

POWER OF ONE ELLIS PICKETT

By Ed Mazarella

Ellis Pickett is a fifth generation Texan who lives in Liberty, Texas, about 55 miles from the coast and is one of the primary catalysts for the formation of the Texas Chapter, the growth of our Texas chapter network and too many campaign successes to name in this short piece.

Although he started networking with people in 1994 to organize a chapter, it was a September 1998 tropical storm named Frances that finally lit the match. The day after the storm, he was at Surfside Beach waxing his board to catch the waning swell. He looked around to see 30-plus houses on the public beach due to storm erosion. Their septic tanks, water lines and other debris littered the beach and stood out. He surveyed the situation and thought to himself, "the developers and property owners are going to try to solve this erosion problem - and they don't surf." That's when he made up his mind to do something to save our waves and beaches.

Sometimes good things come out of bad. The erosion caused by tropical storm Frances was truly disastrous, but it was the best thing to happen to Surfrider Foundation in Texas. The 106 houses left on the public beach along the north coast of Texas became the lightning rod. The media reported that property owners wanted to build 30 miles of breakwater to stop the waves - waves that thousands of people surf on and enjoy.

Four weeks later, they held their first chapter-organizing meeting in Houston, with 55 people in attendance and in January 1999, they became the first chapter on the coast between California and Florida.

In Ellis' own words, "For me, the best Surfrider Foundation experience has been the great people I have been fortunate to meet. Surfing is pretty much an individual sport. We spend most of our time bobbing up and down in the water and the most we might say is 'my wave' or possibly 'nice wave.' Surfrider has given Texas surfers an opportunity to get to know each other."

Ellis chalks up the success and growth of Surfrider in Texas to three fundamental keys: teamwork, self-education and the Texas Open Beaches Act (TOBA).

"In the beginning most of us knew nothing about coastal science or law, or the TOBA," says Pickett. "Early on, we recognized that we had to know more about the science, the law and the TOBA than anyone in the room on any given day, on any coastal issue. We also recognized that the TOBA was the choke point for coastal development and access issues. We focused on the legislature and the Texas General Land Office (the agency in charge of the coast) through grassroots outreach."

Texas Chapter activists have evolved from a bunch of surfers and beach users - into a true power base of grassroots organizing. They have earned a reputation as knowledgeable and reasonable negotiators. The Texas Office of the Attorney General at one time refused to have any contact with their chapter. The AG's office now uses them as a resource and sounding board, as do other state and local officials. The media contacts them for articles and quotes. They have had a lot of success, but the thing that Ellis is most proud of is that we now have four Surfrider Foundation chapters in Texas, and I'll bet money we have a fifth soon.



Message in a Bottle

Dear Surfrider --

Of all the causes I support, beach access is one that deeply touches my heart and I happily send you a donation tonight to help your efforts in this area.

I grew up on the Jersey Shore and spent my childhood days on the beaches of Sea Bright, Long Branch, Asbury Park and many others in the area. Sea Bright was my personal favorite and there was an ocean-front retreat house owned by the local Jesuits who allowed us local kids to use their beach. However, the Jesuits were forced to sell their house to a developer and along with it went our beach access. It was horrible. The developer paid security guards to keep us all off the beach and, other than a small-town beach that was in disrepair, there was no other place for us to go. (The rest of the beachfront was owned by private beach clubs.) It was horrible -- I remember feeling like a criminal. Even as an adolescent, I could never understand why people had the ability to "own" a beach. It seemed completely unjust. Luckily, after the completion of a major N.J. beach-replenishment project (paid mostly by taxpayers), beach access to Sea Bright was greatly improved and now there are plenty of public paths to the shore (even public parking has been greatly improved).

I do wish you much luck in your work with Asbury Park to help assure that beach access is provided as part of the new revitalization plan. As an adult, I'm now living in the Boston area, and my husband and I spend time during the summer and in the off-season with our three kids on Martha's Vineyard. (We just bought an "inland" house on the island with another family.) While N.J. laws are certainly outdated, Massachusetts beach-access laws are completely archaic! The most beautiful beaches on the Vineyard (primarily Chilmark) are completely off-limits to the public. It's sickening. Thankfully, I did learn through you guys that as long as we walk onto "town resident-only beaches" and do not park, the law is in our favor and legally, Chilmark can't restrict our access. Of course, we haven't tried this yet, but I'm willing to give it a go next summer. (And I may even bring a fishing pole for extra leverage!)

Please keep up the good work with helping people gain access to beaches nationwide. As a kid, I remember feeling a sense of rejection by not being able to just walk onto a beach and go swimming, and those feelings have definitely resurfaced as an adult on Martha's Vineyard. I feel passionate about doing what I can to change things. It's organizations like Surfrider, and groups in our own state like the Trustees of the Reservations and Land Bank, which have purchased private land and beaches for public use, that make it incredibly easy for me to make the choice to donate to the causes I'm passionate about. Thanks a million for all your work -- I'm a proud member.

-Chris McCue Potts

