

One man's trash is another man's treasure for local artist Sam Jones, who relaxes on a bench he crafted from all kinds of objects he collected along Kuhlman Gully in Southeast Houston.

Photo ©The Houston Chronicle/ James Nielsen. Used with permission.



Neglected gully gets some love, and a benchmark

By Tony Freemantle

Kuhlman Gully is a quiet 1.09-mile tributary that flows into Brays Bayou. Cavanaugh Nweze remembers it from his childhood: "The Kuhlman Gully gave us many opportunities to play, to just get away from big city life, to skip rocks, and even sometimes to just get in trouble. . . It played a quiet but important part in our lives. As a child it didn't seem like much but now, as an adult, I realize how important the Kuhlman Gully is as a natural space and resource and to our neighborhood."

The once beautiful waterway is today littered with trash; it pollutes the water and can cause clogs in Brays Bayou further down the line leading to flooding. Fortunately, the Southeast Houston Transformation Alliance is spearheading the first steps toward reclaiming Kuhlman Gully for the neighborhood by joining with the Harris County Flood Control District, the City of Houston Public Works and Engineering Department, and Keep Houston Beautiful in community clean-up efforts.

The following article explains how artist Sam Jones is turning the gully's trash into an artistic treasure as part of the waterway's beautification projects. It is reprinted with permission from author Tony Freemantle and The Houston Chronicle, where it first appeared on December 16, 2013. Visit our website at www.houstonhistorymagazine.org to watch videos on Kuhlman Gully and the bench project, and link to photos of the thousands of items excavated from the gully. Sam Jones's public art installation premieres in the late fall of 2014 in Southeast Houston near Kuhlman Gully.

From atop the culvert on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Sam Jones could have been, and was often, mistaken for some kind of official. Maybe somebody from county flood control, or an inspector with the city, a surveyor.

He wore a reflective vest, a baseball cap, waders and a belt from which hung pouches and tools. Occasionally, he would stoop over and stick a little orange survey flag into the bank of the southeast Houston stream they call Kuhlman Gully.

But no one in his or her right mind would have suspected that what Jones was doing was looking for trash. Not just looking for it, but photographing it, measuring it, recording its GPS coordinates, collecting it in plastic bags, cataloging it and treating it with as much care as an archeologist would priceless artifacts.

There's a lot of trash in Kuhlman Gully. When Jones started on his project this year, he figured he could cover much of the small tributary's 1½-mile length.

But the bounty was so great, he spent days in a single spot, his survey flags sprouting like thick clusters of alien vegetation.

Jones is an artist. His work often involves searching for something, he tells me, and discovering something about himself in the process. So when his friend, University of Houston research professor Carroll Parrott Blue, asked him to be part of a project involving Kuhlman Gully, it seemed like a good fit.

"I asked Sam, because I've known him for some time," Blue said. "I said 'You know this gully is a junk heap. Why don't you come out and look at it?' When we got



The artifacts pulled from Kuhlman Gully trace the local and larger community's social, cultural, and technological history across the last half century.



Photos courtesy of Sam Jones.

out there, you know I was just like disgusted, but he said 'Wow, this is great.' I said 'What are you talking about?' He said 'I can make something beautiful out of this.'

NEGLECTED WORKHORSES

Discarded metal makes for a decorative flourish on a bench local artist Sam Jones built on Kuhlman Gully that will be installed on the banks of the waterway.

Kuhlman Gully is one of thousands of gullies in the Houston area. It drains into Brays Bayou. We are, rightly so, called the Bayou City. But the gullies are the workhorses of the drainage system in the flood-prone coastal prairie we live on. Neglected workhorses. We call them ditches. We clog them with trash. We squeeze them through culverts under the streets. And then we curse them when they back up and flood our houses.

Blue is a member of the Southeast Houston Transformation Alliance, a group working to revitalize that part of town, which includes the historic Third Ward. The group sees the potential of transforming a stretch of Kuhlman Gully into an attractive green space.

PLENTY OF RESOURCES

So far, all the group has to show for its efforts is a "pie-in-the-sky dream plan," as Blue calls it, created by two University of Houston architecture grad students, and a bench made by Jones using some of the 1,500 or so pieces of trash he collected from the gully.

The plan by students David Rodriguez-Goujon and Shalini Moodley involves a stretch of the gully from MLK to Sunrise Road. Rodriguez-Goujon tells me it involves widening the gully, restoring its ecosystem and alleviating the flooding that occurred most recently during a storm in early 2012.

Their proposal grew out of a project for a class taught by local landscape architects Keiji Asakura and Margaret Robinson, and was presented to the community this month, along with Jones' bench.

It is hard to describe, that bench. It has three seats made of molded clear epoxy into which some of the gully's artifacts are set. One seat contains items that Jones says reflect the "shady" side of the gully - stolen credit cards, condom packages, needles and syringes, knives, a pill bottle.



Bench created by Sam Jones from discarded items found in Kuhlman Gully.

Photo courtesy of Sam Jones.

Another is about kids and being safe, Jones says. It has candy wrappers, a small cowboy boot, a plastic toy, a discarded disciplinary note in which, in childish cursive, a girl acknowledges her behavior in class was "inappropriate because I was distracting everyone."

The third is an homage to technological history, showing off a VHS video cassette, broken compact discs, a circuit board. The frame is made out of old shopping carts, steel cable, rebar. The backrest contains a rim, a rusted steering wheel and a circular saw blade. Its legs are finished off with shopping cart wheels.

The bench is dedicated to [former] City Council Member Wanda Adams. No one knows where it will sit. Jones favors installing it at the Metro bus stop on MLK where it crosses Kuhlman Gully. He could build a canopy for it with more trash.

"There are still a lot of shopping carts in there," he says. He would know.