

Lindsey Derrington Interview Transcript

I'm Lindsey Derrington, I'm executive director of preservation Austin. We are the only citywide nonprofit dedicated to celebrating and protecting Austin's historic places in full uniform.

Q: How are you connected to the Rogers Washington Holy Cross neighborhood?

Years back, I started with Preservation Austin in 2015, and I think it was 2017 or 2018, when Pat Calhoun, who's one of the longtime residents of this neighborhood, reached out to our organization for support establishing a local historic district.

Local historic districts are really basic tools that have been used in cities and smaller communities since the '70s, really to protect historic places by taking groups of buildings that are significant and actually zoning them historic to protect them from demolition.

Fundamentally, it's a planning tool. You get to say, hey, here's a group of significant homes, and how do we want development to look within this area?

Q: What's really special about this neighborhood?

It's longtime residents or the children of people who built the homes. It was much more to them, for them, more than just saving beautiful houses – it was really saving their history.

And so they reached out to us to provide whatever support we could, if we could. This neighborhood also didn't hire a consultant to do that. It's a long process. And Pat, Brenda, Mr. Scales, Misael, and Jen – they did all of this work you'd normally hire a consultant for. They did all that themselves.

And then Preservation Austin provided two small grants and meeting space. And I think a little bit of research support, but, we did what we could to help them reach this really high threshold of building consensus in their community for this district. And Austin, unlike most cities in the United States, is really behind on historic districts. This gets a little bit wonky, but most cities have been doing that since the '70s.

Austin didn't start doing it until 2004. San Antonio has 35 historic districts, Austin has eight. So we're really behind the game. So it's not only remarkable what this neighborhood and this community achieved, just like creating that district and protecting their history and celebrating it so well. They were only the eighth district the city has ever seen, so I just can't say enough about them.

Q: How did you find yourself becoming a part of Preservation Austin?

I started Preservation Austin almost ten years ago. I started as a programs coordinator. I've been working in historic preservation since 2007, when I first graduated from undergrad. I became interested in this field because I'm from Saint Louis, which is a very different city than Austin.

When I grew up in the suburbs, got my driver's license, was driving around, the city that so many people had turned their backs on – it's like the textbook example of white flight and urban renewal and segregation.

And it's got this beautiful history and culture and all these buildings that need so much investment and care. And so I became inspired to do this work in high school before I even knew what the work was like, I knew I wanted to do something with historic places.

I didn't have money to develop them myself. And then I went to college in Saint Louis and found out that historic preservation was a thing, and then started working at Saint Louis's citywide nonprofit. 2007, kind of a long road here, ended up moving to Austin for opportunity, like so many other people, and I was really fortunate to get a job with Preservation Austin, because the nonprofit side of things really allows you to be creative and support people and kind of build the world you want to see from preservation standpoint.

You're not rubber stamping demolitions or reviewing really complicated federal processes, all of which are important. You really do get to be creative, and you get to work directly with people who want to do this work with you, which is very exciting and very gratifying.

Q: As you started to work with Rogers Washington with Preservation Austin, what was that first experience like?

We were working with Rogers Washington Holy Cross at a time of transition for Preservation Austin because Pat and Brenda had been working with the previous executive director, and I really didn't have much connection with them because my role was different.

But when I became executive director in 2019, I inherited this wonderful group of people. And really at the beginning it was, we need meeting space. Brenda would call and say, okay, we need a meeting space. They were hashing out their design standards. For local historic districts, all the neighbors have to agree on a set of standards that says, "how do we maintain our historic homes and what do we want new development to look like?" Two really important pieces.

And so that requires patiently working with everybody to make sure that everyone feels comfortable with what those restrictions are, because we're the United States, we're also Texas. The idea of telling someone else what to do with their property and what they can and can't do, that can get contentious. Brenda led those meetings and was really, really patient and worked hard to successfully build that consensus around what the neighborhood should be.

Because if you don't have a certain number of people on board, the whole thing falls apart. So them leading that process was huge. And so I just provided the room and stayed late by an hour and a half and then watched and answered questions when I could. It was really as simple as that. When I say we were there to support, it really was a support because the residents and the neighbors were leading everything.

Q: Were there any moments where you got to go out into the field and get to interact with the local community?

We supported the local historic district effort, but when Preservation Austin really got to work closely with Brenda, Pat, Mr. Scales, Mr. Poole, Jen, and Misael, was through our homes tour. One of the programs we have at Preservation Austin, it's really our largest program, is an annual homes tour each spring. People like to look at pretty houses, sure, but also it means that people are exploring and taking a really personal look at what historic architecture is – and its homes that current families are living in.

So you get to see that preservation isn't just about a museum kind of piece or freezing a building in time. Historic buildings are really flexible. They're still providing meaningful, beautiful homes for today's families.

And we selected Rogers Washington Holy Cross to be our homes tour neighborhood we focused on in 2021. That was in the middle of the pandemic, so we had one virtual homes tour already. And then for this neighborhood, it really worked out well because we got to incorporate interviews. It wasn't just like footage of the insides of houses, it was residents talking about their experiences growing up here, their experiences building their homes, their families, and their family histories.

And we really did get to work much more closely with them. And it's a really beautiful little artifact that's 40 minutes long and, and sets this neighborhood within the context of the 1928 city plan of redlining, of how remarkable it is this neighborhood is here given that for those homeowners, it wasn't easy for them to get loans to build their houses.

It wasn't easy to do anything, whereas the federal government made it really easy for white families to do a lot of things after World War Two, but not so much for black families. So setting this neighborhood in that context, but then just running with all the incredible stories and even day to day experiences that are incorporated into that history that make Rogers Washington Holy Cross so special.

I'm not sure with any of the other home tours we've done that we've had so many original families. That's rare, I think, having so many children of the original people who built the houses – or Mr. Poole, he built that house and he's still here. I think that's unique, no matter what the city is, Austin or anywhere else in the country.

Q: Are there any stories or any anecdotes that stood out to you as you were able to share space with them and really get to know more about their history and their experiences?

Interviewing longtime residents is such a different experience than reading someone's obituary or reading in a book the history of this or that. To hear from Ms. Calhoun about how closing down Kealing Middle School impacted her father – he retired, it was his life's work, and how desegregation felt for East Austin.

She says something to the effect that all these kids are having to go west, but nobody's going east, the loss of support with that. It just adds so much weight to history that if you're willing to learn it, you can read about it and when you hear about what it felt like that's totally different.

Something that we have in that film – Ms. Malik produced a show called “Jam City” that was on public access television, and you can still find those recordings in the Austin History Center. It's like kids dancing on the weekends and that would be something that teenagers in the '80s would have watched.

It's just so special. It's just like, what was life? What were people into? Why do people help to create that? That's really special.

Q: Have there been any significant events that have taken place since the time Preservation Austin started collaborating with Rogers Washington Holy Cross?

I think the most significant was the tour, being able to showcase our work with the neighborhood. Pat was involved in planning the tour, as was Brenda. I mean, they were really hands on. It wasn't just Preservation Austin producing this thing with our volunteers – Brenda and Pat were among our volunteers. They've just been wonderful partners ever since. We had Wesley United Methodist Church on a tour subsequently, and Pat coordinated that and was on that committee.

I don't have a really great answer for that. It was never just one and done. We really connected with these folks because what they're doing is like the best of what we can even try to do. They're like, “oh, this is our history. We're going to save it. We're going to do a crash course in historic zoning, and we're going to make it happen.”

And so we've worked with them in various capacities ever since. And we'll continue to. So as far as neighborhoods, we know we have people we can call for support or for help. Pat Calhoun and Marilyn Poole's houses are on our in person tour this year, which is awesome because everyone had the virtual experience three years ago, but now people will actually be able to tour those homes and really get a sense of what they're like, which is great.

We're also having a block party in this neighborhood, which will be wonderful, and we're going to close off Givens. And so it'll be celebrating the neighborhood with walking tours and having vendors from the community, having a DJ – a free preservation event that will be very exciting.

Q: Was there a time when the Rogers Washington community faced a challenge and Preservation Austin was able to help out?

The neighborhood pursued their historic district because they saw all the changes happening around them. If you drive a few blocks in either direction from this really small community, Rogers Washington Holy Cross is not a big one – so much history, but relatively few homes compared to some historic districts, which might be like hundreds of homes – it's changed.

Blackland neighborhoods changed. Chestnut has changed. These are really desirable homes for people with a lot of money and sometimes you drive down blocks and half of the houses or more were built only a few years ago, and they're much bigger and much more expensive than the housing that was there before. And of course, you've lost all that history with those demolitions.

So I think the critical thing for neighbors in this community was to figure out how to implement a local historic district. This achieves two things for us: we get to celebrate our history and we get to protect it, because we're not going to see that kind of development in Rogers Washington Holy Cross because literally we're able to say, here's the map. Here are the houses that are contributing. They're the significant ones. These have history. These need to stay, so they're off limits.

So that doesn't mean that everything is completely frozen in time, but it does mean that the community has said we care about these places and we do not want to see these places go. And so I think within the next ten years, that difference will be even more stark when you drive in or walk into Rogers Washington Holy Cross versus going to the neighborhoods surrounding it.

Other neighborhoods are just really being decimated in so many ways because of the economic factors and market forces in this city and the lack of protections we have for historic places in the city. Even though Preservation Austin's doing this work every day, and we've got people like the folks here in Rogers Washington Holy Cross doing their part to save their little corner of the city, Austin is growing so fast and I think historically hasn't been very proactive in preservation.

And now all of a sudden, all everyone talks about is how the city is changing. A lot of people talk about it as if it's a lost cause, which it isn't. If we can all rally around places that we all agree are important, then we can make a difference in that and save what's here. But yeah, you just have to do it. Which is why I love that this community did it.

Q: Do you have any advice for other communities in Austin that haven't been able to tap into the same practices as you described? Has Preservation Austin been able to extend beyond Rogers Washington before?

Preservation Austin is working to change attitudes around preservation, that it's not a lost cause, that we shouldn't just assume that Austin's going to change forever and for the worse. Or that

growth even means bad. Growth isn't bad inherently. It's just like, what are we losing as we grow? And how can we prioritize historic places in a way that they're not just an afterthought or even like a dirty word?

Sometimes preservation is seen as being anti everything, when really we consider that it's pro – you are saving heritage, especially in East Austin. You're ensuring that whole communities' histories aren't erased. That's an equity issue. That's extremely important.

And what we're doing, we have our homes tour, we have our awards where we celebrate people doing this work every day. We started Legacy Business Month last year, which is celebrating iconic businesses that have been open for 20 years or more. We do a lot of advocacy work. We have a grants program.

We have given a few grants in this community to Ms. Calhoun, to Ms. Dodson, supporting homeowners, replacing their electrical panel. It's expensive. It's a couple thousand dollars. And so if we as a nonprofit can lend our resources to help that kind of work happen, even if it's not something you see, that's really meaningful.

All that said, we're small. We've been around since 1953, but we're only recently at four staff people. So we're rehabbing our own building and just also in the thick of it and pulled in all different directions every day. So I will say it's stories like Rogers Washington Holy Cross that do remind you this work is worth it when you get to work with lovely people who are just inspiring and really kind and so willing to share their history with the rest of the community. And they see the value in that.

And if the city at large understands why this matters and can look at them and see them leading by example, that's also really important. It's not just Preservation Austin wagging our fingers and saying, “you should do this.” It's, “ok, look at this group of people. They did it. It's not impossible or it's not going to be possible for everybody, but you can certainly do it.”

And that is gratifying.

So preservation Austin, it's important to us that we are building a more inclusive preservation movement for this century. It seems weird to keep emphasizing we're in the 21st century because we're like 24 years into it. But preservation as a movement needs to grow.

Everyone needs to see themselves reflected in this work, which they haven't always. The work that we do is, like anything else in the US, has been very focused on white wealth, and many men who have made money, and really looking at like just only a very narrow section of our history and using historic places to kind of to interpret that history.

And so for us, we're citywide. We take very seriously that commitment to representing the whole city and then also expanding what people think of preservation. Some work we do like

supporting this community is very like it's a local historic district. How can we help them provide a grant, provide meeting space, write letters to council?

That's kind of what you think of as being preservation in certain ways. But apart from historic buildings having inherent value and worth for the history they hold and the stories they tell, historic places can also help with sustainability goals, with affordability goals, and then equity goals. It's work that is not the answer to all those things, but as Austin is wanting to become a more affordable, sustainable and equitable city, preservation is one of the solutions to those things in its own way.

So expanding how people think about the work we do is important. And I think the current city council gets that actually. Because there's this "you're either for growth or not growth" dynamic, historic preservation doesn't really fit into those categories neatly, but ends up like "you're anti-growth, you're a preservationist." That's really not the case. You can think Austin's growth is good and exciting, but still want to see historic places be part of that growth.

So things that we've worked on recently, supporting making it easier to move houses across Austin. So someone's going to tear a house down, like people actually put houses on Craigslist. They'll be like, "hey, if you want this house, if you can pay to move it, then you can take it somewhere else." Just the city makes that really hard in ways that are too boring to go into, but worked with council to pass a resolution to make that easier. So instead of literally throwing a house away, "can you move it to another part of town to create housing for someone else?"

The city loses like 600 houses every year, so can we, you know, move the needle on that even a little bit and save some of those places. And so that's again, wonky end of it

Something else I'm proud of that we worked on was looking at the historic Landmark Commission. They are appointed by city council. They play a really important role in our preservation ecosystem and were really homogenous for a very long time. A lot of like white real estate professionals, architects, engineers and their skill sets were appropriate. But just looking at the landmark commission like, how could we as a preservation nonprofit help to change that?

So we make a lot of recommendations to city council. The council office will call and say, "we're looking for so-and-so for whatever district. Do you have any recommendations?" And we have played a role in perpetuating a very white bubble.

So two years ago, we provided preservation commission training for BIPOC advocates and had, I think, 16 people attend and then this nationally accredited preservation commission training, it was virtual. And then we recommended those folks, anyone after the training, who was like, "yes, I want to do this. I want to go spend six hours at City Hall once a month reviewing demolitions and hopefully doing something more proactive than that."

So we had a handful of folks who said they were game, and then we recommended those folks to council. This ended up dramatically changing the composition of this 11 person commission just by simply asking “what are the barriers to people serving?”

Us for one, two just technical training.

So if someone thought like, I really care about my history, I'm an individual from East Austin, I care about this. I've done all this research, but I don't really feel comfortable with the technical side of it. That's what that training was meant to help give people the base footing that they need.

So that was huge and was so simple. Like some of this stuff is just so simple. It just means evaluating what you do and how you've been doing it and what your goals are and who really should be at the table. So that's just an example of the work that we've been doing, trying to very intentionally break down those barriers, people participating in work that is rightfully theirs.

Q: How has working with Rogers Washington Holy Cross impacted you personally?

Working with advocates in Rogers Washington Holy Cross has been very meaningful and very inspiring. And I mean, that preservation work is really hard. A lot of times you're dealing with demolitions or screaming into the wind because you don't have enough funding or there's like policy issues that seem insurmountable. And if you could just make someone like, understand and get it, you could start to move the needle on what seems like just a massive hill that you're trying to climb.

We're coming out of Covid still. For me personally, I became executive director in 2019 and within a year we were in a pandemic for a few years. And it was during that time we did a lot of work with the community here, but when you're kind of have your nose to the grindstone, it's easy to disconnect from, like, the things that inspire you. especially when you've just been doing it for like 15 years. So it's really good to be able to work with people and be able to partner with people and just to bask in their glow and try to like and internalize some of that energy to remind myself why this work matters.

Because people need us to be there to provide whatever we can give them. We're not the be all, end all by any stretch of the imagination, but they do need a city wide nonprofit that has resources, that has connections, that can help them achieve their goals. Not that we're ever giving up or that I would ever give up.

I hope that Preservation Austin also never goes away. We've been in existence since 1953, but I hope that this current era of the organization is remembered as being the one that really truly opened up and wanted to support people and partner with folks and wasn't in its own lane doing its own thing.

I mean, they're growing pains for sure, but when you say we really want to represent the whole city, that's like decades worth of work and trust building and partnership. I hope that the work that we're doing right now is seen as the beginning of that new era for preservation in Austin and for Preservation Austin as an organization.