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Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP)
Oral History Program
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: E21-00016
Interviewee: John Berlin (JB)
Interview by: Emily Holbrook (EH) and Jane Duncan (JD)
Interview date: June 19th, 2019
Interview location: Accusoft corporate offices, Tampa
Transcribed by: Hakeem Haj-Musa
Transcription date: September 12th, 2019 to October 1st, 2019
Audit Edit by: Hakeem Haj-Musa
Audit Edit date: October 1st, 2019 to October 17th, 2019
Final Edit by: Matthew Barganier
Final Edit date: November 1st, 2019 to November 5th, 2019

Emily Holbrook (EH): So, just to start, if you could just say and spell your name.

John Berlin (JB): Okay. John Albert Berlin. I go by Jack. Last name is B-e-r-l-i-n.

EH: Perfect. Great. This is June 19th, 2019, and we are at Accusoft.

JB: That is correct.

EH: Yes, great. So first, you're actually—I want to ask you, you're actually the founder and CEO of Accusoft?

JB: I am, yes. I started this company here as Pegasus in 1991. We bought a company in 2008 named Accusoft, and we adopted that name, so we've been Accusoft since then.

EH: Okay, good, I want to make sure I just have your title and everything correct. Great. So my first real question is how long have you been in the Hillsborough County, Tampa Bay area?

JB: Okay. I moved here in 1990 right after the birth of my first child, and so what is that, almost 30 years? Twenty-nine years, I guess, in July. So just at 29 years.

EH: Okay. And what brought you here?

JB: This area.

EH: Yeah?

JB: Yeah, I grew up in Savannah, Georgia. I love the coast. Savannah was too small. I was living in Atlanta, Georgia, when I got married, and we—that royal we—got pregnant, even though my wife had to do all the work, and I just decided I didn't want to raise a family in Atlanta, so we looked around. Florida was an ideal place to look, because we're Southerners, so California was kind of off the radar and too expensive. So we looked around and settled on Tampa.

EH: Was there anything specific about Tampa or the area that really drew you here?

JB: Beaches and warm weather? I mean you have dreams of coming down here and going to the beach every day, but things called "children" and "work"—I think I went to the beach probably five times in 10 years, but it's a lot longer way from Tampa to the beach than you would think. But raising children and starting a business and growing a business—I'm sure I went more often than that, but it was not the same as your dreams of coming to Florida. But it's been a lovely place to live. I've enjoyed every minute of it. We're in the same house we bought in 1990, so it's been good for us.

EH: Okay. What were some of your main priorities or goals when you moved to Tampa?

JB: Well, I mean, basically, the only goal that I had was just to have a good place to raise my family. I knew very little about the area. I knew it was the type of weather I wanted—I'm just not a winter person, having grown up in Savannah, Georgia. You know, we looked at the East Coast, we looked at the West Coast, and Tampa just seemed ideal. The traffic was a lot better back then than it is now, so I hope that's something we're going to tackle, because it used to be a very big little city that was easier to get around in. More congestion now, I guess, certainly in all cities, because it's a problem we all have, but it's still a very close town, and with St. Petersburg 35 miles—35 minutes—south of us and Clearwater beach, you know, 40 minutes west of us, you get some lovely areas of Florida.

And we moved close to the airport, we're up in the Town and Country area, because we were both traveling at the time and it was convenient. We still can—you know, 45 minutes before a flight, if we needed to catch a flight, we can catch a flight. Tampa airport is wonderful. So it just suited all of our needs for being able to continue our professional lives but also raise our family in an environment that we wanted to live in.

EH: So you mentioned really briefly that it seems a little bit more congested and things in Tampa now since you moved here. Could you maybe describe some of the changes or development that you've noticed since you've moved to Tampa?

JB: Well, I mean of course this whole area, Hillsborough County, the entire area has grown madly. We've added one lane on 275 since I've lived here, and we probably should add—I think they're in the process of trying to add one more.¹ Actually, they added more from Dale Mabry to I-4. They just kind of goofed up there at the Howard Frankland Bridge where it all necks down to two lanes and then the Veteran [Veterans Expressway], which is also new since we moved.

Piling the Veterans onto 275 there makes sort of a mess. And of course, the downtown interchange now is—I don't know if they've ever solved that, it's—just don't be anywhere near it between 3:30 and 6:30, I guess. But I try not to be coming back on I-4 towards town anywhere near rush hour either, because of backup. We're here pretty local, you know, we're on MLK here where we're doing this interview, but again, MLK, Hillsborough, 275 between 4:00 and 6:00 is traffic.

EH: Absolutely. So tell me a little bit about what your actual role is with ELAPP.

JB: Oh, okay. ELAPP's a funny story, as I explained to you on the phone a month ago, I guess. I was appointed by Kathy Castor in 2004 to be on the Hillsborough County Parks and Recreation Board.² And it has been my honor. I'm still serving on that board. After a couple years on that board, the chairman moved out of the county, and you're not allowed to be on a county board if you don't live in the county. I became chairman, and the administrative assistant that worked with the parks board said, "Now that you're chairman, you're supposed to go to the ELAPP meetings." I said, "What's an ELAPP?" And so I said, "Okay, fine. No good deed goes unpunished, so let me go to another meeting."

So I went to a couple of ELAPP meetings, and I of course fell in love. But the funny story is I asked that administrative assistant, Kathy, I said, "You know, they were sorta surprised to see me there. How many of these ELAPP meetings did my predecessor, Doug, go to?"—who had been the chair of the parks board for many years. She said none. I said, "Oh, I see." It was just sort of interesting, because it was not something the parks board had been participating in, and had I known that, I probably would've never gone. You know, my time is constricted, as everyone's is, this is a volunteer activity, serving on the parks board, and I've served on other county boards.

¹ Interstate 275 spans 60 miles from Wesley Chapel in the north to Palmetto in the south, including central Tampa and St. Petersburg.

² Kathy Castor was a member of the Hillsborough County Board of Commissioners from 2003 through 2007. She began serving in the US House of Representatives in 2007.

It takes time. You're driving places, the meetings last an hour, hour and a half, and so—but I went and fell in love, as I said. And being the parks board representative, I was immediately given a voting seat. I have relinquished that recently because the way ELAPP allows members to become voting members is you have to go to so many meetings per year and so many meetings initially, I think, in a row. Since I've missed very few in the years and years I've been on there—we just brought a new parks board member on, Joe Guidry, and he wanted to be a voting member. He'd been going to ELAPP meetings—that's how I met him—and I drug him into the parks board, so I gave him my seat so he could immediately become a voting member of ELAPP.

But that was how I got introduced, and it's funny because when I first joined the parks board, I believe it was January of 2004, I went to my first parks board meeting. It was at the All People's Center, which is a wonderful facility, and I walked in there and there was one other new parks board member that day, who had just a little bit more experience than I did, and his name was Ed Radice. He had just retired, I think a year before, as being the parks director. They had a new parks director, whole different story—I won't get into the politics of that, not a well-respected or well-liked parks director—didn't last very long. But Ed had just been appointed by one of the county commissioners to be on the parks oversight board, and he and I started the same day. He knew everything there was to know about parks. I knew absolutely nothing about parks. We became fast friends, just—I think the theme of that meeting and the parks board carries through to ELAPP.

Ed was really excited to have a businessman on the board. Typically, you get hobbyists, environmentalists, sports people, people with special interests in their relationship to the park that are appointed by a county commissioner because they run a football league or they run a baseball team, or they—there's some special interest, there's some tie-in. And he was really excited because I had business experience—probably less than he thought I had, but that's okay—and we became fast friends, and I miss that man still today. We used to do breakfasts and lunches whenever we could. He got late in life where—of course, he left the parks board, after not too long of a period because he got to where he couldn't really get around very well. But you know, a cherished member of parks and rec, of Hillsborough County history, and certainly of ELAPP history because he was right there, instrumental in getting the first steps of ELAPP happening in this county, which was not easy to do.

The first property that they were beginning to buy—if you look at Upper Tampa Bay Park, which was right at the cusp of them wanting to start ELAPP, that was scheduled to be a whole bunch of townhomes and condominiums. It was through the actions of Joel Jackson and Ed Radice—and then they decided after successfully making that regional park and saving some of our bay coastline from development, I think that was sort of the forerunner of them saying “Hey, we should”—and I don't know the entire history of how they did it, but I'm sure it was a lot of work and a lot of politics, to go get a first referendum, get money raised, and to start buying environmentally sensitive lands.

So back to my story, I just—it has become, of all the volunteer boards I've served on, I've served on a lot, it was by far and away where I feel the most useful and I feel the most proud, because of the tens of thousands of acres that we've been able to protect. But my story is—again, I'm serving with people that were there at the very beginning. Mariella [Smith] can't serve any longer because she's now a county commissioner, which is wonderful. But you have all these dedicated people that—Ms. [Jan] Platt certainly, but lots of others, that started this program, and they're environmentalists, they're scientists, they're real activists, and here I was, just sort of a software business guy. And I think I'm most proud of the fact that I've earned their respect. Because I am in awe of the talent and the dedication and just the overall knowledge every time I go into one of those rooms and they talk about how you maintain and how you restore and how you protect lands, and that's not my expertise.

But what I have been able to bring to ELAPP, I think, is some sense of practical project management, some sense of here's how we can do it in a political way. I was very instrumental with helping them write the last referendum we did, the language to that. I was very proud of the work we did there. You only have so many words, and every word has to mean something, and it has to mean the right things. I forget what the majority was there, but it was close to 70 percent voted for basically a tax on themselves. So I think I bring a different set of skills to ELAPP, and I think that they've given me a great deal more than I've given them. So that's my ELAPP story.

EH: So you said earlier and then a little bit there at the end that Kathy Castor nominated you or appointed you to the parks and rec, and that you have that sort of, like, a business mind in a political sense. Why do you think she appointed you to parks and rec in the first place?

JB: Well, I love Ms. Castor. I think she's been a good county commissioner as well as a good congressperson for this area, and now seems to be gaining—she's in charge of the climate committee and some of those things. I met her through some issues with some of the estuaries. I live on Sweetwater Creek, and there had been some problems from previous county commissions. She was District 1 representative, which is where my house is, and I was a spokesperson for my neighborhood, and that's how I got to know her.

We got to talking about the Skyway Park, which is just around the corner, and various things, and maybe she—maybe it was because she respected my judgment, maybe it was this is a good way to shut him up, I'm not sure. I've had great conversations with her, and I know that my daughters met one of her daughters as well. Similar age, my daughter's a little bit older, but they're good people. Not exactly sure—maybe when you're a county commissioner you've got to fill all these spots, maybe I was just out in front and the first choice, but for whatever reason I'm thankful for it, because I—it has gotten me involved in the community in a way I never would've.

You can get very lost in a company now with 170 employees. You can get very lost in what you're doing and trying to pay your bills and deal with employee issues and grow the business. We don't do a lot of local—we do very little business locally. We do business around the world, but very little in the west coast of Florida, a couple of customers, not many. So I don't have a lot of ties here, and joining the parks board, I started meeting people of sincere interest. You want to call them activists—they're not activists. They just really care.

I met people that cared about things, not because it was going to make them money and not because it was really going to do them any good. They were volunteering their time. They were giving of themselves. I think about Jan Smith, and the number of boards that I've served on with her, Pete Fowler, Joel Jackson—oh my gosh, the county ought to build a statue of that man—and just on down the list. The people that show up and go to these meetings and give of themselves to better our community—I'm humbled by that, I really am.

EH: Did you have any interest in conservation or environmentalism or anything like that before you started serving on these boards?

JB: Yeah. I am a rare southern liberal. I guess it's all that liberal arts college degrees, I guess, but I have always fancied myself an environmentalist. I've always taught my kids that no matter where we go, we take one more thing away than we came with. You pick something up, you throw it away, because if we all did that the beaches would be cleaner, our trails would be cleaner. I've always tried to—you know, we have solar here, we try to eliminate single-use plastic—

EH: These are recyclable plastic.

JB: Those are recyclable. We have compostable flatware. We are trying not to buy single-use plastic. I wish we would ban plastic bags everywhere. So I'm an amateur environmentalist because I have a real job. When you're raising kids and running a company, it's hard to have that third passion. But my kids are all gone now, the business is more grown up, but I think so, I think I have always been a conservationist. I think I've always believed we should leave a place better than we found it—not to the degree that the folks on the ELAPP board that have studied these sciences and are experts on these types of things. It's just really more of a belief system with me.

So yes, I try to put my money where my mouth is. I try to put my actions where my beliefs are. So it was—they were kindred spirits in that regard, but not in an expertise way, if that makes sense. They just knew so much more than I knew, but yes, I did have and would like to think I have always been a believer that we should take care of the only planet we have.

EH: You said maybe it was your liberal arts education or something that—so did you grow up really concerned with the environment or just outside, outdoors a lot? Something like that?

JB: Yeah, well, I grew up in Savannah. We were at the beach a lot, and we had a—we boated, we skied, we crabbed, we fished—typical Southern kid from Savannah. But I think it's always bothered me to see trash floating in the water, to see somebody leave—you know, throw a cigarette butt out of a car. Yes, it's just—I don't know if it was just genetically built in or it was just my parents. I don't know what causes it, but it is—I can't remember it ever starting. It must've been ingrained at some point early, early, early on. I just—it would make me sick to put a piece of trash on a—I would put it in my pocket and find a trashcan. I can't understand leaving it someplace for somebody else, but that's just me.

EH: So, if you don't mind, let's talk a little bit more about ELAPP. What do you see as the main goals or priorities of ELAPP now?

JB: Well, I just—I served on the ELAPP, the latest strategic initiative. Our county administrator, Mike Merrill came to ELAPP, and he said, "How much is enough?" In other words, we have 60—you probably know more than I do—thousand acres under protection. Our role, our strategic vision has to change, because the county is more grown up, it's more occupied, there's more people, there's less land. So we have just gone through rewriting—I don't even think it's fully adopted yet—a new strategic vision for ELAPP where we're basically focusing on those pieces of property that would make a real difference, would add to an existing ELAPP site, would add to a corridor.

So it is changing. It is changing to where we just can't say [that] anything that's nominated we'll look at. We're looking at tracts now that really would make a difference to the overall environmental situation in Hillsborough County. We don't have unlimited funds, so I think the ELAPP mission now is to try to add those strategic parcels, if we can get them. I mean, this is a volunteer program and owners don't have to sell to us, we can't eminent domain a piece of property, so someone has to be willing to sell to us. Our purchasing is limited by fair-value rules. We can't overpay—we can't really overpay for a property. We're using taxpayer money, so there's all kinds of rules and regs on that.

But what we really are focused on now is completing key parcels, looking for significant tracts that would add to a wildlife corridor or would complete a—certainly, things that would add to the watershed quality. I mean, the Cone Ranch, which is now called the Lower Green Swamp Preserve, was a wonderful—originally that was being targeted to become a major sports complex. And I served on the Cone Ranch committee, as one of the technical advisors, which was kind of funny. It was interesting to go through that process and see the county make the right decision of no, this land just absolutely has to be restored and protected. It's just too much of our

watershed, that Lower Green Swamp is what's feeding fresh water into Hillsborough River, into our aquifer.

So it's going to be interesting to see how we change, because there's not a whole lot more that we're going to be able to purchase. There's just less land. I do hope we are able to get a couple of key parcels that we're looking at. The wildlife corridors and trails that go through wildlife corridors are important to us. I'm hoping the state of Florida will also link up. They're now talking about trails across the peninsula, and across counties, not just county, so that's kind of where ELAPP is today. It's really focusing on just a couple of key strategic parcels, or what they call in-holdings, something that's adjacent to an existing ELAPP property, and we're able to bring it in and expand the property. That's an easy one for us to do, typically.

EH: So you say you are, like, really now focusing on the strategic corridors, these connections, things like that, and this a volunteer program doing like that. And ELAPP historically had been pretty popular with voters, with the public, and acquiring parcels of land and things like that. Do you still feel that community support? Do you still feel that political support in the area for acquiring these key pieces?

JB: Especially after the last election, yes. You know, may we be so fortunate going forward, not to get political here on tape. Yes, I believe—I don't think Hillsborough County understands what we've done and what a leader we are nationwide. Our ELAPP program is second to none. There's not a county in the country, that I mean, for us to have—again, I wish I knew the exact numbers, but 60-something thousand acres of protected land. We're a large county, but still, that's a very large chunk of land, allowing us to protect species that are unique to our area, protect our aquifer and our water quality.

I think the community, if we were to do another referendum, we'd have the same level of support. I do believe that for the most part, people believe that they're living in Florida because they want clean water, they want it to be a nice environment. When you look at things like red tide, you realize that's nothing other than us not controlling stormwater runoff from all over the state of Florida.³ We're feeding algae all kinds of fertilizer. So one of the causes—not being a scientist, I won't make any scientific claims, but certainly, if we treat our waterways, if we treat our environment as nothing other than a trashcan or a toilet, we will reap those horrible, horrible results, and if we do what we're doing with ELAPP, when we treat enough of this land with respect and keep it in a restored state, we'll reap the benefits of clean water and clean air—cleaner water and cleaner air.

³ Red tide is a form of algal bloom that typically follows massive storms that cause the upwelling of nutrients, feeding the algae and triggering rapid multiplication. Red tide harms the ecosystem, as the blooms are harmful to many marine mammals, birds, and turtles.

I mean, we still are growing at a rapid rate from a population standpoint, so that's going to always encroach [on] environmental areas. It means more people using trails, and more people using cars. So we'll have to deal with all of that. Come on, Tesla, let's build more battery cars! But I think the support is there. I mean, just to go back to your original question, I think that if we were to put another referendum up, which they'll probably never let us do, but if we were, I think we would get the same level of support, because I think people see it. They probably don't have it front of mind, but when you say 62,000 acres and regional parks, and what we're providing, and what it does to protect air and water, I think that we would stay at that better-than-two-thirds support level.

EH: And we touched on it briefly, but why do you think Hillsborough County residents, or even Floridians in general, are concerned with the environment or are supportive of these conservation efforts?

JB: Well, I'd like to think that they understand the ramifications if we're not. I don't know, because as you know, we're a very partisan state, we're as purple as they come, 1 or 2 percent either way, and one side is typically not an environmental side, and one side typically is. Why, when your—of course, cities typically are a little bit more liberal than more rural areas. But even so, why with a pretty even split partisan divide, you're able to get close to 70 percent support, especially when you're talking about raising—a potential raise of property taxes, I don't know.

I think it's wonderful. I would like to think that all people, all of us, can think something bigger than ourselves, can be thinking about our children and grandchildren, can be thinking about, just the overall world we live in, and maybe they can put partisan things aside, and pocketbook issues aside, and say, "Hey, we're only talking about another couple of pennies here." So I don't know, but it is stunning, and I don't know the answer.

EH: Okay. So does ELAPP ever concern itself with maybe other environmental issues you talked about? Like, does ELAPP ever get concerned with what they can do about red tide in the area, or climate change, or anything like that?

JB: No. That is outside our purview. We have a very, very narrow purview, as an ELAPP committee. Matter of fact, it has to be nonpolitical. We cannot take stances. Our fiduciary duty as a board is the oversight of the funds that are dedicated, and these properties. It really is a fiduciary oversight board, and we're making recommendations, of course, to county commissioners, both on the parks board as well as on ELAPP. They get the final say on just about anything, when it comes to money. But we are an independent oversight board charged with trying to squeeze every damn dime as far as we can.

I don't know the numbers, but I think it is 20 or 30 percent of the money we've spent as ELAPP did not come from Hillsborough County but came from matching grants and other grant programs, state and federal. I know we get "swift mud" grants.⁴ Of course, Florida Forever funds have been dried up for a while—hoping that will come back. But we've been able to stretch those referendum dollars that we've raised. I don't believe we've added—since the last referendum—I don't think we've added even a penny to property taxes. I think we've been able to stretch it. I think that we've not issued all the bonds that we had the capability of issuing, but we've been able to stretch the taxpayers' money very, very efficiently.

Kudos to the real estate people in Hillsborough County that do the negotiation for these things, and the folks in conservation department that are always seeking grants, matching grants, grants for restoration. We put in so many dollars, we're getting grants from other places, and that's allowed us to get a whole lot more than what we've raised through bond revenue through the referendum.

EH: So it's been really cooperative in that sense, the success of ELAPP?

JB: It's work. Depends on the administrations in Tallahassee. Florida Forever's not being funded, I don't think, [or] at least it hasn't been for some years. Maybe that will change. That would be good. So the grants have dried up. "Swift mud," of course, gets a great deal of money for restoration, because they're charged with our water quality, and certainly we've done impact studies on what ELAPP lands bring as far as value to the community, as far as water quality and air quality, and the return on our dollar. Mr. [John] Turbiville—the gentleman, you can ask Ross [Dickerson] about this as well. They can give you the facts and figures on that, but we've gotten a real bargain. We're also exploring carbon credits and other things where we can get funds from doing carbon banking, which is basically trying to take carbon dioxide and get it out of the atmosphere by planting certain kinds of trees and foliage and those types of things. We are getting a great deal more value than we're spending.

And future generations will owe a debt of gratitude to people that did this some decades ago. I'm not sure they'll owe a debt of gratitude to me, but certainly to some of the founders of this program. I certainly owe them a debt of gratitude, and I've told them—the ones that are still living—I've told them that. The foresight to do this and to put this together and to make it the program that it is, as well-run as it is and as well-maintained as it is, is absolutely—it's astounding. Really is.

EH: What do you see as the future of environmental conservation in Florida, at large? You talked about really hoping there would be partnerships with other parts of Florida and linking up these certain areas, but what do you see as Florida's conservation future?

⁴ "Swift mud" is a nickname for the Southwest Florida Water Management District, or SWFWMD.

JB: You talking about North Florida or South Florida?

EH: Either, or all, or whatever you can speak on.

JB: It's very different. The politics are very different in this state.

EH: Absolutely.

JB: But I would hope that we would understand that tourism is really important in the state of Florida. I would love to see a, say, not wait for a crisis to develop, and red tide might already be a crisis. I don't know, we'll see if it comes back. I know—I can't be on the beach because I'm very sensitive. I can't breathe it. I will get to where I just can't breathe if I'm anywhere near the coast and we've got a bloom going. It just affects your respiratory system, and I hate—I feel the same way about climate change. We should not—every month and year we wait, it's more expensive to fix. Why wouldn't—if we know we're going to have to tackle it, why wouldn't we be proactive as opposed to reactive? I feel the same way about the state and county government. You know, transportation will be more expensive next year than it is this year, and 10 years from now even more expensive. So if it is something we've resolved to do, then let's do it.

As far as environmental things, I would love to see us get together and put all partisan politics aside, and say, “You know what? The best asset we have in the state of Florida is our environment—our clean bays, our clean rivers, our clean lakes, our clean Gulf of Mexico.” Why don't we act that way? Because we don't. And it would make a lot more sense to put a few dollars, a home stormwater fee, like they have in South Florida. Fort Lauderdale has a \$75 dollar per home stormwater fee to clean up their waterways. I think here, we were very proud for a dozen years not to ever raise our stormwater fee. I won't mention the county commissioner who told me that, but I think we've just recently doubled it. I think we're up to like \$24 per home stormwater fee.

But we have simple solutions to these problems, and not expensive. Outside here on MLK is a rain culvert, right. They're all over the place, they're little drains. Whatever's on the road when it rains—oil, leaves, trash, plastic bottles—goes straight to the Hillsborough River, unimpeded. The Clean Water Act of 1976 said you shouldn't do that. Here we are in 2019, and we have direct pipes all around this—4,000 of them, feeding Tampa Bay with whatever runs off. For a few dollars per home—I mean, we have a \$200 million backlog for stormwater projects in this county. Fund that. Yes. You want to clean up the environment. It's easily—they have all kinds of systems that are not expensive, it requires putting baskets in here, and it means a truck that comes and cleans them out, and carbon rings that keep the oil out of the—but yes, you could do it. You could do it for not a lot of money.

So yes, we can either wait until the tourists stop coming, and then it becomes really expensive, or we can get together and say, “You know what, let’s all chip in a few dollars per year per home and see if we can’t make—we stand up when we’re on the Riverwalk, and instead of seeing trash, you see the bottom. You see the manatees. You see the dolphins. Whatever you want to see.” We could do things like that. There’s all kinds of things called “living shorelines” that we could do. We are a seawall community. Instead of doing seawalls, you can do plantings, you can do rock walls that allow natural habitat to develop and it actually helps—you know, if oysters come back, they clean the water.

So seawalls keep turtles from nesting. There’s all kinds of things that seawalls do that are just not—I mean, I’m throwing out just a few things that goes top of mind, but no, what I would love to see us do as a county, as a region, as a state, as a country, as a globe, is to have the foresight to say doing some smart things now will be a whole lot better than trying to clean up a mess later, and I would love to see us do more of that. Yes.

EH: So this might be some of the things you already said, but you have a pretty unique perspective of ELAPP and conservation because you’re not an environmental scientist, you’re not involved in water management and things like that, you’re a businessman, and you’ve talked about, you know, you have that business sense, and you’ve been a part of the political strategic sense of it. What, then, in your mind, is the best strategy for conservation efforts?

JB: Well, I think it’s twofold. I mean one, you have to elect the right people, but then I think you have to figure out—and it probably has to be the people you elect, but you have to figure out how to get environmental issues front of mind. You’re always going to fund police and fire here as a county. They’re not going to be cut, they’re going to be funded. And so then it becomes a fight for dollars and the budget, and I think what you have to do is you have to convince people, and that’s true about transportation, it’s true about healthcare, and it’s true about the environment.

You have to have some leadership that’s willing to go out and convince people that this is a priority. I think that’s kind of what I try to bring to the ELAPP committee a little bit, is that practical side of, you know, how do we build a compromise that’s going to move our efforts forward? Sometimes when you’re an environmentalist, perhaps, you are passionate about it, you can let some zealotry get in the way of compromise. So I’d like to think that I bring a voice of—I don’t want to say “reason,” because I typically agree that we need to do all of these things, but when you know you can’t do all of these things, you don’t want to let the perfect get in the way of the good.

You’ve got to figure out a way to move the ball forward somehow, even if it’s not everything you want, you still have to be willing to fight for and accept compromises, as long as those

compromises are moving you in the right direction. So I would love to see us somehow figure out how to make environmental—I would love to see a state campaign, maybe the next governor's race, where environmental issues were a higher priority. Taking the Everglades away from the sugar industry or something, I don't know what it would be, restoring—trying to save the coral reef off of southern Florida through runoff again. Our number-one environmental problem here is runoff. It absolutely is runoff. It's not something we don't know how to fix. It's not even expensive to fix. That's what's sort of scary about it.

You know, you've got to restore lands first of all, because that allows water to permeate and not just run off, carrying whatever it carries. You want retention areas, you want holding areas, you want wild areas. When they chopped up the Everglades, they canal—what they did is they ran canals to run the water out of there. That's not allowing it to be filtered naturally through the plants and animals that exist in the Everglades. Same thing exists when you have seawalls and grass up to the seawalls. You don't have those marshy areas that would act as natural breeding grounds and natural filtration systems with oysters, and again, talk to the scientists, don't talk to me. I'm giving you a layman's view.

But I would love for us to understand that it is not only the right thing to do because it's our planet and we should protect it, but it's the only thing to do because our economic well-being will ultimately live or die based on what we do. Maybe not this year, maybe not in 10 years, but if we're not careful, we're gonna say, Oh my God, what have we done? And then it's going to be really expensive, i.e., perhaps climate change.

EH: What are, maybe, what is or what are some of the achievements in ELAPP that you're most proud of?

JB: Cone Ranch. Absolutely. Lower Green Swamp Preserve.⁵ I kid those guys, but that was a massive win for us to get that large of a piece of property and to keep it from being developed. There was one plan at one point in time, they were going to put hunting lodges and make it a hunting ranch or something like that. Then another plan, they were going to put a giant sports complex on there. And all those sounded really great until I started attending those meetings and I started realizing what an environmental jewel it was.

So I'm very proud for the small role that I played in making sure the County Commission did the right thing there, which was to put it in ELAPP. They didn't have to. It was all their call, but it was an overwhelming recommendation from what was called the Cone Ranch Committee that we put that land in the ELAPP and protect it, and that's what they did. Those were many, many, many meetings, public hearings and meetings and presentations from all sides, including the

⁵ The Lower Green Swamp Nature Preserve is a 12,800-acre tract in the northeast corner of Hillsborough County. It was known as Cone Ranch before it became an ELAPP property in 2010.

ones that wanted to develop the land and put some private residences on it and hunting lodges on it, and those types of things.

So it worked out pretty well, and the referendum, I was very proud of my participation there. I'm always very proud, and I don't know that I can point to instances, when I'm able to figure out a way—things come up in our meetings from time to time and we get gridlocked. “Let's do this, let's do that, no, let's do”—and I'm always—I think that's been my role since I've been there. I'm most proud when I can figure out a way to navigate through the middle and we all get a unanimous “Yeah, let's do that,” and everybody gets on board instead of two sides fighting over a thing to do, we're able to come together with some sort of compromise, or some sort of way forward that everybody can get on board.

I can't point to any, but it's happened a number of times, both in site selection—I'm on the site-selection committee as well as the general ELAPP committee, and I've been pleased I've been able to contribute that way, because they can tell me what endangered species are on there, and what it would cost to maintain, and what the land should look like, and whether it's high soils or low soils, or this soil or that soil. That's great. I learn a lot, I think it's wonderful, let's protect it all, but I think my role and my contribution is how do we do it effectively. And we move the ball. I think I've helped us be more effective and get more done.

EH: I'm going to ask you just a little bit, maybe more specifically about Cone Ranch—you called it an “environmental jewel.” Can you just describe, especially for the people who might not know what it is, like, what is Cone Ranch? Why was it so important?

KB: Well, it was part—on the north side of our county, we have the Green Swamp. As it drifts into Hillsborough County, I guess from Polk, I'm not sure about borders, but the—Pasco, I get them confused. But anyway, and again, I've not been to the preserve. I have threatened to go many times. I've seen presentation after presentation of restoration efforts, and I think we still have an active cattle-grazing contract. We did at one point in time. I think we still do, because as we restore, we're restoring piece by piece by piece, and we've let the cattle contract stay, again, to raise funds for our restoration effort.

I'm not sure when that's scheduled to end, but I think the biggest win there was the fact that this was part of a real feeder of our aquifer. The fact that it was swamp, it was a lot of wetland—wetlands are the hardest things to protect, because you can't build on a wetland. You can't pave a wetland. And if you do pave them, they're not wetlands anymore. So I think the biggest win there for us is what we did to protect the aquifer and the water quality in Hillsborough County. I forget how many acres that property is, I want to say it's like 20,000, but I'm not exactly sure. But it was a huge plot of land. And in that area and that region, with its importance to the Hillsborough River and to our aquifer, and what we're doing now to restore, it'll be even more important. That's why I just think it was a huge win for us. And just the sheer size.

EH: Yeah, absolutely.

JB: There are not plots like that left in Hillsborough County.

EH: So we've gone through—it's been great, and we've gone through a lot of great things. But I really want to know, what are some memorable moments for you, in ELAPP, outside of Cone Ranch, perhaps?

JB: Memorable moments. I love the people there. I mean, the memorable moment is seeing someone you haven't seen in five or six months and getting a hug. Memorable moments—getting everybody to agree. I wish I had some specific examples, because I really don't, but to agree that we're going to move forward on a purchase. It looks like the buyer and seller have agreed on a price and they're going to take our offer, and it's going to happen. Seeing, you know, going on site to see the few preserves that I have seen. I have tried to figure out a way that we could preserve some smaller plots in this county, but it's outside the purview of ELAPP. But I have talked to a number of ELAPP folks about that.

But I don't have any specific examples. I just—it's funny because I look at my calendar and I'll see an ELAPP meeting, and I go "Oh my gosh, I've got that afternoon shot," and I get down there and I get just so much love. Just from the whole feeling of a group of people that are getting together to do something good. And I always say, "What was I complaining about?" I'm blessed to be a part of this group, and I'm blessed that they accept me as the outsider that I am. They've become good friends and they've done good work, and I am a hanger-on of their efforts. You're talking to me because I was lucky enough to get associated with what they were doing and be a small part of it, and I think the applause all goes to those early believers, those people that paved this trail and have kept it moving.

And ELAPP committee is now mostly about restoration. We are looking at a few plots, and it's just—it's changing now, so it's—certainly the early days were the hardest, and now it's changing, so it's just easier. I hope that we're lucky enough—there's a couple of other sites that we're still pursuing that I think would be real good additions. In the northwest, there's an old water field, I think owned by Clearwater, or one of the Pinellas County governments, I think, or city governments over there own a water field, and I think we're negotiating to possibly bring that in to ELAPP. But it also could be apartments just as easily. Hopefully, we'll be able to add a few more parcels. But it has been an honor to serve on that committee and to be a part of it.

EH: So, like, this interview and the whole like collection and everything—we're really hoping that people can use this to listen and learn and also for their own research and those sorts of things. So is there any final message you would like to leave for people listening to this or any takeaway you wish they would get from this? Something like that?

JB: Well, I'm hoping that they'll listen to people, maybe not me, but the Jills and the Jans and the Mariellas. I mean, Mariella is perfect because she's Sierra Club, has her own small business, joined ELAPP, got fed up and ran for public office, and is now a county commissioner.⁶ I mean, that's—my encouragement is don't just sit back and complain, join. If you're upset, or even if you're not upset—I was never upset. I cared about the environment. I somehow was lucky enough to join this group and lucky enough that they accepted me, but the—you know, participate. Participate in this planet you're in. Participate in your community. Participate in the process. Elections matter. We've learned that the hard way. Voting is the minimum you should do.

You should also be willing to speak for your convictions, and put some of your time and effort into—you know, if the environment is important to you, or transportation, or healthcare, or whatever it happens to be, then go participate. Don't just sit back and complain and hope that somebody else will take care of it for you. The fact that, over the years, 30 or 40 people have driven ELAPP, for what, three decades now? We're a county of how many millions? More people should go to the ELAPP. It's open to everyone. They're publicly posted. You can go to parks board meetings, you can go to transportation meetings, you can participate. Some of these boards, like ELAPP, if you go to enough of them, you become a voting member. So you can have your voice heard, but only if you speak.

So that's my—I would urge everyone to be the next one that's being interviewed by students at USF, or faculty, I assume, or faculty assistants, or whatever you are from USF, but that—be the next person being interviewed for some great thing that's happening in our community. And again, I think it's an honor that you're talking to me, but I think it's really, really great that you've captured a lot of the essence of who made ELAPP happen and possible for the community. And this is a forever thing. That land is protected. No one can touch it. Every bloody acre that we can put into that, in Hillsborough County, or Florida, or the United States—maybe we'll do something in Brazil. But if we can protect that land, it's forever protected and forever doing us a benefit of trying to make this a better environment and better planet. So yeah, get involved.

EH: Thank you so much.

JB: Sure. Been my pleasure.

End of interview.

⁶ The Sierra Club is an environmental organization founded in San Francisco that aims to defend environmental resources and wild places.