

# BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE

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When I first joined the photo staff of the Beaumont Enterprise in 2014, Susan Kilcrease was one of the first people I met – her photograph among those published in my very first front-page story about the history and revival of historic downtown Silsbee.

Years later, Ms. Kilcrease would find her way into multiple future front page stories after taking the reins heading the Ice House Museum.

I watched as that space transformed from a “museum” that was more an event space with artifacts making a nod to its century-old origin placed sporadically here and there to an actual museum, recording the history of Silsbee, its founders and other history related to the nearby Hardin County region.

Ms. Kilcrease didn’t wait for people interested in local history to stumble into the resource she was growing – she reached out to bring them in.

I have been fortunate that my number was in her contact list from years past.

The stories she brought to my attention weren’t just a rehashing of well-known history finding its way into the Ice House Museum’s latest exhibit.

They were tales of intrigue, forgotten, sometimes unknown history – stories that had been lost in time or never found before.

They were the unknown grandsons of Silsbee founder John Kirby, the river raft recreated to exemplify the lives of lower bottom Neches River dwellers, tales of Bigfoot in the Big Thicket, the discovery of a Rosenwald School in Silsbee, a Canadian TV series crew making their way to Southeast Texas for their latest “Fishing for History” episode, the iconic Dog People of Caneyhead story and more.

All have earned a front page spot on the Beaumont Enterprise, and personally, have been among some of my favorite stories to tell.

I have learned so much from my time working with Ms. Kilcrease – her enthusiasm and deep knowledge of history, contacts with “boots on the ground” level historians who’ve entrusted her with stories never before told, bringing a new level of meaning to the term “personal history.”

As a lifelong Silsbee resident whose family dates back to its earliest years, the history is indeed personal, but the stories she finds resonate with viewers and readers far beyond the limits of Silsbee and Hardin County.

The stories I’ve done on Ice House Museum exhibits and other news have resonated with a host of readers and continue to generate buzz years after their initial publication date.

It wasn't a surprise that Silsbee was among the finalists considered for the Smithsonian Institute's Museums on Main Street series last year.

It's an opportunity Ms. Kilcrease pursued, the exhibits and history she'd brought to light over the years putting the Silsbee community on the radar of a national stage.

As a journalist, I've covered multiple local historical museums and organizations, but my most rewarding and simply intriguing have been stories I've covered with Susan at the Ice House Museum.

She simply has a way of finding history that's off the radar, that goes beyond the big names and moments to the common citizens whose lives infused the tapestry of Southeast Texas – their stories forming the interwoven strands lying at the heart of our larger story and history.

Ms. Kilcrease finds the common man, the one of a kind, the lost history of marginalized communities and even the weird and wonderful.

Using the contacts she's created building trust with long-time residents in this community (which, as a reporter I can assure you is no small task but critical to a job well done) and beyond, I have been so impressed by her efforts to think out of the box – sometimes way out – to grow history beyond the confines of a museum to other venues, like the arts.

The Dog People of Caneyhead exhibit has spurred a number of projects from visual arts to music to new books and articles exploring the topic.

As a journalist who also paints and has exhibited my art, I was inspired after writing that story to create my own painting dedicated to I.C. Eason and fellow Caneyhead denizens.

I know she has been working on curating a creative homage to the subject – from visual arts to a possible full scale opera – which, to me, is just a phenomenal spin on the role a local history museum takes in telling its tales.

One of the things that I have been most impressed with is Ms. Kilcrease's ability to take what was a small museum with seemingly low expectations and make it into an engaging, truly fascinating place to visit.

Beyond John Kirby and timber, she didn't really have much to go on when selling Silsbee and surrounding Hardin County communities as a go-to for historically-minded visitors.

There's no grand home with Tiffany glass adorning its visage and opportunities for family holiday photos.

Little was handed to her when it came to generating interest in Silsbee history – she found it, a labor of love and testament to her devotion to history, community and the people lying at its heart.

I have no doubt it's a skill she'll bring wherever life lands her, bringing untold and fascinating tales to light for current and future generations of history lovers alike.

Thank you,

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