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PUBLIC / PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

## Spreading the Wealth of Rich Texas Heritage, Environment

**BRAUN HELPS FAMILY SHARE ITS RANCLAND WITH ITS COMMUNITY AS PARKLAND FOR ALL TO TREASURE**

Gay Dahlstrom first arrived at her family's historic ranch at the tender age of 18; at 80, she still walks the property regularly. Gay loves the connection the land gives her to her heritage and to the environment, and she has always wanted to share that connection with others.

Now – thanks to Gay's vision and the guidance of an expert team of land-conservation specialists—people in Central Texas will have the opportunity to experience 384 acres of one of the state's most unique natural areas, currently known as the Howe Pasture, at the 2,254-acre Dahlstrom Ranch on Onion Creek.

“My mother is the one who allowed the public access to happen,” says Gay's son, Jack Dahlstrom, Jr. “She loves this land and appreciates all that it has done for our family over many, many years – five generations. Now it's our family's turn to give back.”



From a broader perspective, the Dahlstroms are giving back by preserving the whole ranch in perpetuity through a conservation easement – an agreement that will keep the ranch intact, let the family continue to own, live on and use the property, restrict development, and protect the land's unique features and wildlife habitats. The family engaged Braun & Gresham, a Central Texas-based law firm specializing in land

conservation, to fulfill the family's vision. The Braun team coordinated a visionary collaboration to help the family sell a conservation easement, creating an unprecedented partnership with nonprofit land trust Hill Country Conservancy, federal agency the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and local governments the City of Austin and Hays County.

The public parkland is a bonus Braun helped the family create through a lease with the County to offer the Howe Pasture for

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public access – a park located on private land, but operated by the county government. The land itself is extraordinary – with myriad caves and sinkholes, as well as diverse woodlands connected to both the Texas Hill Country and the state’s eastern prairie – making it an ideal location for a park experience centered around environmental education in a natural setting.

“Gay had dreamt of preserving the land and maybe donating part of it for public use,” Braun attorney Cassie Gresham confirms. “The natural area will happen within the terms of the easement, so that it doesn’t interfere with the conservation values protected under the agreement.” The Howe Pasture will be leased to the County for seven years, with the option of three five-year extensions.

Working with Braun and the Dahlstroms, Hays County and Hill Country Conservancy applied to the National Park Service to help jumpstart the process of opening the pasture to the public. Kathryn Nichols, a community planner with the agency’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, leads a public-access committee shaping the future of the natural area.

“We’re working with local partners to determine how to best move forward with providing opportunities for the public to enjoy the land,” explains Nichols. “We’ve come up with recommendations on issues like visitor management – trail maintenance, tour guides – and we’ve included some processes for involving volunteers and other regional partners. In addition to building some trails and support facilities at the trailhead area, nature education programs will be done more by partners than by the County, so we hope to create some strong and supportive partners for the site.”

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GEORGE COFER,  
HILL COUNTRY CONSERVANCY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

While Hays County will manage the Howe Pasture, the Dahlstroms have their own ideas for the area. Jack currently hosts hunters, birdwatchers, families and folks seeking solitude at a lodge on the ranch; his goal is to expand this fledgling ecotourism business so that the ranch can become self-funding.

“Our plan is for a conference center at the entrance to the public area,” Jack details. “Maybe a small complex, with the first building being the main one. It would feature a few classrooms and one large room, and could be used for community meetings, art exhibits, field trips, banquets. I want the ranch to generate enough income for it to pay for itself tax-wise, so that even if future generations [of our family] move elsewhere, it won’t cost them to keep the land.”

The Braun team continues to represent the family and facilitate their vision for the land as plans unfold. However it develops, the ranchland/parkland will provide both a wonderful natural sanctuary and exceptional educational opportunities for visitors – including archeological rock specimens and native bird species.

“Here in Texas, or anywhere with a strong property-rights ethic, it’s fairly unusual to have public access to private land,” notes Hill Country Conservancy executive director George Cofer. “It was part of Gay’s vision from day one, and it’s going to be an exciting chance for the people of Central Texas to spend time in a very special place.”

“The ranch has a whole new persona we weren’t even aware of – we’ve gained appreciation for the breadth and richness of the history of the environment and the peoples,” Gay Dahlstrom’s eldest daughter, Cecilia Barrentine, adds. “We couldn’t have done it without Braun’s team of attorneys. To find such a wonderful way of keeping the legacy of the land alive, and to have it benefit the public, too – it’s just a total win-win.”