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Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP)
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Joe Guidry (JG): This is Joe Guidry on January 12th, 2017. I'm interviewing former Hillsborough County Commissioner Jan Platt at the Jan Platt Library. So, Jan, I'd like to ask you, first, where you were born and raised.

Jan Platt (JP): Well, I was born 80 years ago in St. Petersburg, Florida, and I have lived in the state of Florida ever since, so I'm a native.

JG: When did you come to Hillsborough County?

JP: Well, we came—my dad was teaching school at the time that I was born. And he taught about a year, and then he moved to Tampa; we moved to Tampa, in South Tampa, for a short period of time. And then, when World War II broke out, he went with the Department of the Navy, and he was in Dunedin. We lived in Dunedin, and we lived in Lakeland. He worked with Donald Roebling in the development of the amphibious tank that Donald Roebling designed.¹ And so, we moved back to Tampa from Lakeland when the war ended in 1945, so we lived there ever since.

JG: And where did you live, in Tampa, at that time?

JP: In South Tampa—not in South Tampa, in Seminole Heights.

¹Donald Roebling (1908 – 1959) was an American philanthropist and inventor who is most famous for inventing the amtrac, often called the Roebling Alligator. The amtrac, an amphibious warfare vehicle, was intended to operate in swamp terrains that would have been inaccessible to both cars and boats at the time.

JG: Oh, and you went to Hillsborough High School?

JP: I went to Broward Memorial and Hillsborough.

JG: Oh, wow. And so, was your father from Tampa?

JP: No, my dad was born in Tarpon Springs, and my granddad had Anclote Marina engine works at Anclote River, so we always had access to boats.

JG: So that explains your love for boating and fishing. What was Hillsborough County like, when you were here growing up?

JP: Well, you know, when I was born 80 years ago, there were 1.7 million people in the state of Florida. Today, there are 20 million. And that population for the state is almost the population of Hillsborough County today. I was blessed, in that my dad was an avid fisherman, and so, he and I—he had no sons, so I was his partner in fishing. And we would fish the lakes, the streams, the bayous, the rivers. Any body of water that was there, my dad and I would fish. And, over the years, it would just kill me to see the development that was destroying all those wetlands. There was one stream that we fished in, in Town and Country and area, where the water was crystal clear. It was the only place that I ever saw—um, oh, what are they called? What are those water animals? Black?

JG: Otters?

JP: Otters. There were otters in there, and you could see the bass. And when Town and Country got developed, that stream was used as a stormwater outfall² and was destroyed, and I just continued to see that over the years.

JG: So that explains it; you've always had this enthusiasm and love of the outdoors.

JP: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

JG: And so, tell me how you get into politics.

²A stormwater outfall is any point where a waste stream discharges into a body of water.

JP: Well, when I was in high school at Hillsborough, I went to Girls State³ and was elected to the Supreme Court, and that inspired me to seek a career in government. And so, that is what also inspired me to go to law school. And so, I went a year to law school at the University of Florida, where I was very unwelcome. I was the only woman in the law school. They would heckle me. The instructors would say, “Ms. Kaminis, would you please describe what’s in your briefs?” And everyone would snicker. It was the most un—it was the worst experience I’d ever had. But anyway, so I stayed a year, and I made my grades, and I made the mistake—I’d been offered a scholarship to Duke [University], and I didn’t accept it. I should have. But anyway, so I came back to Tampa. And so, what was your question?

JG: How did you get involved in politics? Well, when you came back, did you go to work then?

JP: Well, then I taught school at Hillsborough. For a year, I taught American history. And then I became a field director for the Girl Scouts. But what inspired me to run was my sister’s untimely death. She was six years my junior, and she battled cancer as a very young woman. And she died on March 4th of 1974. And the next day, [Dick] Greco⁴ resigned from office, and there were three seats open on the City Council, and I said that life is short, and you have to do what you were trained to do. And so, I announced that I would run for city council. And I’ve dedicated my career to her.

JG: Right. I’m sure she’d be very proud.

JP: Yeah. So I probably would never have run if that had not happened because I did it because of her passing. So all of my friends and her friends got behind me when I ran for office, and I’ve always been sort of apolitical. Even though I’m a registered Democrat, I vote Republican; I vote the issues. I’m just pragmatic.

JG: As I remember, you (inaudible) for office, good government, ethics was sort of the focus, as it was throughout your career. But the environment came a little later. Or was it a priority right from the start?

JP: Well, it was always a priority. It was always a priority.

³Girls State is an immersive week-long educational workshop, focusing on Americanism and the political process, sponsored by the Florida American Legion Auxiliary. The program seeks to educate young girls about American politics and government by allowing them to become the citizens and elected leaders of a mythical state.

⁴Dick A. Greco, an Ybor City native, was mayor of Tampa from 1967-1974 and again from 1995-2003.

JG: Was there any issue that really brought it to the fore when you were on the council or the commission?

JP: Well, you know, I was known as Commissioner No-Vote. Voting “no,” I had more “no” votes than any other single vote of anybody who has ever served in the county commission. And Tom Ingles(??) did that count. And it’s because I would vote “no” on all these rezonings [sic] and articulate why that rezoning was a bad idea. And so, every time a rezoning came up that was approved, where they would let somebody pave over a Cypress Head or something like that, I would articulate why that was a bad idea. And my mom told me that a well articulated “no” can be as positive as a yes, and I believe that. So with all those “no” votes, they were aimed at saving the environment.

JG: And how did ELAPP first come to you? How did you get the idea for ELAPP? How did that develop?

JP: Well, I kept seeing lands destroyed, and there was no way—environmentally sensitive lands destroyed—and there was no way for the government to save them, other than to block it through a zoning. And, unfortunately, the commission was always controlled by—a majority—the majority of the commission was always controlled by the developers, so I didn’t have any hopes of doing that. I always remember that there was a corner out on Dale Mabry and I think it’s Lake Fern Road, where there was a beautiful Cypress Head, and it was swamp, and they voted “yes” to destroying it and let a bank be built there. So it appeared to me that the only way to save lands is to buy them and to have an avenue to save them through purchase. And so, in 1987, the [*Tampa*] *Tribune* did a series of articles about—oh, what’s his name?

JG: Gus?

JP: Gus Muench⁵ and his boys. He was a crabber down in south county. And the *Tribune* did an article about some little islands offshore that were up for sale for developers, as well as the shoreline being for sale. And so, I called Gus and went down, and he took me in a boat, and we toured those islands. In fact, one of the islands has an Indian mound⁶ on it. Beautiful. And so, I thought, We’ve got to save this property. And that’s when I came up with the idea of the environmental land program and used those islands and that

⁵August “Gus” Muench, a longtime Tampa Bay area crabber and environmentalist, was interviewed as part of the Tampa Bay Estuary Oral History Project. His transcribed interview can be found in the Tampa Bay Estuary Oral History Project Collection.

⁶Over several thousand years, Native American peoples built mounds of soil in various shapes and sizes across eastern North America; many of these mounds remain standing today and have great archeological value.

property as the focal point. And, what's interesting is, it's been on the ballot three times for voters to tax themselves to buy environmentally sensitive lands. And, every time, the measures pass by over 70 percent of the voters. It just tells you that the public, in general, wants to save those lands, and it sends a message to the elected officials that there are 70 percent of the people out there who are interested in it. So, hopefully, it had a change on some of those rezonings [sic], but I can't attest to that. But at least we were able to start buying lands.

JG: Did you face some obstacles and challenges in getting this through and getting it on the ballot? Was there much opposition from other commissioners?

JP: Well, not really because it was going to have to go to the voters; the voters were going to have to decide it. And the landowners had to agree to sell. It was not taking land from individuals; it was a joint decision. So that it was an avenue, for people who owned environmentally sensitive lands, to get paid for it, rather than having to work with a developer to pave it over. So it had that positive aspect of it.

JG: Were there any other people? I know Gus. We mentioned Gus. Any other people who were on the forefront with you who were very helpful during that period?

JP: I can't remember that. I don't remember. I know the media was very strongly in support.

JG: Yeah. I remember. Did ELAPP, did you see that as complementing other environmental efforts? I know—

JP: Oh, absolutely. Because it enables the government to buy lands that abut the lands and the bay, so that it would save mangroves. And one of my issues has always been to improve the bay, which was going downhill. And so, this provided a funding source for purchasing lands abutting the bay, so that they would not be developed.

JG: Because you found out you didn't believe that regulations, in and of themselves, were sufficient?

JP: No, no. They weren't because you had a lot of weak people in public office, and you still do. I mean, the developers, the development community, large contributors, basically speak very loudly behind the scenes.

JG: Have you been pleased with how ELAPP has operated and worked?

JP: Yes, and I think one of the keys for its success is its citizen's committee that has been the one to review the sites and to make the final decisions. And that gives great strength to the purchasing of the lands because you have a broad-based citizens group that has reviewed all the parcels and made a recommendation. And then they make a recommendation to the board of county commissioners, and that gives it great strength. So we've been very fortunate.

JG: Have there been any problems that you know of? Or anything that needed to be improved or worked on?

JP: Oh, I don't know. I can't think of any.

JG: Are there any ELAPP purchases or accomplishments that are particularly, that you thought were really major? I mean, they all, the whole, in total—

JP: No, I wouldn't put any above the other. Let me just say, as an 80-year-old resident of this state, it was killing me to Cypress Heads mowed over, mowed down, and then the swamps filled with sand and buildings going up on it. I mean, that was where we were headed until we had this program.

JG: Has it worked well with the state's land acquisition areas?

JP: Yes, in fact, SWFMD⁷ has been a partner in purchasing some of it. They've had money that they would partner with ELAPP funds and purchase some of the properties. And then that [Florida Forever]⁸ that Martinez came up with, he modeled it after this.

JG: Did he?

⁷SWFMD stands for Southwest Florida Water Management District, the regional governmental agency that manages water resources in the southern half of Florida from Orlando to the Florida Keys.

⁸Florida Forever is Florida's premier conservation and recreation lands acquisition program. Florida Forever replaced Preservation 2000, which was the largest public land acquisition program of its kind in the United States.

JP: Yes. That's where he got the idea. He saw what a success it was. And thank goodness he did because, then, this is statewide. But I think we're the largest local land-buying program in the state.

JG: Is there anything I didn't ask about ELAPP that I should have, that we should've discussed?

JP: Here is the thing I did find, [reading] "Largest local land acquisition program in Florida." We've bought 61,000 acres.

JG: And have you ever encountered any opposition to ELAPP at all? Was there any, for instance—?

JP: No, but they wouldn't come to me. (both laugh) They wouldn't let me know what their opposition was.

JG: Okay. Well, the program is named for you, Jan. How did you feel when the commission did that?

JP: I was very surprised and awestruck. And it was Kevin Beckner who did it at a county commission meeting. I had no knowledge that it was going to occur. So I was very surprised and grateful.

JG: Well, it's well deserved. Nobody championed it more than you. And, when it did go up for voters, you were always at the forefront of leading the campaigns. I think, at the last one, Bob Martinez was with you. And it received bipartisan support.

JP: Yes, it has. And it's over 25 years old now. We had the 25-year anniversary not long ago, out at one of the sites. Nineteen eighty-seven, what is that? It's 30 years old now.

JG: Well, I also wanted to ask you—you were also very involved in cleaning up Tampa Bay issues—how you feel about the progress that has been made. Do you feel like adequate attention is still being given to it?

JP: You know, I have always been amazed at how that came about and how successful its been. And, you know, it required various businesses to change the way they did business, and I don't think anybody had knowledge that what they were doing was harming the bay. And I would say, in particular, the power companies because they were burning coal; you'd look up at the smoke stacks at TECO [Tampa Electric Company], and there would be this brown smoke coming out. And they bought—they own acres upon acres of coal mines because that was their way of powering their plants. But, once it became knowledge that that smoke, when it came down on the bay, was doing considerable damage, they changed and without much opposition. And so, I make a point, every time I go on the bay shore, to look across and see and make sure that that's still white smoke. And it is white smoke.

And Mosaic⁹ [was] the same way. Because their gypsum stacks¹⁰ had no holding ponds, the water would run down from the gypsum stacks right into the bay. And, once we made it very clear that that was harming the bay considerably, then they built holding areas around those gypsum stacks, so that the water does not go down into the bay. Now, the governments were a little bit harder, too. You know, to change their sewage treatment costs a lot of money. Hillsborough County built a new plant and, ultimately, the City of Tampa did too, and Pinellas, so that it made a complete change in the way governments handled their sewage and their stormwater too. But, you know, it's just being aware of the facts and the impacts, and they knew it was ultimately in their best interest that the bay be saved, and it has been, thank goodness.

JG: How big a factor was the Clean Water Act¹¹? Do you think that was major?

JP: I think that came after it. I mean, that was putting a stamp of approval on what was already going on.

JG: Okay.

JP: It sort of affirmed that we were on the right course. And I first became involved with it when I was president of the Suncoast Girl Scout Council, and we were building a Girl Scout Camp Wai Lani in Pinellas County on the gulf. And we were going to be the only saltwater Girl Scout camp in the Southeast. And, lo and behold, Pinellas County decided

⁹Mosaic Co. is one of the world's largest producers of concentrated phosphate fertilizer, which they mine for in various locations throughout Central Florida.

¹⁰A gypsum stack is a pile of accumulated phosphogypsum, a byproduct generated by the chemical processing of phosphate ore. Gypsum stacks are known to pose significant environmental health risks.

¹¹The Clean Water Act, enacted in 1972, is the primary federal law in the United States governing water pollution.

to put a sewer plant in close proximity and was going to have a 19-inch outfall go right along our campsite and dump the water into the bay—into the gulf. And so, I was president of the Girl Scout Council, and so I called Roger Stewart¹², who I had read about, and told him what was going on.

And he came over and told me; he said, “Jan, the water that goes out of sewage plants in our state are primary treatment,” which means no treatment, that you flush the chain, and what goes down the toilet comes out in the pipe, no treatment. And so, I and the Girl Scouts became very vocal in the media about what was happening and what the laws were. And so, Pinellas County scrapped the idea of that sewage plant going, the pipe. And that was the first reclaimed water discharge in the state. Because what they did with that—that’s what waters Innisbrook.

JG: Oh, wow.

JP: (laughs) So that was a win-win. And see, it made it. We publicized about sewage treatment. And see, at the same time, I was captain of the Mainsheet Mamas¹³ at the yacht club. And we would sail and see all this stuff floating. And so, we, all together, worked to have the City of Tampa change its sewage. So when I ran, they were some of my strong helpers, those sailors. Because, again, that’s how that got in the media—the fact about that Girl Scout camp.

JG: When you were fighting the Pinellas plant, was that in the ’70s?

JP: That was in ’72, 1972.

JG: And where was the Girl Scout camp?

JP: Wai Lani. That was off of [Route 19 Alternate], just north of Tarpon Springs, sort of around Palm Harbor.

JG: Is it still there?

¹²Roger Stewart was a prominent and beloved Florida environmentalist; he led the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission for 30 years.

¹³The Mainsheet Mamas were chartered in 1973 in the Tampa Yacht & Country Club as an organization of women dedicated to sailing and racing Optimist Prams. The Mainsheet Mamas, a member group of the Florida Women’s Sailing Association, seeks to teach and promote women sailing.

JP: Oh, yeah. It's still there today. I went there the other day.

JG: Really? Oh, is that surrounded by development?

JP: There is development in the area, but it's still got a lot of the natural plants and everything, and kids can go up. They have the—oh, what is it? The cabins are upstairs because it was built with floodplain standards. So they're upstairs, and they can look out and see the bay. At the time, it was the only saltwater campsite. I think [there are] probably some more by this point.

JG: Are there any other things that you helped effect on the commission that really helped the Tampa Bay? I mean, I know ELAPP has been a huge help, but there's a lot of other issues—

JP: Well, and when I was on the regional planning council, I helped form the Agency on Bay Management¹⁴. It was my idea to bring together all of the regulatory agencies and governmental agencies, as well as environmental volunteers, together on a regular basis, in an organized way. And we called it the Agency on Bay Management. And we'd meet monthly, and it's still in existence over in St. Pete. And that was an opportunity for all of the various bay issues to be discussed and solutions to be found. And it's still in existence, and I'm still on it. Because there was a need for people to put their heads together and come up with solutions. It's easy to criticize, but it's more difficult to find the solutions.

JG: And this all started when you fished with your dad as a little girl.

JP: Um-hm. Yeah.

JG: Are you still able to fish?

JP: Oh, see, being with this walker, and then I take pills where I can't be in the sun, so Kevin offers for me to go. He goes on a regular basis, so I kind of do it through Kevin and Emma.

JG: Well, but you did fish through most of your adult life.

¹⁴The Agency on Bay Management (ABM) of the Tampa Regional Council is the primary organization focusing on the protection and management of the Tampa Bay estuary.

JP: Oh, oh, until just recently, just until I've had this cancer. Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And we gave our boat away to Peter Clark's group the other day, the last couple, donated it to them. And I'm just so thrilled to see my granddaughter.

JG: She likes being on the water?

JP: Oh, she does, and my son and daughter-in-law. And we're the recipients of their catch. (both laugh)

JG: What was your favorite fishing when you went? What did you like to fish for?

JP: Well, I was happy to catch anything. And, you know, in the bay, you're fortunate because you can catch a trout; you can catch a redfish; or you catch a snook. I mean, any of the three. And they're, all three, good to eat. And they're all spunky fish, so I was happy to catch any of them. And then, when I was a kid, we didn't have a boat in the bay. We would walk and crab and trip and all that. Out of Tarpon [Springs], we had a boat that had cabins and all, and we would go fish out around Anclote Key and that kind of thing. It was always fun to go out there and catch bigger fish.

JG: Oh, I bet that was. Well, Jan, is there anything else that you would like to discuss on your environmental efforts in Tampa Bay, ELAPP, anything I might've overlooked or forgot to ask?

JP: Well, I just think it requires constant vigilance to make sure that everyone still, not only appreciates the bay, but continues to protect it and not to be afraid to stand up and speak out because the bay is too important.

end of interview