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Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP)
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Emily Holbrook (EH): It is June 10th—Monday, June 10th, 2019. We are in the Tampa campus library. I am Emily Holbrook, and I am here with Maya Burke. If you could, just spell your name for me.

Maya Burke (MB): M-a-y-a B-u-r-k-e.

EH: Okay, great. And we are doing some additional interviews for the ELAPP Oral History Collection and Digital Scholarship Services. Okay, so my first question is how long have you been in the Hillsborough County, Tampa area?

MB: So I'm a Pinellas County native. I was born and raised here, so I've been here since the early '80s.

EH: Okay, great. Well, that—great, that answers the next question. So can you tell me about sort of growing up in the area then?

MB: Yeah, so I grew up in a little fishing village called Crystal Beach. It was sort of the last gas [sic] of fishing villages here in the Tampa Bay Area. But it's right—it's located on St. Joseph Sound, north of Clearwater Harbor. And it's just kind of a funky—a funky little place that changed a lot as I was growing up. In the '70s, a lot of folks were moving out of the cities and into the suburbs, and so areas in—people were leaving St. Petersburg, and they were moving to north Pinellas County, so there was this rapid transition as I was growing up.

So a lot of my neighbors were from old Florida fishing families. We would get together and have, like, neighborhood fish fries. People who cast-netted and knit—you know, made their own nets. We would do that sort of stuff, but over time, the neighborhood changed. Different people moved in, and the, sort of, the vibe of the community felt different. But yeah, I grew up in northern Pinellas County. It was horse farms and orange groves, still, when I was very little. The train—Pinellas Trail was still a train when I was growing up, so we used to hear the bell ring, and we would walk down to the post office there and watch that happen.

Our streets were sandy, not paved, so you walked barefoot outside and do that. And yeah, my high school was built on an orange grove, a place, you know, you used to go through, and you'd pluck the oranges, and stick your thumb in, and you could suck the juice out just like that, and it was super fun. But I grew up kayaking. My dad used to take a belt and strap us to the back of his windsurfers, and we would ride all along, and windsurf along in St. Joseph Sound, and so just being part of all that was formative for me, and I think a quintessential kind of Florida fun that maybe doesn't exist anymore. I'm not sure.

EH: All right, so I didn't ask—when were you born?

MB: Eighty-three.

EH: Eighty-three. So you're talking about the, like, late '80s, early '90s, in all of this?

MB: Yeah.

EH: And you said that you just—the area changed a lot. Could you describe some of the changes for us?

MB: Well, it changed both for the good and maybe not as good. But a lot of the changes were—a lot of money moved into that neighborhood and to those communities, and so it was no longer, you know, multi-generations of Florida families that made their living fishing on the Gulf and whatnot. But folks made their money other ways. They had more money, and they came in, they built these big houses. They just had a different way of life, but we all really still valued the same thing, which is, it's gorgeous living there, right on the water, you know, that—I think that's really one of the ties that binds for people. And so, yeah, it changed like that.

And also—so Jan Platt was formative for me, from a very young age.¹ Some of her early activism on water-quality issues happened at Camp Wai Lani, which is the Girl Scout camp. It's literally—it's like the north part of St. Joseph Sound. So her advocating for water quality improvements, and the additional wastewater treatment from the plants that were just to the north of the place where I grew up, made a big difference in water quality. And I saw that happen. I mean, I saw what the water would look like when I was, you know, growing up versus coming back, after going to school and living, you know, on my own and everything. It's night and day difference. And, you know, that thread of Jan has been in my life, in my career, for a long time.

EH: That's great. So how did you really just get involved in environmentalism and conservation?

MB: I think I'm probably the poster child of someone who responded to the efforts to get the right materials into educational curriculums. So, like, Earth Day stuff, you know? And I'm trying to remember, there was a kid's program with Linda Weatherby [sic] that Nickelodeon used to air, and it would be like these current event topics for kids and stuff.² I was susceptible to all that.

EH: Oh, *Nick News*.

MB: Yeah.

EH: Yeah.

MB: Yeah. So I think all that resonated with me, and I think when you pair that with the backdrop of growing up the way that I did, you know, we had a long leash. We were—I was on St. Joseph Sound after school every day, like, that's what I did, or I was climbing trees, or I was making a fort in a mangrove or something like that. So I think when you pair that experience with a good quality education, that those two things kind of came together. So I've been interested in this stuff for a long time, and it's, you know, what I studied when I went to school, and I was really fortunate to fall into a career path that supported those sorts of things.

EH: So you said you studied environmental science in school?

MB: I have a double degree in political science and environmental studies from New College of Florida.

¹ Jan K. Platt (1936–2017) served four years on the Tampa City Council and 24 years on the Hillsborough County Commission. She was a key figure in the founding of the Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP), which was later renamed in her honor.

² Linda Ellerbee hosted *Nick News* from 1992 to 2015.

EH: New College? Okay, great. So when you moved back into the Pinellas County area, what were your priorities when moving back home?

MB: So I actually only left for one year, and then I commuted to Sarasota the rest of the time. So I've been in Pinellas County most of my life. My partner and I bought a house in St. Pete when we were 19, and worked on renovating it, and we lived there and he actually commuted up here, to USF Tampa, and I commuted down south to Sarasota. So we're, like, committed to Pinellas County. So we just liked it. That was always our priority—stuff like that.

EH: How did you get involved in ELAPP?

MB: Well, I mean, I think—I worked for the water-management district, that was my first professional career outside of college. And I held a couple of different roles there, but once I became an environmental planner in the planning department, I was the basin planner for the Hillsborough River Basin Board and then the Northwest Hillsborough Basin Board. And so environmental lands acquisition was a big part of how we accomplished our mission at the water-management district, protecting natural resources, flood—providing flood protection and water-quality improvements, all those sorts of things.

And so I was involved with sort of keeping tabs on what was going on, in that capacity. And then we also reviewed comprehensive plan amendments that local governments would put forward. And so, if there were potential acquisitions—a lot of times there's overlap between developments of regional impact, so these large landowners, they sort of have two paths. You know, one path is they can develop it through something that was called the development of regional impact, which we don't see too many of anymore because of comprehensive planning changes, legislative changes, that happened in 2011. But they can develop it with houses, and retail, and all that stuff, or they can make a conscious commitment to conserve their land for future generations.

And so they could go through something like the ELAPP Program, and either have a conservation easement where they continue to maintain and, you know, ranch on the land, do those sorts of things, but it also has a public benefit that's sort of locked in. Or they can sell it and get the rewards that way. And so, that's part of that, sort of, watershed-scale planning effort that I was involved in. And so that was sort of my first interaction.

EH: Okay. And that was when you were working with water management, you said?

MB: For the Southwest Florida Management District, yeah.

EH: But now you work for the Tampa Bay Estuary Program.³

MB: Yeah.

EH: Did you move right into that after working for the watershed?

MB: I didn't. I actually—I got my dream job and I was the—I worked for the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council. So doing a lot of the same kind of work that I was doing for the water-management district, but the big difference was I was convening this group called the Agency on Bay Management. And that's another group that Jan was really formative for. She helped create the Agency on Bay Management. So that is sort of a successor agency to a citizen activist group called Save Our Bays that really agitated for a lot of the water-quality improvements that we're reaping the benefits of around the Tampa Bay region now.

And so I did that for two-and-a-half years, and was approached by the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, and they asked me if I would like to come work with them, doing, you know, good things around the Bay. And it was just—it was—they're such a dynamic group at the Estuary Program, it was something that you couldn't say no to. So I left my dream job to come to Estuary Program, and I couldn't be happier.

EH: That's great.

MB: Yeah.

EH: What is your current position at the Tampa Bay estuary project?

MB: So my role is the science policy coordinator, but really, we're a small and mighty staff of six, so we all wear a lot of hats. We have to be utility players, so I do a lot of different things. I like to say that my strengths are really in sort of distilling and translating scientific research into a form that's useful for policymakers and planners. And so that's sort of how I view my role there. But I manage a large-scale grants program called the Tampa Bay Environmental Restoration Fund. So that takes private dollars, as well as public dollars, and matches them together, and we use that to fund catalyzing research throughout the region, habitat-restoration projects, water-quality-improvement projects, or innovative social science or community

³ An estuary is a partially enclosed body of water where fresh water and salt water meet.

outreach projects. And a lot of those kind of things are—they take properties where, you know, the county might own the land but it needs—it's in need of some kind of restoration.

So there might be, like, an ELAPP property—like one project we're working on now is called the Kracker Avenue Project, and that's an area that was acquired through ELAPP. It used to be fish ponds, so it's a highly modified landscape of, you know, these linear ditch ponds, back and forth. And what we're doing is working with the county—with Hillsborough County—and the Southwest Florida Water Management District Swim Group. And we're going to restore a more natural flow-way using fresh water, and—so that it creates, you know, additional treatment for that water that's coming into the bay. But then also, it's delivering it in a more natural way, that provides really great fish habitat for import—commercially and recreationally important fish species. It's really exciting we get to do stuff like that. And that's a big part of my workload, is managing all those projects. It's usually, like, on average, about 10 new projects a year.

EH: Wow.

MB: Yeah.

EH: That's a lot. So what is your actual role in ELAPP when you go to the meetings? Like, who are you then?

MB: I'm not—I think, like, I've been on some of the advisory committees. I'm not one of the, like, selectors or anything like that, but I perform technical review functions for them. So when they are putting together a land-management plan for one of their properties, I try and make sure that, you know, what they're proposing is not only good and appropriate for the habitats that are out there, but it's also taking into consideration the best available science that we're conducting here around the region. I try and link people up. I think of myself as a connector, too, and so I'm always trying to connect people to research or other resources, whether they're financial or, you know, knowledge that other folks have—just sort of keeping everybody on the same page about what's out there and how they can manage the properties appropriately.

EH: Okay, great. So what do you see as the main goals of ELAPP or maybe just environmental and conservation efforts that you're a part of in the area?

MB: Well, for ELAPP, I think it's kind of what I said earlier, which is, I think water is what connects us. I think it's our way of life. I think we're all here—we love Tampa Bay. We love the Gulf of Mexico, and one way or the other, we're encountering it and enjoying it day to day, and so it's important that we protect it. And protecting the land is a really important component of that. And so I view programs like the ELAPP program as—it's cultural. You know, it's like why

you would fund a museum or a sports—or people talk about a sports team, you know, it's part of our shared experience here in the region, and it's an investment that is worth our time and energy in protecting.

EH: Okay. Have you seen any changes in that since you first got started?

MB: In, like, investing in land acquisition? Yeah, I mean, there's—it kind of ebbs and flows. One of things I learned, working at the water-management district, was something I already knew from growing up here, which is that land conservation and environmental issues in Florida — they're not really partisan. They're just not. There's so many people that are very conservative Republicans or very liberal Democrats, or whatever else, all along the spectrum, and that they agree on a lot of these issues. There might be language that divides or, you know, other things, but when it comes to the core, there's a water ethic.

And working at the water-management district, I think, really hammered that home—working with the gubernatorial appointees from different administrations, working with folks out in the center of the state. I mean, the water-management district that I worked for is 16 counties—goes out to Polk, Hardee, Highlands—those kind of areas. I mean, you work with those folks, and you understand what values you share and how you can work together. So I think a lot of that did change, and has changed, but I still think that even if those political conversations are happening in a different way, that the people still feel the same way.

And so I'm hoping that we're starting to get some sense that the pendulum is, you know, righting itself a little bit. You know, with things like the—trying to re-fund Florida Forever, you know, that's one movement to try and address these things at the state level. But county governments have done a great job stepping up where the state government has maybe taken a break and a backseat. And so programs like ELAPP are helping to keep that legacy around, and they're continuing to—they have funds, they're still buying land, and people still value these things. So they're doing the people's will.

EH: Great. So, since we're sort of on the politics, you said there's a lot of, you know, more support—like, nonpartisan sort of support, locally and the county level. What's the state political support like? Or the political side on that end?

MB: So I don't work as much—like, I worked for land acquisition at the water-management district for about a year the time that I was there, and that's sort of when the tide was turning to either don't buy it or, if you buy it, it should all be less than fee, so don't buy it outright, buy a conservation easement on it, which is, you know, that's valuable too. So I'm not sure, you know, how that tide is turning. It seems like there's a little bit more support. There's certainly more

funding—not anything comparable to what it was in prior years, given where the budget's at right now. So I don't know as much about that right now.

EH: So what do you think are the biggest challenges, maybe to political support, for conserving lands or acquiring different pieces of land?

MB: Well, I usually think—like I said, I think that—I do think that there is support for it on both sides, so it's about finding a path where people have cover [and] they feel safe with their different constituencies. And that works both, like, above them and below them. So the grassroots that—the actual constituents that people support, but also they have—politicians have communities, you know, within their party and within their donor fields and things like that. So, to me, a lot of times, we push for purity and we have different ways that we talk about things, and sometimes it can create uncomfortable situations for people who would otherwise agree with you, but, you know, can't. And it puts them in uncomfortable situations elsewhere in their lives, and so I think we should just be working together to find that common ground and to make progress where we can. I don't know.

EH: What are some current concerns or projects for ELAPP or other environmental groups in the area?

MB: Well, I think one of the biggest concerns is our continued growth. There's a lot of growth pressure here, especially in south county, in Hillsborough County. That place has changed like the change that I witnessed growing up, but they're seeing it now. And we've had iterative plans that have been put together throughout the region, where we've said—we've expressed values that we don't to continue to grow the way we have in the past, and there are places that are worth protecting, and we want more density, and things like this.

And we also want to preserve the rural way of life where we can. So we want to have these areas where, like—this is where we do a lot of farming, so if we want local agriculture and farm-to-table kind of restaurants, and these kinds of things that make for good community fun that we all enjoy, you know, we need this space in southern Hillsborough County to persist there. So I think, you know, continuing to provide support and strategies for ways that we can actually implement these visions for growth management—and it needs to be local at this point, because we don't have that kind of protection from the state really, anymore, so ELAPP can play an important role in addressing these kinds of threats for more growth, going forward.

And then the big one that I work on a lot, too, is climate change. So we have acquired all these lands, and they're in the public trust, so they're our responsibility to manage and we've invested in them. But how does that change over time if our baseline is changing? So if sea levels rise two to four feet by 2100, or more, you know, what do we do? How do we continue to make sure that

these lands provide function—they provide ecosystem services that protect us as humans, and our human health and wellbeing, but they're also continuing to provide habitats that are functional for plants and animals. Those kinds of things, I think, are big and important challenges for ELAPP to consider.

EH: Why should the everyday Hillsborough or Pinellas person—the voter—why should they be concerned with what ELAPP is doing or what other conservation groups are doing?

MB: So this is a question, a type of question—it does not always speak to my biases, so I guess my first—my gut reaction, as always, is it's not as important for them to be aware. It's important that they enjoy these places and these places exist. But I check myself, and it's a conscious bias that I check. And so it's just—it's something that I work hard on reminding myself, I guess, but—so one of the reasons that I think that the Estuary Program is such a successful example of environmental recovery here in Tampa Bay is because we had these actions from all corners.

And citizens being knowledgeable and engaged and caring is a really important pressure point for politicians to do the right thing or for city administrators to do the right thing. And so I work, a lot times, at that staff level or with elected officials, and so I'm navigating those kinds of channels, and so I bias that as that's what most important. But really, my job is a lot easier when citizens are aware and informed of all those things because they can help apply pressure and make statements about their values. And if they do that, in the end, if government is functional the way that it's supposed to, their government is responding to them and serving them. And so, that knowledge—being informed about environmental lands and having a voice in that process, I think, can ensure that the program continues, the program is appropriately funded, and the program is protecting the resource the way that it should, for our—for the public benefit in perpetuity.

EH: Okay. So, historically ELAPP and Save Our Bay and those programs have actually been pretty popular with voters and things like that. Can you recall any moments of political resistance or resistance from local populations where you didn't feel like they really had the support for some of the efforts?

MB: Uh, no.

EH: That's good. That's good. What do you see as the future of ELAPP, or even your own program itself, or other programs?

MB: I don't know. Like _____ (??) in my crystal ball. I mean, I think that the challenge is one that I alluded to earlier, which is, that we—and since—so I've been in this field for about 15

years now and, ever since I started, everybody was warning of the great retirement wave that was coming. Like, everybody's going to retire. Don't worry. There'll be opportunities. There'll be this, there'll be that. And then, you know, the economic crash happened in '07, '08, and a lot of those folks stayed around for a lot longer. And that's good, in some ways, because we have that institutional knowledge and we've had some overlap. But there's been so little hiring and movement in that time period, that we haven't had this sort of cross-pollination or this overlap between the old guard and the new guard.

And so, we have the potential for a lot of new guard stepping into really responsible roles without the benefit of that history or that experience working with those people that have been working here in this region for 30-plus years, in a lot of instances. Like, we've kept a lot of resource managers that have worked here since the beginning, and they're still here and they know so much just about this area. And when they retire or if they pass, or whatever, we lose all that.

So the challenge for us is to continue to pass this information along, and share it with the next generation of folks and continue, I think—so one of the things that got me plugged into so many things are these networking opportunities and, really, learning experiences. So, at first, at the water-management district, there was a thing called the Northern Tampa Bay WUCA II. It was a water-use caution area, and that was this effort to bring wetlands and stuff back from the really atrocious impacts from the water wars. So we had a lot of folks that were pumping—overpumping ground water from Pasco County and north, and so all of the communities were fighting about, you know, what's—about where they get their water from and the impacts that they were causing for each other.

So we go through the water wars, it's settled out, we're really lucky, and we form Tampa Bay Water as a result. But the water-management district's role was to establish these minimum flows and levels, so, for the aquifer, for wetlands, for rivers, that sort of thing. And so this whole recovery strategy—working on all these things—I learned so much. Not just about the resource and how it was responding, and the best available science of how to measure that and how to manage it, but also about the people and how to work together.

Same thing with going to that agency on bay management, those meetings—meeting those people that were involved in, you know, controversial resource issues, talking about things, learning about things, meeting each other. I don't know how many people are really provided space and time in their day-to-day life, in their day-to-day work life, to be able to go and participate in these meetings. I mean, it is a master's degree on steroids. Did you get it right there, you know? You're learning so much. You're meeting people, and it's, like, this really great opportunity. And when I go to these meetings now, it is not very many new people, so I know there are new people that are doing this work, but they're not tapping into some of these resource-sharing networks, which I think are super critical and really valuable.

So I hope that we do a good—a better job of bringing people into the fold, and creating that sort of continuity of knowledge so that we don't lose what ground we've made up in 30 years, because the ground that we've made up is tremendous. And I know I—I know that I feel that weight, and my colleagues feel that weight, on our shoulders, every day. You know, when Holly Greening retired, we met the seagrass recovery goal here in Tampa Bay.⁴ And Holly Greening retired and all this—like, all these greats are, you know, they're walking away at the top of their game, and they're handing it over to us. It's like, "You better keep it. You better keep it there."

EH: Okay. So who are these other groups of people that you think need—these bigger groups, like ELAPP or different environmental groups that need to get involved with? Who are those other people we need to make connections with?

MB: Well, I'd love to see like some of—I think we've seen a proliferation of smaller, more boutique kind of NGOs. You know, like, we've got Surfrider, we've got Waterkeeper, we've got Rise Against—Rise Above Plastics. We've got, like, all these sort of other environmental NGOs, and they're pursuing their little corner of the environmental picture, but I wish we would get together in these sort of meta-organizing functions where all these environmental groups are getting together. And they'll still have their own, you know, pet issues, but they'll all have that same backbone of knowledge and those same relationships. I think that would make us stronger as resource managers, stronger as advocates, and I think, you know, stronger and better for our economy and our way of life here.

EH: Okay, great. What is—so we talked a lot about partnerships and doing different things like that—what do you think is the best strategy, in your mind, for conservation efforts or environmental efforts? Like, public-private partnership something? What do you see as the best strategy?

MB: So, I'm a big believer in all the things on all the fronts.

EH: Oh yeah? Okay.

MB: So I—which is interesting for me because I'm generally a pretty strategic and focused person, but again, what I've learned, part of how things like the Estuary Program are so successful is because there's lots of incremental progress and lots of strange bedfellows. And, you know, it's worked, so why not?

⁴ Holly Greening was the first scientist at the Tampa Bay Estuary Program and its second executive director. She retired in 2018.

EH: It's multidisciplinary—multi-strategic?

MB: Yeah, absolutely.

EH: Okay, great. So can you just tell me about maybe some memorable moments in your history with ELAPP or even just the estuary project? Are there any really good memorable moments that stick out to you, that you'd like to share with us?

MB: Well, I know it took Jan [Platt] a while to warm up to people. And, you know, if you got Jan's blessing, that was a big deal for the Agency on Bay Management. She took a little while to warm up to me. I think once we threw her a luncheon and declared her a champion of the bay, she was okay with me. But I don't know. Every day—every day is real fun.

EH: Do you have anything that you consider your, so far, maybe greatest achievement or goal that you've reached?

MB: Well, I think the thing that I'm most impressed with is getting together this group called the Climate Science Advisory Panel. So my colleague, Libby Carnahan, who is a UF IFAS Florida Sea Grant extension agent, she and I are co-facilitating this group of scientists.⁵ And we've been working together since 2014 to put out regional projections for sea-level rise and for climate change in the region, and it's really, sort of the underlying work that allows policymakers and administrators to plan for sea-level rise in a uniform way throughout the region. And it's a pretty big deal to get a bunch of scientists to agree on a number, and then to get that information in the right hands so that elected officials can do something about it, so—

EH: What can the local or everyday person, or even maybe students who are interested in this sort of thing, what can they do to get involved or to make an impact on these efforts?

MB: So we host a lot of volunteer opportunities through our Give a Day for the Bay Program, but there's also a lot of other ways you can volunteer. You know, Tampa Bay Watch has a lot of volunteer opportunities, and there's a lot of local parks that have friends-of groups. So I serve on the Friends of Boyd Hill, which is a park down in St. Petersburg, and there's tons of opportunities, you know, to help those natural places up their game, in terms of what they're offering, or just providing a little bit of elbow grease where you can.

⁵ According to its website, the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences "is a federal-state-county partnership dedicated to developing knowledge in agriculture, human and natural resources, and the life sciences, and enhancing and sustaining the quality of human life by making that information accessible."

EH: So do you have any sort of final thoughts for us? Things that you think we should know or advice you'd want to give to anyone who's looking to get involved? Things like that.

MB: It's a hard field to break into. There's not as many jobs like this as you would hope, and so it's always—it's hard. But find a mentor and talk to somebody. There's a lot of really kind people who are doing this kind of work, and that are willing to help where they can. And those relationships are really important, not just for landing a job, but for also being successful at what you do in general. I mean, it's all built on the back of relationships, so I think that's kind of what I've been saying all along. You know, knowing these people and liking these people and working together on common, shared issues is super important. So those personal connections are really useful.

EH: Okay. Any final thoughts for us or anything? Anything you'd like to leave us with?

MB: Keep it wild.

EH: Keep it wild. I love it. Awesome. Okay. Well, that's all—that's all my questions. Do you have anything? Awesome. Okay. Well, this is the—

MB: Do I win?

EH: You win. Well, this is the end of our interview with Maya Burke. Thank you so much for coming. We really appreciate it, answering our questions.

MB: Thank you.

EH: And we look forward to hosting your perspective for other people to see—or hear. Yeah. Awesome. Thank you.

End of interview.