Riverside Conservancy – Meet Dr. Arthur Litowitz

Dr. Art Litowitz is a Florida native who is one of three founding members of Riverside Conservancy. Litowitz currently serves as a board member and as treasurer with the conservancy.

Born in Miami Beach, he had a front-row seat during most of his life in watching growth and urban sprawl challenge surrounding native coastal ecosystems. That early exposure to Florida's unique challenges as one of the nation's most populated states sparked a lifelong interest in finding ways to sustain the natural viability of his home state and to protect its fragile shorelines.

Litowitz earned his undergraduate degree in neurobiology & behavior from Cornell University. He completed dental school at Washington University in St. Louis and earned his certificate in orthodontics at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Dental Medicine. He also earned his pediatric dentistry certificate at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Practicing for 40 years before retiring as an orthodontist in 2010, Litowitz worked in Miami from 1979-1995, and in Central Florida from 1995-2010.

While practicing, he also earned his M.B.A. degree in finance at Nova Southeastern University in 2009.

And with a deep appreciation for yoga and eastern meditation, Litowitz has added certifications as a yoga instructor.

In addition, he has completed Florida Master Naturalist Program classes through the Marine Discovery Center (MDC), earning certifications in coastal systems and coastal restoration. He also participated in the Protect Our Lagoon Academy offered through MDC.

Litowitz and his family have had ties to community philanthropy for years through the Litowitz Foundation.

Here's what Litowitz had to say to Riverside Conservancy staff writer Lisa D. Mickey about his role with the organization:

Q: Talk about how you and co-founders Greg and Tom meshed together to make the idea of Riverside Conservancy work.
A: Not knowing each other, we met in 2017 in a class sponsored by Project H2O called Protect Our Lagoon Ambassadors. I had just moved into a home on the Indian River Lagoon. I had lived beachside, so I knew a fair amount about ocean waters, but I didn't really know that much about estuarine ecology even though I had lived here for more than 21 years and had kayaked on the lagoon.

In the course, we had a requirement of 15 hours of civic engagement and we had to complete a project. I made a poster about living shoreline restoration. Tom had a previous experience of forming a conservancy up in Ohio. Greg had recently retired as an aquatic ecosystems specialist. We teamed up because we wanted to create this conservancy.

Now that we have planted the seeds of Riverside Conservancy, we're growing limbs and we're maturing as an organization. I'm excited to be supportive of it philanthropically and also involved with citizen science, education and research. I don't think a day goes by that we don't engage in some aspect with what we're trying to accomplish – even with the study of history in the Volusia County community in relation to the Indian River Lagoon. We're also so grateful to the Marine Discovery Center for being a sponsor of that program where we all met.

Q: Is your team a mixture of business and science? Why was it important for this conservancy to get off the ground?
A: It's an amalgam – really, a chemistry -- and we combine assets from our own respective experiences. As I entered my retirement a little over 10 years ago, I realized the experiences – all of it – from the 40 years of a dental career and all the education prior to that, as well as the experience with people, practice and business. Dentistry is a business, but it's a science and it's also human experience. This project combines all of that.

I graduated from college in 1970. The first Earth Day was 1970 and my first course in ecology was in 1970. I lived in upstate New York and went to Cornell University. At that time in 1970, the population on earth was 3.7 billion. Currently, the world's population is a little over double that. I just see the numbers increasing – population, sustainability, along with environmental challenges. I wanted to start where I live, right here, and this was an opportunity to do that. You act locally, but think globally. Each

human is one out of 7.5 billion people on earth, but each person can do a lot with what we consume, what we produce and how we impact our place on the planet.

Q: How did it happen that you donated Riverside Conservancy's headquarters building?
A: When we moved to our home in Edgewater on the Indian River Lagoon, we met our next-door-neighbor, Mike Robinson, a commercial fisherman and the grandson of the person who built the house. This was maybe one week before Hurricane Matthew struck as a Category 3 storm [in October 2016].
Shortly after the hurricane hit, Mike passed away. I met his father, David, who grew up in the house. It occurred to me to buy the house and use it as a resource for the conservancy. We were in the process of forming a conservancy, so I arranged for an option on the property and then I was ready to buy it. I wanted to create a center and a space for education, research and also habitation. There is an opportunity to offer space for visiting professors or the executive director to occupy a space that could be actual living quarters.

Q: You could have bought the house, knocked it down and expanded your yard, but instead, you saw a possibility here.
A: I have an acre of property on the Indian River Lagoon and I subscribe to the Buddhist philosophy of no greed, no avarice, and also no ignorance. You have to learn to know what you don't know.

Q: What excites you the most about this nonprofit?
A: I'm trying to look at the Riverside Conservancy with a long view. I'm 72 and I've been retired for 10 years. My dad just passed a year ago at age 97, so if I have a good genetic quotient in my body to last another 20-some years, my thought is to conduct a 20-year prospective study of what it's like to restore ecosystems along the shoreline. Working with the Indian River Lagoon Council and all the work they're doing for the National Estuary Program, I want to see that happen and what the lagoon would look like for my grandson some 26 years from now.

Q: Do you have any concerns about getting this seed to grow?
A: Yes. In terms of our process of getting the conservancy to grow, I would like to engage more members and donors down the road. It truly starts as a seed and the seed is that location! Once you start, it begins to aggregate.

We have the soil, we have the waterfront and we have the ability to keep daily records of what we're growing and to demonstrate it. We also have the means in social media and educational opportunities to engage with others who have done this. When you think about it, the Nature Conservancy pretty much started as a seed. Now, they are engaged globally and are trying to turn around the impact that humans have had on our planet.

Q: You have seen many changes over the years while growing up in Miami. How has that experience shaped your understanding of a coastal ecosystem?
A: It's still happening! My parents lived there until a few months ago, when my mother passed away at age 93. I was literally born in the middle of the Indian River because St. Francis Hospital was on a bridge over the river water body. I am now reborn here! I'm more realistic and not as optimistic as I would like to be sometimes because I see changes that are happening, but I'm also not pessimistic. I just want to understand what we can understand about the changes we see.

I have an interest in paleo-climatology, which is the study of ancient climates. That's a science within itself when you realize that we're just a tiny hairline fracture of history of the earth in our lifetimes. The human lifetime is almost insignificant in terms of the geologic record, but we're part of it and we're creating changes in the habitats that will hopefully be conserved and preserved. But what does that mean? We'll be a part of a record some 100 million years from now – that little blip indicating what we were. The optimism is, if I can live a couple more decades and support this effort and do what I can to educate myself, help stimulate research and help others. The goal is to inspire others to keep going and to learn more environmental science and be aware of environment.

Q: How does your science background help with the work that's being done at Riverside Conservancy?
A: In dentistry, every patient who walks into the office is unique. You're treating a mouth and teeth and they are very specific to that person's genetics, form and morphology. Yes, we're trained in technique that we would apply to most people, but every person has their own unique experience with it. Here at RCC, I look at each property line, each conservation easement that we might have, and prepare each surface as I would prepare each patient. It's a different configuration, but it's the same

idea of restoring an ecosystem and getting people to understand what is necessary to maintain it. I want to be an initiator and a developer and somebody who's going to see this to fruition in my lifetime, as much as I can. In dentistry, you give it your best and try to restore the mouth. The terms we use pretty much is also ecosystem restoration! Is there damage? Is there harm? Are there infections? Is vibrio in the water? There are kinds of organisms at play there in the lagoon and in dentistry, the same is true in your mouth.

Q: In your hometown of Miami, you have seen the worst-case scenario in Florida with a lot of people living in a small space with sea-level changes.
A: Yes, and recently, there was a condo collapse. That was a mile and half from my parents' condo, so you wonder, could it happen somewhere else? My parents' basement has been flooded by hurricanes. It's real.

When I look at numbers, my great-grandfather, who raised my dad, was born in 1848. There were 1.2 billion people on the planet in the mid-19th century. My dad was born in 1919 and the population was already 1.9 billion. A few years later when my mom was born, there were 2 billion people on earth. I was born in 1949 and there was a global population of 2.5 billion. When my daughter was born in 1990, there were 5.3 billion and when my grandson was born, there was a population of 7.4 billion. The increase of population, plus the way we live, is impacting the planet. It's of concern to me. It's estimated that by 2050, there will be 9.7 billion here. In 2100, when my grandson is 85, there will be an estimated population of 11 billion. What's that going to look like? What's it going to feel like? How is it going to be to live here? This is essential to our considering our planet and to the work we do.

Q: What can you envision 10 years from now for Riverside Conservancy?
A: I can see it as a site for educators, research scientists and the public with citizen science. I think it's about partnering with others, such as the Marine Discovery Center. We're part of a community and Volusia County is a construct of a community – a governmental entity, but it's all the people who live in this county. The Mosquito Lagoon is shared with the middle and the southern end of the lagoon. It's one lagoon, one estuary -- just with different parts. Ten years from now, I see a continuation with other partnerships and organizations that will be helpful. We already work with

the county, with the St. Johns River Water Management District, and with the cities of Edgewater and New Smyrna Beach. Anything we do that is productive and helpful and can be applied in other cases, is something we're looking to do with other organizations in the state of Florida. We're all experiencing record heat and climate change. It's a global issue.

Q: So far, what makes you most proud of what has been accomplished at Riverside Conservancy?
A: I just think it's about the team effort we have put together and the involvement with Volusia ECHO and Volusia Forever -- reflecting other populations and other areas of the county with which we're engaged. I'm really proud of that! With Kelli [McGee] as our executive director, she's gifted, knowledgeable, helpful and resourceful and I'm proud of our involvement with her leadership, guidance and mentorship for us.

Q: Your hobbies include yoga. How often do you practice or teach?
A: I'm still a student and I'm reading a classic book, "The Tree of Yoga." I practice every day. There are eight limbs in the tree of yoga, and I try to adhere to those eight limbs. It's a way of life. Yes, it's a hobby. I do teach and I have taught, but it's mostly one on one or in small groups, but it's more the philosophy of it – the history and thinking behind it, and how it has evolved through humanity with human nature. It has a lot to do with the heart/body, the mind and the spirit – as an integrated discipline. It requires effort to be disciplined in your awareness of yoga.

I think this also applies to what we're doing at Riverside Conservancy. We're growing mangroves. We're growing trees! That's oxygen. That's breath. Breath is one of the key components of yoga. I translate that into the Riverside Conservancy.

Q: Does living on the lagoon give you any special insight into what is needed to conserve and protect this estuary?
A: I think so. People who are conservation-minded are the fishermen, the guides, the people who work on the water. They want to catch the big red fish, but the big reds come from little red fish and those little reds need a place to live, which is the estuary. That's where they grow up. My concern is with the attitudes of many other people I have observed driving boats with little or no concern about the manatees or dolphins. I like MDC's Discovery boat and the way naturalists guide people around the lagoon and explain what they're seeing. The beauty of where we live includes learning

about what is here. Living on the lagoon is a real privilege and I’m grateful for it every day and I don’t take it for granted. We see birds and dolphins almost every day, as well as other animals in this habitat engaged in survival mode. We can try to be helpful.