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*“Working
Together”*
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RIVERSIDE STORIES

SAL GONZALEZ & MATT MITCHELL

Landowners & Neighbors in San Antonio, NM

MATT MITCHELL AND Sal Gonzalez, neighbors in the Bosque del Apache area of New Mexico, have been working together to restore the natural splendor of the Rio Grande for several years. Along with a group of about a dozen nearby neighbors, they entered into a partnership with Save Our Bosque Task Force in order to streamline the efforts in ridding the river system of invasive plants, such as the tamarisk (salt cedar). With this grand scale initiative, they have been able to clear more than 1,200 acres - nearly 2,300 sq. miles - of invasive plant infestation.



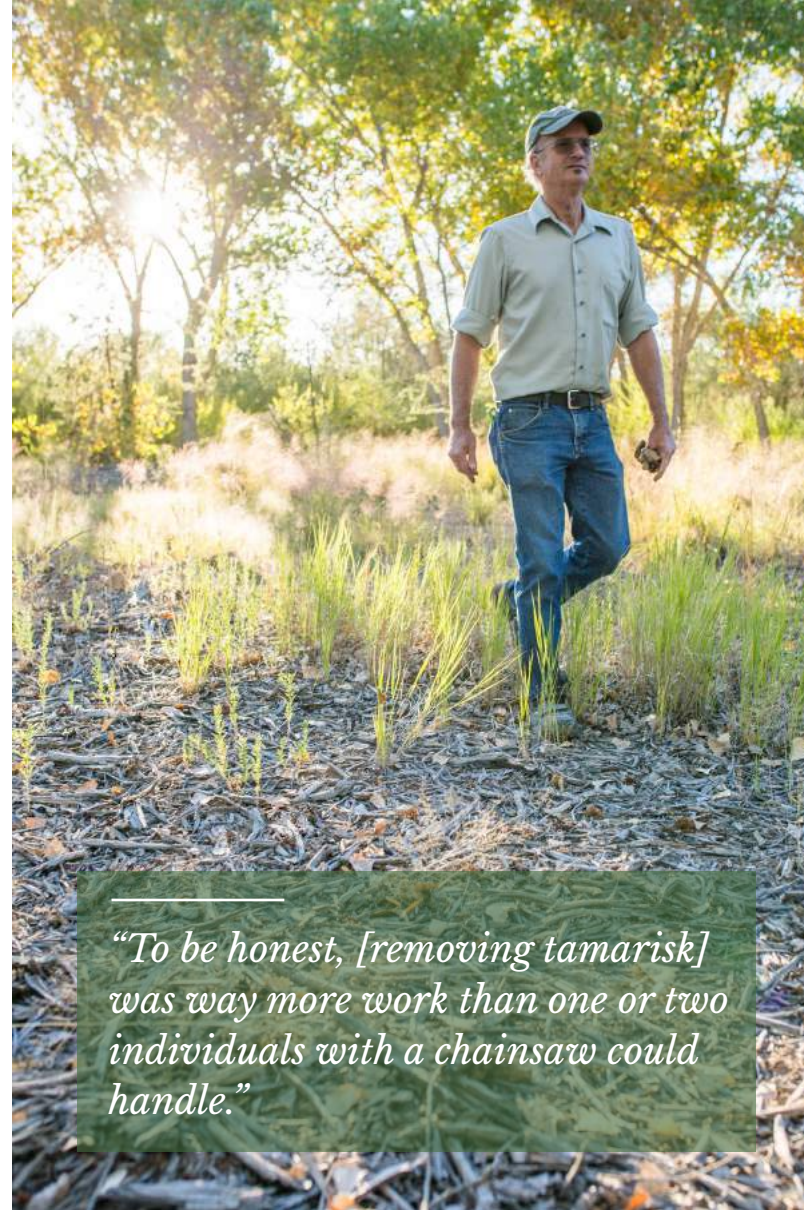
In order to do this, all neighbors had to enter into a conservation easement agreement. This designates a particular section of land as zoned for conservation and eliminates the potential to develop it - in perpetuity. In turn, the land-owners who enter into this agreement receive monetary aid in their restoration efforts. “The beauty of all of this is that when you put a conservation easement on your property, that money is guaranteed to do good,” explains Matt. “It gives you a real advantage when you’re applying for competitive grants to improve your property.”

On their own properties, too, Matt and Sal have been able to effectively reduce the tamarisk and other non-native plant populations, returning the native plants’ ability to grow and prosper. However, at the beginning, it was a daunting task.

When Sal and his siblings inherited land from their father, they knew they wanted to clean it up, but they couldn’t even survey it due to

the infestation. “It was basically over 70 acres of tamarisk,” he explains. “It took us seven years to establish the boundaries, and we used chainsaws.” Matt faced similar problems when he purchased a portion of Sal’s father’s land in 1998. “When I first bought my place, it was really choked with tamarisk. You couldn’t walk. You might be able to get on your knees and crawl, but it was too thick,” he elucidates. “To be honest, it was way more work than one or two individuals with a chainsaw could handle.”

After help from a series of grants over several years, and a considerable amount of hard work, the tamarisk has been almost entirely eliminated from their land. “Basically, with the exception of a few sprouts here and there, my land is tamarisk-free,” Matt says cheerfully. “We’ll see how long it takes for them to return, but we have tamarisk on the run here at the moment.” Sal has also taken refuge in the comforts of a job well done and a revitalized landscape. “Two to three times a year, we clear-cut the new saplings and spray to eliminate the tamarisk and Russian olive. In the process, new growth from native plants such as cottonwoods and



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willows have started to grow again. Along with the native plants that have come back on their own, we have also planted 200 willows and 300 native plants,” he says.

Both Matt and Sal attribute their success to the collaboration between neighbors involved in the initiative. “I think it probably comes down to the way you were brought up, and your work ethic. You find that there may be unpleasant moments, but if you have a good relationship with your neighbor, things will go well,” Sal explains. “It was great,” Matt laughs. “The comradery and the good vibes of doing good work and restoring the property made it worth it.”

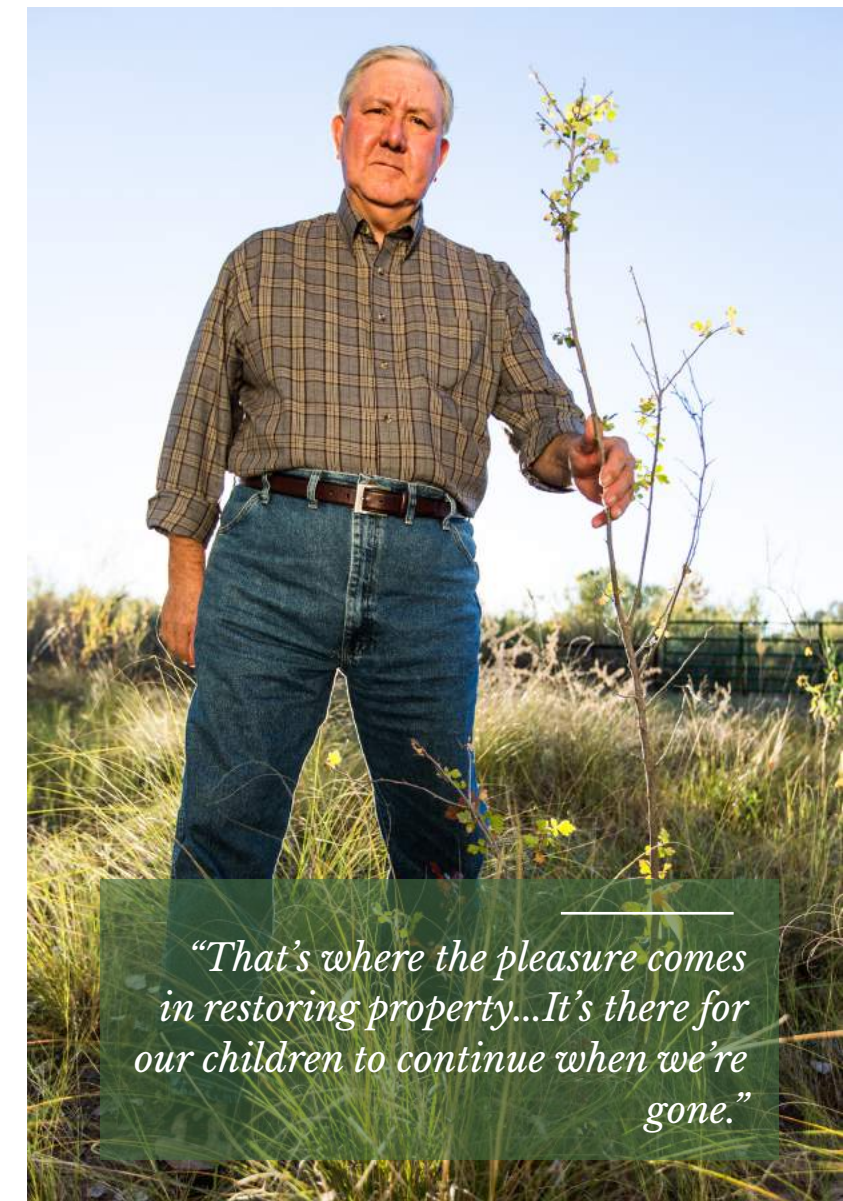
Matt and Sal, who are both native New Mexicans, have worked hard to return their land to its original beauty, and will continue to do so, inspiring neighbors to do the same. “Without the [invasive species] competition, the natives are just taking off. I’ve realized that we’ll never get back to what the river actually was; those days are gone. That said, I still think it looks a whole lot more like what it should be. It’s a great thing to see,” Matt smiles.

Sal is also happy to have contributed to his father’s legacy. “Now we sit here and enjoy the canopy of cottonwoods, and the proximity to the wildlife refuge,” he says. “You can hear the geese, the cranes. There’s so much more wildlife and game here now that we’ve restored the property. That’s where the pleasure comes in restoring the property. As sons and daughters, we did what our dad couldn’t do. The legacy lives on. It’s there for our children to continue when we’re gone.” ■

This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with Save Our Bosque Task Force, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

To learn more about other individuals doing great work along rivers, visit <http://tamariskcoalition.org/about-us/riverside-stories>.

Photography Credit: Zach Mahone



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