- the J.D. White Company— (where) I got a taste of what working in the public sector might be like. John White, the owner, was a great role model. He began calling me "junior" six months into the job and assigned me to land use planning for both the city and the Port of Vancouver.

Q: What brought you to the Puget Sound area?

A: My wife and I wanted to locate in the Seattle area, so I took positions first on Bainbridge Island and then in Renton, adding land use planning to what I had previously done. We lived in Ballard, and I watched the ships on Elliott Bay. Then I landed a planning and environmental position at the Port of Seattle. That showed me that I wanted to work in maritime commerce—something bigger than myself. The mission of ports is to create real economic value, and I liked that.

Q: What did you find as you entered this world of ports?

A: That environmental work is complex work that must show value, and support a port's mission: economic development. In addition, it must have an ecological gain or benefit, be strategic (well laid out and thoughtful), must bring together design, permitting, and available resources. It is not viewed as a revenue generator. The Port of Tacoma has allowed me and my team to do it correctly so that our work makes financial sense, creates economic benefit, and fits the port's mission.

Q: What is the impact on your work on the Seaport Alliance (a new collaboration) between the ports of Seattle and Tacoma?

A: My counterpart at the Port of Seattle and I have been included in the discussion about how work might come together in this new arrangement. Change is scary. The conversations have nudged me to take off my personal hat, my program hat, and even my Port of Tacoma hat. When I do that, the alliance makes such perfect sense.

Q: What have been your most important lessons learned?

A: The ones that are not tactical but about attitude and approach. I've learned to joke a bit and how to tackle a tough issue in a room when the parties are not agreeing. How to get to the root of an issue. My mentors were fun to be around, and I always learned a lot. Early on, one taught me not to chew gum when making a presentation. One taught me emotional intelligence, by example, and how to leverage that for the port. She modeled how to be two-to-three ahead of what was going on. We spent time to think about how to improve our strategies.

Q: What would you like the legacy of your work to be?

A: I would like to leave Commencement Bay in better shape than I found it. What is motivating to me is that our work is substantial and is meant to last for generations. Colleagues and I get energized to work hard for that. I like the fact that we are creating jobs with what we do, that our work can have a multiplier effect, from short-term construction jobs to building a wharf and that these are high-paying, family-wage jobs.

Q: Looking long term at Commencement Bay, what do you see for it?

A: I see a working waterfront that will continue to be just that and stakeholders throughout the city making sound decisions from both land use and environmental perspectives and that these can coexist and function at high levels. I believe we are moving in the right direction for the right reasons.

Q: What might the challenges be in the future?

A: We can't create more land along our waterfront, so we need to protect it for industrial, commercial, and residential uses. This will become a larger issue as the region continues to grow. It will continue to rain in the Pacific Northwest, so water quality and storm water regulations will affect all of us who are located on or use the bay. We have to balance the need to remove contamination with the resources required to do it. Land use and storm water issues will drive us in many directions for a long while.