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Emily Holbrook (EH): This is Emily Holbrook, and I am here with Commissioner Smith at the County Center in Tampa, Florida. It is September 23rd, 2019, and we're doing an ELAPP oral history interview. Okay, so first, thank you so much for sitting down with us. We really appreciate it, taking your time out of your day to do this. My first question for you is, how long have you been in the Hillsborough County, Tampa Bay area?

Mariella Smith (MS): Oh, I'm a fourth-generation native of Tampa Bay. I grew up on Tampa Bay, in South Tampa, and then, about 20 years ago, I moved to the mouth of the Little Manatee River, on Tampa Bay, in south [Hillsborough] county.

EH: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like growing up in this area?

MS: It was wonderful, and I really had a wonderful childhood. In some ways, I look back and say, "Whoa! Parents just let us, you know, bicycle anywhere we"—it was just a different time. So we would bicycle, we would take our little boat out into the bay. As a child, I used to have a long-handled dip net, and dip up—I lived on Tampa Bay in South Tampa—so I would dip up little baby pufferfish and spiny boxfish and trunkfish, beautiful little babies that would come in with the seagrass, and lots of seahorses.

EH: Wow.

MS: I know. And yeah, it was a magical place with schools of mullet jumping. Just tons of mullet jumping in the summer evenings, and fireflies, and just a very different kind of—less urban, even in the city, then.

EH: What about the, like, parks and green spaces and things like that? What were those like when you were growing up?

MS: You know, my family—my parents were not that outdoorsy as I turned out to be. So we did not do the kind of picnicking in the park when I was a child, but as I grew older, then my friends and I would go out, and there were not ELAPP lands, of course, then. We would go out to places where there were—like the phosphate mines or big open spaces to just hang out. There was, oh, places on the bay, where you could go to access the bay, but they weren't formal parks. They just—you know how kids are—go someplace where there wasn't the development, and enjoy being outdoors.

EH: So speaking of the development, can you talk a little bit about seeing that development of Tampa Bay over time?

MS: Sure. I remember as a small child, you know, my parents had friends who lived on White Trout Lake, which is now Carrollwood. And they would take us in their car, out to visit their friends on White Trout Lake, and it was—I mean, we would be going out past cow pastures and orange groves, and into the countryside, and swim in the lake and pull up shellfish and stuff, and that's Carrollwood now. And this—the road that we took out was Dale Mabry [Highway], you know, so it has all developed pretty quickly.

EH: How did that development impact you?

MS: I just—I didn't feel like it was impacting me, looking back. I just—as I got older, I realized, if we don't preserve some of these places and spaces, and make room for the wildlife, and make room for—to connect the wetlands and connect the habitat, we won't have it.

EH: So, I mean, speaking on that, how did your interest in, like, environmental conservation and things like that sort of get started?

MS: Really, it was more when I went to graduate school in Tallahassee that I was doing a lot of getting outdoors and into the Apalachicola National Forest, and began exploring Florida when I got a little older. And then I was 19 years old, in graduate school in Tallahassee, and I was just knocking around the library and stumbled upon this inch-and-a-half-thick picture book of the wild orchids of Florida, which has since gone out of print. It's by Dr. Carl Luer, and he was a physician, but he took his family on weekends to—throughout Florida, exploring and searching and hunting for all of the wild orchids that grow in Florida and documenting them with beautiful

pictures and maps of where their habitat is, and where their range is, and when they bloom. And he communicated a passion for them, particularly the ghost orchid—you may have heard of—but also the little terrestrial orchids that we have.

And I asked my parents to buy me that book for Christmas, and it's still on my shelf. And I began hunting for the wild orchids, and at the same time, I became very interested in carnivorous plants, which grow—we have several species of carnivorous plants in Florida. And so on the weekends, I would go out into the Apalachicola Forest with my friends. I had friends who were very interested in snakes and reptiles that grew in Florida and lived in the Apalachicola Forest. And we would go together, and I would be looking—“Stop the car. Stop the car. I think that's an orchid. I think that's a pitcher plant.” And they would be like, Oh, stop the car, I think that's a rattlesnake. I think I saw a timber rattler, or something—whatever, a kingsnake—whatever it would be, and we would just go exploring.

And I became, you know, just as a layperson, more and more interested in everything that's out there, from the plants to the animals. And what this kind of scat, you could tell was which animal—now I'm using my friends, picking apart some dried old scats, showing, “This is how you know it's a bobcat because they're predators, and you can see the hair and the teeth.”

EH: That's wonderful.

MS: Yeah, so, “Yes, this is your commissioner on the trail, and here's the difference in the gopher tortoise scat because that's going to be all vegetable material. And you can tell which way he was walking by which way that scat is pointing.”

EH: Wow. That's wonderful. That's so fun. So you were, like, 19 at the time, and doing that in grad school?

MS: Uh-huh.

EH: How did that sort of built up into where you are now, and becoming a commissioner for the county?

MS: So from there, once I came—I mean, and my degree is in philosophy with a major in ethics and logic, but from there none of it has anything to with biology or botany or anything, that's just my hobby. And then, from there, I actually went on to start a business in graphic design and web development. So I come home, and I'm just working for a living but still had this interest in native plants. And so—[phone rings] sorry. I went to—I was living with my husband in Temple

Terrace, and I had been interested in the Native—Florida Native Plant Society and the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club for their protection of the environment, but was really—I hadn't gotten involved in any of that till I got married and kind of settled down and saw that the Florida Native Plant Society was having a meeting in the University area. And we were in Temple Terrace, so I said, "Okay."

My husband was working nights, so this was something—I popped in, and lo and behold, these people were talking about the *Epidendrum tampensis* and the, you know, *Spartina*-something-flora. And this was the language that I had been using as I guided my friends through the forest and swamplands, and said, "Look! There's the *Encyclia cochleata*, there's *Epidendrum tampensis*, and there's a *Spiranthes* and *Habenaria*." And they would all be making fun of me. And so suddenly I was in this room full of people who are all talking about that, and showing slides of these plants, and picking them apart and looking at their little reproductive organs, and I said, "Yes. These are my people."

And they would do field trips and go out on field trips. I started laying out the newsletter for them, and volunteering with them, and then going out on the field trips with them. And from there, I mean, it just became a hobby and a passion. I started a little group of women, who would go out hiking on the last Friday of the month, and we would go somewhere, usually on ELAPP land, that—rain or shine, hot or cold, whatever it was, the last Friday of the month, we took off work and we would go hike somewhere.

If it was in the summertime, we would find a place—and it was usually me finding these places—and find a place where we could get in the river, somewhere along the hike, you know. If it was in the winter, not so much, you know. But we—from doing that once a month rain or shine, whatever the season, I became even more in tune with the seasons here in Florida, and particularly in our area, and what blooms, and what animals are roaming, and what birds are migrating through, and what butterflies are coming at which times of year. And after a couple of years of that, you start to see the natural cycles and really appreciate that.

And meanwhile, lucky for me, my husband was every bit as interested in the outdoors, and we would go kayaking and hiking and camping, backpacking, throughout the state. So I really just deepened my appreciation of the outdoors and realized what a wonderful thing Hillsborough County was doing with their ELAPP program in protecting these areas.

EH: So—mentioned the ELAPP—how did you start to get involved in ELAPP?

MS: I, you know, it was so long ago—it may be somewhere between 10 and 15, 20 years ago, that I first got on the ELAPP general committee. I was on several stakeholder committees over time and volunteering with cleanup, with removal of Brazilian peppers and invasive plants. I got

very involved with a group of people that was helping to remove—volunteering to remove invasive plants, particularly around Marsh Creek, and became active in trying to get “swiftmud” to help us restore that area.¹ And got involved with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program’s Give a Day for the Bay cleanups that they would do.²

And I can’t—I don’t know what order it came all in, I just got involved with all of it. So then I got on the—at some point—on Cockroach Bay Aquatic Preserve management advisory team. That was a stakeholder group of everyone from TECO [Tampa Electric Company] to agricultural interests to voters. Because Cockroach Bay—the Aquatic Preserve—had problems with the motorboats tearing up the seagrasses, and we needed to come up with some kinds of zones where that wouldn’t be allowed, in order to protect the seagrasses. And in order to do that, we brought everybody to the table.

And so in groups like that, I began to be representing the environmental interests but trying to finding consensus and common ground with the groups who wanted to run their motorboats. But [I] understood at the same time the need to protect the resource so that the fishery would still be there for them to enjoy. So [I] began working with groups like that and, along the way, became part of the ELAPP general committee.

EH: And so now that you’re a commissioner, what’s sort of your role with ELAPP now?

MS: Making sure they get enough money to preserve what needs to be preserved before it’s all gone—facing the pressures that we are facing of development threatening to pave it all over.

EH: And what do you see as the main goals of ELAPP?

MS: The main goal is—I’m sure what most people would tell you—and that is to preserve the crucial pieces that are needed to connect corridors that allow wildlife to travel, and connect big pieces of habitat so that you can have meaningful gene pools surviving and living. And that a panther can—or, not a panther, but a bobcat or foxes can get from one end to the other and not be in isolated islands, which end up having trouble with their gene pool over time. But also that they can connect with the prey they need to survive and connect with their food sources.

And all of that, the plants and the animals, can be—the habitats can be connected in significant, large swaths, as well as the wetlands and waterways can move in the ways that nature intended and that is beneficial for the wildlife so that we can preserve it. If we only ended up preserving

¹ “Swiftmud” is the nickname for the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD).

² Give a Day for the Bay is a volunteer program by the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. The volunteer program is held for half a day on Saturdays several times a year and focuses on invasive plant removal, native plant installation, and restoration of coastal and upland habitats.

little small islands of pockets of beautiful wild areas, you would have an isolated, say, population of gopher tortoises. Well, that eventually would die out if it's not connected to more gopher tortoises and scrub jays. And everything that we have here needs to be big, connected corridors.

EH: And you've been involved in ELAPP for a long time, even before your time as a commissioner.

MS: Oh yes.

EH: So how has, like, ELAPP changed since you've been involved?

MS: What—ELAPP is one of the things this county does really right. And so ELAPP has been making great strides in protecting the environment and connecting. But over time, too, it's been facing greater and greater pressure from development to—that has been taking prime habitat and prime wild places out of—off the table. So once they're gone, they're gone. Because what's really critical is not only that you have the wildlife there and the right plants, you have to have the right soils. And once development comes in and excavates that and digs a drainage ditch and brings in fill from somewhere else, you're never going to be able to scrape that all off and restore it to something that actually supports the true native habitat.

EH: So now ELAPP is more, sort of, trying to combat or fight against, like, increasing development?

MS: Absolutely. And—as well as, you know, political pressures. There are those who say, “Well, how much is enough?” Because we have to spend money not only at acquiring ELAPP land, but maintaining it and burning it and removing the exotics. And so—I say not, you know, it's not about how much is enough, it's about what are the crucial pieces that are still left that we really need to protect within our county. And there's plenty of it. I, myself, have nominated quite a lot of it, yeah. And some of it has been preserved, and some of it's still out there.

EH: Okay, great. That sort of leads me into, like, my next question, which is, what's that—for people who don't really know how ELAPP works, and things like that—so what is that decision-making process like? Like, how do you decide what lands to acquire? Like, what goes through that?

MS: You know, I've been on the site-selection team for many years, and I've always been very proud of the objective nature of that. The whole ELAPP committee and the individual committees are made of volunteers who are really passion-driven, and people who really

understand and are very knowledgeable and bring different perspectives—retired scientists, environmental scientists and stuff, come in and participate in this, and people who understand the real estate market, and people who understand the soils that I was talking about, and the hydrology, and the habitat.

And so there's a ranking system that is, you know, assigns points for certain criteria that we need to really—that we need to value, and then the sites are ranked with a discussion about how many points we should grant for this area meeting these criteria. And then it's—they're ranked A, B, and C, and then we have our priority list of what's the most important lands to acquire. But a key criteria is lands that'll make a connection and lands that are under threat of—immediate threat of development.

EH: And once ELAPP acquires the space, how does ELAPP having it affect that space?

MS: Once it's acquired, it's preserved forever. It's just such a beautiful thing because we buy land, we don't sell it, ever. And we don't trade it, and it's preserved. And often, we protect it jointly with other agencies like "swiftmud" or some other land conservancy organization, and then you get—the more layers of bureaucracy you can have on the ownership of the land, the harder it would be, ever, to come in and do anything else with it. But once we have it, we have it. And it's protected, and then the—one point that I've tried to make, when people are saying, Yeah, but it costs us money, not just to acquire but to maintain, and we might not be in a position to spend that money right now. I say, "But let's just acquire it. Let's just get it and hold it, even if it's just a bunch of Brazilian pepper, because once it's a parking lot and a retail store, or a strip mall, it's done. So let's just get it, then we'll worry about how we can maintain it."

EH: So historically, ELAPP has been very popular with Hillsborough County voters, but can you recall any, like, political resistance to the program since you've been involved?

MS: Well, yes, I can. And now I'm a new commissioner. So I'm used to being an activist for 20 years, so I'm not used to being careful with what I say, but I can tell you that we have had people in the county administration who would rather be spending money on other things. And so that's where the resistance has come from—from people who, within the county, would rather spend the money on other things. But as you say, the citizens of Hillsborough County voted the last time to extend this and tax themselves, and that was during a recession. And they voted to—by almost 80 percent—it's, like, unbelievable, the landslide mandate that ELAPP carries with it from the voters.

EH: Why do you think Hillsborough voters are so supportive of the program?

MS: You know, it's—that's an interesting question, because not everybody is like I am in getting out and hiking. I was just out on one of the ELAPP properties this weekend.

EH: Oh wow.

MS: I mean, I'm out there a lot—just—it's where I refresh, right? Not everybody does that, but even the people who are not out in it as much as I am, they recognize that this is something precious that we have to leave future generations and that if we don't preserve it now, it's gone. People also understand the value of the wetlands, and in this day of flooding risks and storm events and rain events becoming more and more of an issue even for people who are not on the coastal areas, they recognize the value of natural wetlands being the storage areas and the protection for our neighborhoods. And that if you pave over everything and harden our landscapes so it's not—no longer permeable, and rain is no longer soaking into the ground, that's a danger for our neighborhoods.

And they—the people also recognize the value of the filtration of natural areas for the water that percolates down through and into our wellfields and eventually into our rivers—that is a source of our drinking water. So those were always points that resonated with people. But also, people liked the idea of having some wild spaces and some spaces where there still are deer and bobcats and foxes and eagles, and where eagles can hunt. People like to know that it's within their neighborhood.

EH: And what do you see as the future of ELAPP?

MS: We still have more to do. We still have more to acquire. And it's still very important to preserve the scrub jay. The scrub jay exists only in Florida. And I should show you a picture I have of scrub jays after we finish with the recording. But the future is to make sure that we have preserved all that is needed to preserve within our county to maintain that balance of life, of humans, and development, and agriculture, and wild spaces, and wildlife, and some of the endangered golden aster, and some of these rare orchids and pitcher plants that—they don't grow in a botanical garden.

They don't—you can't grow them in your front yard. You can only go find them in the wild. They're dependent on a delicate balance of the proper lichen and symbiotic relationships that they have that you cannot recreate anywhere else. And so the future of ELAPP is to make sure that we put those other necessary puzzle pieces in place to make those connections, to strengthen that, and then to protect it for future generations to have.

EH: What do you see as the future of environmental conservation in Florida, in general?

MS: You know, we are in a really bad moment of the pendulum swinging against those of us who value the environment and value its benefit as natural resources for all of these things—for clean air, for clean water, and for a legacy for our children, because our state has been putting the wolf in the hen—in charge of the henhouse—and putting people in charge of protecting our environment and our nation, unfortunately, too, right now.

But I'm an optimist because I know this is not a partisan issue in the long run. I, myself, had a lot of cross-party support. ELAPP, as we know, had cross-party support. It was started by cross-party people—coalitions. And I know—having campaigned throughout Hillsborough County, having grown up this area and traveling throughout the state—I know that people in Florida value our environment across party lines. And so I feel that this is a bad period politically, but it's happened as a result of an anomaly of forces and people who don't realize what has happened. And I know that the pendulum will swing back to the values of the people in our state.

EH: And you have such an interesting history, compared to some of the people we've interviewed, being an environmental activist before getting on the political side of things. So to you, what is the best strategy for conservation? Like, public-private partnerships, conservation easements? What do you see as, like, the go-to strategy?

MS: Conservation easements are another great tool in the toolbox. Of course, the gold standard is what ELAPP does, in simply purchasing, acquiring the properties and then saving them totally. But conservation easement is the next line of defense to—where there are people who want to continue owning the property and using the property in ways of agriculture or passive ways but are happy to sell the development rights to protect it. So yes, that's another tool. I completely agree with Sierra Club's philosophy, that the protection of our environment begins with getting people out in it to enjoy it. And so Sierra Club's motto is "Explore, enjoy, and protect the environment," and that's because—and "the planet," they say.

But here, I totally agree that it is in getting people outdoors as much as possible to experience our ELAPP lands that we get them to understand the benefit in protecting them. And so there are some people who are under the misconception that once we buy land, we put a fence around it and it's for wildlife only. No, nothing could be further from the truth. These are lands that are owned by the taxpayers, owned by the citizens of this county, and totally open to people to just get out of your car and go walk, and go enjoy it and experience it. And the more we get people doing that—so, the more I think we will preserve and safeguard these properties. So the future of ELAPP depends largely on informing citizens of what they own—of this treasure that is theirs—and helping them to get out there as much as possible.

EH: So has ELAPP, or even maybe your constituents from the area that you cover, are they concerned with other environmental issues like red tide or climate change, things like that?³

MS: Absolutely. And my district, by the way, is the whole county, so I'm county-wide.

EH: Okay.

MS: Uh-huh. And—which suits me because I really have experience of the whole county. And, yes, sea-level rise is very important in the bay, Tampa Bay and our—but speaking of the Bay, you know, you brought—mentioned red tide. Also the blue-green algae.⁴ And so we are right now doing some studies on how pollution is impacting some of the creeks and streams that flow into the bay, and what needs to be done with that. And our county is now looking at—I am really concerned with how we can improve and transition some septic systems off into sewer systems that will keep some of the pollution out of the bay.

But again, educating and informing the public about how the fertilizer they put on their lawns ends up in the bay, fertilizing and stimulating the growth of blue-green algae and red tide. It's not the cause of red tide, but it is food for red tide, and it's the cause of—it's the fuel for red tide—keeping that going longer and stronger than it might have without our addition of nitrogen to that system.

EH: Okay. Do you ever get residents who contact you over concerns about ELAPP or ELAPP-owned lands or anything like that?

MS: So I was just elected last November, and I'm kind of new. We have not fielded a lot of calls about ELAPP. Occasionally, someone is concerned—raises a concern—but they're pretty specific concerns. What we have is thousands of emails saying we are overdeveloping this county, and it's going too fast. And a lot of that email does express concerns over driving wildlife out of their wild spaces, so there's that connection to wanting to make sure we're protecting enough habitat.

EH: So you have a long history with environmental work and ELAPP itself, so do you have any memorable moments from your time with ELAPP that just stick out to you, that you'd like to share with us?

³ Red tide, which is caused by rapid growth of a microscopic algae called *Karenia brevis*, led to a harmful algal bloom from the Panhandle to the southern tip of Florida in 2018 and 2019.

⁴ Blue-green algae, also known as cyanobacteria, are microscopic bacteria found in water ecosystems, which can grow and form a bloom that is toxic to marine life and humans. Nitrogen pollution from fertilizers and septic tanks can lead to longer and more intense outbreaks.

MS: Oh, my goodness. It seems like every walk that I've taken is—has something with—something blooming that is enchanting, or an encounter with some of my favorite butterflies. Of course, anytime I see a gopher tortoise waddling along, or even better, a clutch of newborn gopher tortoises emerging from a nest, those are magical moments. You see a swallow-tailed kite flying overhead, or a hawk feeding and crunching on something. I mean, every—probably, after you leave, I will think of oh, the perfect story I should've told. But in reality, every single time I go out for a hike on ELAPP property, I am enchanted by the native azaleas blooming, or the tarflower—there's so much—so special here.

EH: If a person came to you and asked, “Why should I care about ELAPP?” or “Why should I care about conservation efforts in Florida or in Hillsborough County?” what would you tell them?

MS: I would wish that I could tell them, “What are you doing this Saturday? Come out with me. Come out with me and see it.” I have never, ever encountered someone who says, “Why should I preserve ELAPP land?” I have citizens who disagree with me about what we should do with growth management and what we should do with transportation planning and, “We should widen roads. No, we should do transit”—I have discussion with citizens about that. I've never had a citizen say, “Why should we preserve natural lands?” But if I did, you know, I would want to just take them out and show them why, yeah.

EH: That's great. Well, then, to wrap it up, I guess—the point of this is to—these interviews—are to host them so that they're available to students and faculty and other people who want to listen, who might be interested in ELAPP or things like that, so are there any final thoughts or messages that you'd like to leave with those who are listening?

MS: You know, I would just—I just hope to inspire people to visit ELAPP lands, that they belong to you, they belong to your children and your children's children. And to—if you don't know where to start, call my office, and we'll tell you where to go that's near your neighborhood. But also look up the Tampa Bay chapter of the Sierra Club. They are taking people on outings to our ELAPP land every month. They kind of take a break over the summer months sometimes, but during the nicer weather, they'll get back at it.

And even in the summer, they're taking people out kayaking and canoeing, and so for people who would be shy to get out by themselves, get with Sierra Club. I don't know that Tampa Audubon does as much field trips. They kind of ebb and flow. Sometimes they do—that's another place to look, is the Tampa Audubon Society, to get out in a group of people that are being led. You don't have to join either of those organizations. You don't have to pay anything. Just go check them out online and see when they're taking a group out, and go.

EH: Yeah, I love that. Get outside.

MS: Yeah.

EH: I love that. All right, well, that's all of the questions that I have. Thank you so much for sitting down with us and sharing your story and everything with us.

MS: And thank you for doing the work you're doing and recording these for posterity.

End of interview.