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Emily Holbrook (EH): It is July 19th, 2019. I am here with Sheryl Bowman, and we are at the France—Lake Frances field office for the ELAPP [Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program] oral history interview. So the first thing I'm just going to ask you is just to say and spell your name so that we have it correctly.

Sheryl Bowman (SB): My name is Sheryl Bowman. It's spelled S-h-e-r-y-l, and then B-o-w-m-a-n.

EH: Okay, great. Thank you. So, like I said, we're just very interested in knowing sort of the perspectives of people involved in ELAPP and conservation efforts in the area, and where the people that are currently involved sort of see conservation going in the future. So my first question for you is, how long have you been in the Hillsborough County and Tampa Bay area?

SB: Oh, how long have I lived here?

EH: Yeah.

SB: I've been here over 40 years. I moved here in 1977 from northwest Indiana, where I lived for 18 years.

EH: Okay. What brought you to the area?

SB: I came here to go to school.

EH: School?

SB: I wanted to major in biology.

EH: Okay.

SB: So I did that. I graduated from the University of South Florida.

EH: So can you just tell me what it's been like living in the area for the last 40 years?

SB: Well, it's changed a lot. It's gotten a lot more developed. A lot more crowded. I mean, I moved down here not really knowing anything about Florida or Tampa, so I had no idea what to expect.

EH: So, what—can you sort of describe the area when you first got here?

SB: No, mostly I was on campuses. So I lived downtown, and then I lived near USF and around there, so I hadn't been out and about town, until I started working for the county.

EH: So you said you moved down here for school, to go to USF. Did you pick USF specifically because of biology, or what brought you here?

SB: Well, I went to the University of Tampa for two years, and then I transferred to USF, and I picked it specifically for biology. I wanted to study biology and botany, and it was difficult where I used to live because I was, you know—because of winter.

EH: Okay.

SB: You know, when you can study something all year round, it's a lot better.

EH: So, what—can you just tell me about your interest in environmental conservation efforts? Like, how did you get involved with that?

SB: Well, I've been interested in it since I was probably in high school. In the era I grew up in, there was a lot of attention to the environment in the news media because of air and water pollution. And in the area I lived in, it was extremely polluted, and it affected my health. And as I was growing up, I had asthma by the time I was 12 or 13 years old. So I was pretty much aware of the environment. I'm not sure that people that live here are so much aware of it, but I was in the era where the ecology symbol was in the paper every day. And [at] the time I was a teen, they had passed the first efforts of the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Environmental Protection Agency, and things like that.¹

EH: So did you get your degree in biology with the intent to do environmental work?

SB: Oh, pretty much so, but I didn't really know what was available or what I was going to be able to do.

EH: What was your first job outside of university?

SB: I worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service on the National Wetlands Inventory in St. Petersburg.

EH: Oh, very cool.

SB: So I had a temporary job there, and then I went to the Environmental Protection Commission. And I worked there from 1986 to 1990, and then I came here in 1990 and worked here till present. And, right now, I'll be retiring in two years.

EH: Could you tell me a little bit about those first early jobs that you had outside of university?

SB: Well, when I was at the Environmental Protection Commission, they had just passed the wetland rule, the first state laws to protect wetlands. And that was very difficult, because unlike now, where people basically understand it, nobody knew what it—how it was going to be implemented. Nobody knew how it was going to be enforced. There was a lot of illegal dredging

¹ The Clean Water Act of 1972 regulates the discharge of pollutants into US waters and establishes quality standards for surface waters. The Clean Air Act of 1970 authorizes regulations to limit emissions from both stationary and mobile sources, such as factories and automobiles.

and filling going on, still, that we were required to stop. And it was very controversial. Eventually, it made it into most of the news media here and was being covered. In fact, the news media used to show up every single week and look through the enforcement files and see if they wanted to put anything on—in the newspapers.

EH: Okay. And you said you got into this area in, like, 1990?

SB: I started with this department in 1990, in April.

EH: So, what was your first sort of job with this department?

SB: Well, I came here when they were first forming the ELAPP program. They passed—they acquired their first site in—around 1988. And by 1990, when I started here, there was only one acquisition, and we weren't managing it. But right after that, because of the state of the economy, they purchased several sites, almost in succession. And then they continued to purchase it, and then they eventually passed a couple more referendums to continue the program.

EH: So were you involved in the site management of those early ELAPP sites?

SB: Yeah, I went out there and did a lot of the inventory. We did site security almost right away, and I was also responsible for developing the management plans, a lot of which are behind you on the shelf. I spent about 25 years working—either writing them or working with people who were writing them.

EH: So, what is your current role in ELAPP?

SB: Well, currently, I'm what they call a land-management coordinator. And we've divided the county into four areas, just because we ended up with over 60,000 acres of property. So I'm coordinating the management of 14 sites in the northwest portion of the county, which are those little red dots up right there, up in the northwest part of the square there.

EH: And so what do you do as the coordinator and everything?

SB: What we're doing—we coordinate prescribed fire. I work on prescribed burns. I'm a prescribed-burn manager. I coordinate the exotic-plant-control efforts. I have supervisory authority over three technicians and one part-time technician, so we talk to—about what needs to

be done and where it needs to be done, whether it's repairs or mowing. I've been—also been involved in the development of quite a bit of the public access areas over the years, and quite a few environmental studies.

EH: So from your perspective, what are the main goals of ELAPP?

SB: Well, the ELAPP referendum was established in—with the efforts to protect environmentally sensitive lands. And within that, they had already lost a great deal of wetlands and almost a majority of the natural upland habitat, even before the first referendum was passed. So, what they wanted to do was save what was left of their natural habitat in this area. And, in order to do that, because most people don't even understand what you're talking about, they envisioned a concept of wildlife corridors where they would go along the major rivers and acquire land almost in pieces and try to get as much connectivity as possible.

And then, after that, and within that, it was a—the attempt to protect rare and endangered plants and animals that are in this area as much as possible, and to increase the populations whenever they could. Those were the primary objectives, and also to manage the land appropriately for those species. The recreation—I mean, it's always been the desire to have these areas open for public recreation as long as it did not damage the reason, or damage the habitat, or damage the species for which the site was purchased.

EH: So you've been involved in ELAPP since almost the very beginning, really. How has it changed since you've been involved?

SB: Well, we got a lot more property and a lot more staff, and so things have gotten much more complex. As far as management of personnel, deciding who's going to do what job duties—because at the beginning, I did a little bit of everything, and everybody that came on board did a little bit of everything. I didn't have any experience in land management, unlike some people they hire today, who've already worked for a state agency or forestry or, you know, in some other capacity—probably managing wetlands, perhaps. But I came on board with none of that, so we pretty much developed the programs from the get-go. And at that time, there weren't—there wasn't a lot of people with experience in land management around.

EH: What was it like stepping into a land-management role without that experience?

SB: Well, we just started from scratch. I mean, to give you an example, we were housed at Upper Tampa Bay Park at the time, so that was pretty cool to go and work in a park. I'd never done that before. And a few weeks after I started there, there was a lightning-strike wildfire, and no one knew where it was. All they could see was smoke. They had no real road network around the

park, except one paved road in and one paved road out at the time. So they climbed up on top of the nature center to try to see where the fire was, and it was kind of like a Keystone Cops comedy of people just running around.²

And finally they figured out where it was, and sent somebody out there. But we advocated a prescribed-burn program—not just a wildfire-management program, but an actual prescribed-burn program. And fortunately, the park manager, Skip Denham, was willing to listen and we ended up calling in advisers from the Florida Forest Service, who advised us how to start the program and how to cut up this land with fire lanes so we could access most of the areas a little more easily and keep that going. And even to this day, they're still doing prescribed-fire management in the park. So that's pretty cool.

EH: Yeah, that is really cool. Could you describe prescribed burning—what it is, and sort of the benefits of it? Because I think a lot of people don't really know.

SB: No, most people don't really know. It's a way to introduce fire in a prescribed method with a specific set of parameters that mostly have to do with the weather and how—where the fire is going to go and how they're going to stop it and a specific set of objectives of what they want to accomplish, whether it's for fuel reduction and just, like, having less burnable fuel in the unit afterward and to benefit certain specific species of wildlife or plants. So that's what it is, and then carrying that out is something interesting because it takes people a while to get enough experience to do it and do it well. At first, they think that they're just going out there and throwing a match on the ground, and it couldn't be further from the truth.

EH: So it's like very planned out—very specific areas that you burn?

SB: Yeah, and it's been useful for us because we burn certain areas several times, and then we kind of get an idea of what's happened in the past.

EH: So could you tell me what the decision-making process is like for ELAPP? Like, how do you decide what land should be acquired, and, you know, which ones are—which ones do you target to try and get?

SB: I've been on the site-assessment team for pretty much the entire time I've been here, and what they've had in the past—they've allowed the public to make nominations, and only recently did they allow staff to try to make nominations to the program. So we would—we have several teams that do assessments. It was set up to be almost by committees, but because—so no one

² The Keystone Cops were the incompetent policemen in Mack Sennett's silent-film slapstick farces from 1912 to the early 1920s.

person was going to dominate the process. Our late director, Ed Radice, was very concerned about people who may abuse the process for their own personal benefits.

So we ended up with a site-assessment team, which I've been on, and a site-review team, and then a site-selection team. They've had a real estate team, then they've gone for final votes, and then they've had to go to the board for approval, so everything was looked at from every aspect. And mainly we—when I was there, we'd go out and look at the properties for the environmental habitat quality and the listed species and common species and what was out there.

EH: So are there—as part of someone on the site-assessment team, you're sort of the first people to go out and really look at the land, and tell everyone, like, hey, here's exactly what's going on?

SB: Right. Unless—it depended on how much was included in the original nomination because some of those properties people already knew about. Not necessarily the county staff, but they may have been assessed previously. A lot of them had come in with development plans. And some of them were very close to being developed when the county acquired them, so sometimes they had habitat studies from other entities.

EH: And what do you look for, specifically, when you're doing an assessment?

SB: We were looking for, and still look for, endangered and threatened species of plants and animals, and also a natural habitat quality. We also look at—see if there's archeological sites. If there is—the water resources, we would look at that, too. And then we were, you know, trying to put together a whole package of information to send along.

EH: Based on that, you decide [whether] to go further with the process?

SB: Right. I mean, right. Yeah, we were—we had an assessment process where we could decide, at our level, whether the site qualified or not. I mean, some of them just didn't qualify at all. Some of them may have been altered but had potential for restoration because of their location, and they were in a really sensitive habitat, like in the coast—along the coastline—and could be restored, then they could qualify if there was a funded restoration plan by another agency such as the Southwest Florida Water Management District, they can qualify and go on. But if the site absolutely didn't qualify, it was eliminated. And it—and then we would decide if we wanted to do a fuller site assessment or a more detailed assessment on the property.

EH: And what would disqualify a site?

SB: Well, a lot of people were nominating isolated parcels, that sometimes they were just wetlands. They always assumed in this program—although, I don't think that's a great assumption—that these isolated wetland parcels were already protected by regulation. The program's intent was to go beyond regulations to places that were not protected. So that's how they would do it, but every year, we would get pieces of land that people didn't—they wanted to sell just because they didn't want the wetlands, or they wanted to see the wetlands behind their properties protected. Or they didn't understand what the ELAPP program was or what it was for, so it might be something that was just too small for us to manage.

EH: So once ELAPP, you know, you go through the whole process on the site selection and actually approving it and purchasing it. What—how does ELAPP owning a space sort of affect that space? Like, what happens to a space once ELAPP takes ownership or control over it?

SB: Well, we—first, we try to secure it, as best we can, and assess whether there's gates. A lot of times we go out there and find somebody else out there working who didn't know that it had been purchased by the county, or under a lease to the previous owners. We would attempt to establish site security on there if it needed it, although they don't do that as much anymore. They've eliminated a lot of the site security residence, but we still have several sites where people actually live there and patrol it. So once we established that and assessed what kind of fencing and locks and gates it needed, we would—we used to just open them up for public access if we could.

We have opened probably 95 percent of the properties for public access. We also assessed how safe they were. And some of them were in pretty good condition when the county acquired them, and others were not. Especially in terms of prescribed fire, some of the places had not burned in a long time, were very overgrown. And sometimes you could get through them, [but] some places had roads that were washed out and bridges that were in pretty rough condition and things like that, so we'd have to look and see how—what we needed to protect and, you know, what was safe for the public to enter.

EH: What are some of the current concerns or projects for ELAPP?

SB: Well, most of our current projects, because we've acquired so much property, is focusing on restoration and habitat restoration in areas that haven't been restored yet, and getting money to do that, or getting funding to do that from other sources. I think the acquisition phase has kind of, like, tamped down a little bit, although there's still some major pieces that they're trying to get to connect properties like Blackwater Creek. You know, they're working on an area around here—to [the] south of here—at Brooker Creek buffer. And besides restoration, I think that there are—well, I'm blanking out on that right now. I forgot what I was going to say.

EH: Oh, no worries. So you said “restoration” quite a few times, and that there’s like site restoration going on. What do you mean by “site restoration”?

SB: Sometimes it's just restoring natural habitat. We start with ground cover, you know, properties, or tree plantings. And we've done tree plantings in the past, but we're trying to restore from the ground up with ground cover—native ground—establishing native ground cover, eliminating invasive exotic plant species, which takes quite a while before we're able to even start thinking about ground-cover restoration. Sometimes the site's not in good condition, and we really can't start. I haven't worked on a lot of those, but I've been involved in quite a bit of isolated restoration areas over the years.

EH: So from your perspective, why is environmental conservation or programs like ELAPP so important?

SB: Well, I guess what people don't understand is that a lot of things were probably altered and destroyed before they were born. In the area I came from, very little natural habitat was left. So the program is important for—to maintain natural habitat, to maintain as much possible good air and water quality, and to maintain a system of parks and preserves where people can go and just rest and unwind and have examples of what real natural habitat looks like. Even if they wanted to restore it on their own properties, they could potentially do that.

EH: You've been involved in environmental conservation for a really long time, and like you said earlier, you're close—you're two years away from retirement. Why do you continue to take part and dedicate your life to environmental efforts like this?

SB: Well, I think it's important now, more than ever, for an upcoming generation of people who may or may not be exposed. There's a lot of children that I know that really don't have any experience even going outside. They're tied up to computers, don't know how to even interact in a natural habitat. I walked out with one young man a couple of weeks ago, 14 years old, and he couldn't even walk as far as I could, and I just turned 60. And I was pretty shocked that this child could not keep up with me and didn't have the strength to do it or the ability to do it. It was kind of shocking to me.

EH: So that really just drives you to keep going?

SB: I want to keep going. It's been a lot of fun here to discover what's on the properties. Even though we do assessments, we find a lot of things along the way, and it's been really cool to discover what's on our properties and to manage for them. And I don't really feel like our work is

done. We keep finding that—new things that we—that are interesting that we need to get done. And we really—although there's been a lot of effort in this area to protect certain pieces of property, even outside of direct land acquisition, a lot of people don't know what management means.

EH: Yeah.

SB: I've seen areas—and I just can't give you any, or don't want to give specific examples right now. But areas of upland habitat that's been protected, but there's been no fire management, no vegetation management—those areas are going to burn eventually. And a lot of people don't know that. They don't know—they'll be told, “Well, the mangroves are protected by your house.” But they don't know that it's filled with Brazilian pepper, and that really needs to be managed, too. They'll say that they're—they'll put a cage or a fence around wetlands, but there's no management of those wetlands, and it's just overgrown with invasive species. And there's really, like, a lot of misunderstanding about what that means.

EH: So you said there's a lot of misunderstanding about land management and stuff. Do you get that from most of the citizens around it, or do you find that misunderstanding of what managers need to do from the actual government and people sort of involved?

SB: When I was first with the government, there was a lot of misunderstanding from the aspect of the government. So people that were in the agency I was in, myself and others, were just concerned bunny huggers and tree huggers, and we were kind of mocked and laughed at by other agencies. “Well, here comes the, you know, environmentalists,” and that's the way they would say it. I think there's been more education and more acceptance in the county government level since I've been here, which has now been 33 years. But at first, it was difficult to get through to them, even my own agency, but particularly with the county administrator. They had a lot of problems understanding and frequently were at the wrong side of the environmental regulations.

EH: Do you see that changing at all?

SB: Yeah, it's changed a lot. I mean, they've come into compliance with wetland-mitigation requirements. We've helped them with that. And they understand about air quality and a lot of other aspects that just were pretty much far off in left field at the time, and now are, I'd say, more middle of the road and accepted, like, here's the way things can get done in a sensitive manner.

EH: Do you still feel like there is, like, a scoffing at, like, “Oh, here come the environmentalists” sort of attitude?

SB: No, not so much. I think that people have accepted it—a little bit more mainstream. But, like, when I—the news media helped us a lot, because when I first started in the county, they had no dedicated environmental staffing at some of the local media. And I had one news reporter telling me one time that he was covering environmental beat because there was no murders in Tampa that weekend. And so it was kind of like they were just thrown at us, and they really had no idea what they were talking about, even when they covered something.

And so when you came up with a difficult subject like prescribed fire, and somebody went to them, we weren't portrayed in a very positive manner, because they had no idea why there was smoke or, you know, why such and such a neighbor didn't get the notification that he thought he should get or, you know. At one point, our burn program was shut down because a neighbor thought we were killing baby birds, and that was all over the news media. So we try our best to communicate, to put out our own media releases. We've come a long way in that regard. We've improved our website. We're improving our trails, you know, kiosks, and all the information that we put out there to try to help people understand what we're doing and when we're doing it.

EH: So ELAPP has historically been pretty popular with voters, passing the referendums and getting that support. Why do you think that Hillsborough County residents are so supportive of a program like this?

SB: They've always been supportive of it. There hasn't been a lot of organized opposition to it. And I was on—I participated in all of the referendums that they passed here, except the first one. I voted for the first one because I was in Hillsborough County at the time, and then I just—we weren't supposed to go out and campaign for the program, but we were allowed to disseminate information about the program. So that's what they saw the role as county staff. And Nature Conservancy and other groups came out and helped us explain it to the voters.

But unlike in other areas where they already had a lot of government land, we really don't in this county, and that's one thing that they recognized. That they didn't feel that there was going to be a lot of state or federal acquisition in Hillsborough County, so they did need the help of a local government. I mean, they do have some properties, and we ended up partnering to a great extent with the state for land acquisition, but they still feel that we needed the, you know, a local program. And the voters now understand it a little bit more and appreciate it a lot more. I just wish that they could get out to those sites more and will do so in the future.

EH: Do you feel like the public doesn't really access these lands as much?

SB: Not as much as they could be. And I'm particularly concerned about the schools that are next to our sites, because several of our properties were purchased next to schools just so that we would be able to interact with children and bring them right out the back door into the preserve.

EH: Yeah. You're really close to a high school and an elementary school, I think. Didn't we pass one? Steinbrenner?

SB: Oh, yeah, that's a couple of miles away. And Town 'n' Country Preserve is right next to Alonzo High School. We have been participating in the Great American Teach-In for quite a few years now, and they have been very supportive of us.³ So we will take several of the environmental classes just right out the back door into the preserve, usually in November. We've also done this with—at the Bell Creek Preserve with Marion Rodgers Middle School, and we've done it some—not recently, but in the past, with Freedom High School and the Cypress Creek Preserve. So it's a pretty good opportunity for the faculty and staff there and the kids to be able to just walk out of the classroom. They're not real—they're very uptight about that right now in some areas because of, you know, school security. So right now, we've kind of had to take a step back and get back together with them and reassure them.

EH: Do you get involvement or interest from the universities in the area? Because we're from USF, but like, we have UT [University of Tampa] and we have other universes that are sort of close by.

SB: Yeah, we've worked pretty closely with USF, especially archeological studies. We've worked extremely closely with the USF herbarium. In fact, we've hired them several times, and they've done botanical surveys on our properties. Not so much with UT, but I wouldn't mind being involved with UT since I went there for two years. Um, Hillsborough Community College, and then we have a long-term lease agreement at the English Creek Environmental Studies Center, although I understand they've closed that site down. But we might end up acquiring it anyway.

EH: Wow.

SB: So yeah, we've had a very good relationship, and we have no problem with expanding the relationship. The University of South Florida—we feel that—we've gone out to the USF eco area. We've talked to them out there, and that's right adjacent to Lettuce Lake Park, so we feel there's a natural opportunity there for more study.

³ The Great American Teach-In invites members of the community into schools or other educational institutions to teach students about careers and hobbies.

EH: What would you like to sort of see with the schools in the area and stuff, like their involvement? What would you like for them to do or come out, like, invest in?

SB: Well, for—you mean for the younger people?

EH: Either. Younger people or even, like, college students. Any of them.

SB: Well, for the younger people, just to come out and see the sights. And I've even spoken to faculty at some of these schools who don't know that the preserve is a preserve. They just drive into it, through it, to their parking lot, get out, and go into their offices all day.

EH: Wow.

SB: You know, as far as the universities, definitely that we would want them to know that the opportunity is there for study. I mean, we've done a lot. We've had a lot of research students contact us and want to do studies, and we help them in any way possible—showing them around and telling them what our inventory is, and so—what's out there that could be studied.

EH: Can you recall any moments or instances of resistance to the program? Like, politically or anything like that?

SB: I don't think there's been a lot of political resistance. The politicians have been extremely supportive. I mean, there's been degrees of support throughout the years, but overall, with Hillsborough County or county commissioners, this has just been amazing and awesome.

EH: That's great. What do you see as the future of ELAPP? Your perspective.

SB: For our perspective, I think the future is going to go toward more biological inventory and more research on the sites. They're going to have to, I guess, find a balance between public access and protection of the resources, because the sites can't support everybody doing everything. And I think that they're going to have to—the coastal sites are particularly vulnerable right now to rising sea levels, and I don't know what the future is for those, but I would not think it would be very good if the water level continues to rise. But we're trying to inventory the extent of our plant communities. We've done a couple of them already, you know, geo-referenced the sites just to be able to continue to monitor what's happening. But we do know that the plant communities have changed. You know, the structure has changed as the water seems to move inland.

EH: Does, like—well, maybe ELAPP or just Environmental Lands Management—are you as concerned with other environmental issues? You talked about rising sea levels. Are you concerned with things like red tide or climate change, things like that?⁴

SB: We're concerned about our continued ability to conduct prescribed burns, for sure. And with the weather the way it's been, and it's—the weather has changed. It's gotten hotter. A lot more people are moving into this area, who live in—adjacent to preserves, who may or may not understand what it's like to live next to a preserve, and what could happen there, and what does happen in the preserves.

A lot of development has been permitted. I've spent probably 15 years or more, along with a co-worker of mine, and we have set up a system through the county that—so that compatibility plans are required for new development that is coming in next to preserved sites. And it's almost, like, just a—really, it's not a regulation, it's more like a giant billboard to electronically notify people through their deed restrictions of what—that they are going to be living next to a nature preserve and help them make that decision of whether they want to do that or not.

EH: What are the compatibility requirements when you have something like a development going up there?

SB: Basically, we just have a developer sign a compatibility plan along with the county, and that ends up being incorporated into the deeds of anybody that's moving next to the preserves and within a certain distance from preserves. And it advises them that there's prescribed fire—

EH: Okay.

SB: —that there may be chemical control of certain invasive pest plants, that there's certain management practices going on in the preserves.

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

SB: I'm not sure that I can say what's going to happen. In general, I think they're very concerned about it right now because of issues with algae blooms and water quality. People are seeing some things that—I've spoken to people who are born and raised here, who really sometimes don't

⁴ 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 continued into 2019.

really understand or didn't understand—"Why do you have water quality regulations? The water's fine." And they don't see the connection between the fact that it used to not be very good, but now that they're—the climate is heating up, they're seeing algae blooms and reading about it, and smelling it maybe for the first time, or maybe feeling a lot hotter for the first time. And they're realizing the air quality is—could be compromised.

And it's unfortunate that something has to be wrong for them to understand it, but a lot of the things that I bring out—I see trees dying, for example. I don't know why we suddenly are losing all these trees, but we are. So—and I know that it's due to something. We've lost quite a few different species. And it's almost like you're seeing the symptoms of a disease, but you don't know what the disease is. And that's very difficult to explain to people, because they just kind of look at it, and they see vegetation, and I'm looking at it and seeing something that is wrong, and people may or may not want to know about that.

You know, there's a lot of nice things that's happening—that these areas are protected, and we do have a lot of endangered and threatened species in them that are protected. For example, we have Brooker Creek Headwaters Nature Preserve, and it's got the only managed population of pitcher plants in the entire county.⁵ So—and we've done quite a bit of prescribed burns and vegetation management to keep track of the species, and quite a bit of inventory. But we don't have anywhere else that's on public ownership of that land that has hooded pitcher plants. No, there's no other preserve in this area that has them. And that's it. So—and all the other properties around it, they may have some pitcher plants, but there's no management for them. No recognition that they're there. So it's pretty cool that we're able to do that, but we're—that's like their last stand in this area.

EH: Do you ever have Hillsborough residents contact you over concerns—or maybe ELAPP—over concerns over certain lands or things like that?

SB: All the time.

EH: All the time?

SB: Yeah, mainly it's veg—it's mostly dead tree complaints or, "Trim this back because it's encroaching on my property." Very rarely, we get complaints about invasive pest plants or, you know, "Why haven't you burned this site? Why aren't there any prescribed burns taking place in this preserve?" Sometimes I get those. I'm happy to get those calls. Because it seems like people understand what we're doing, and that we should be doing more of it. But it's—when I get those complaints, a lot of times, it's from somebody who already used to work here or knows what, you know, some pest plants growing in some remote area that we would want to know about, or

⁵ Pitcher plants are carnivorous plants that catch insects in their pitcher-shaped leaves.

some invasive species has been seen out here that we already know about and possibly can't manage. And there's several of them that—and there's really no management technique for them, but we know that they're here.

EH: So, what—like, what happens, or what do you do when you get calls like that?

SB: I call them back. We address the complaint. If it's a tree complaint, and if it's on our property, we—and we can address it—we would. But a lot of times I explain whether we can or can't do something for them. We try to help them and educate them as much as they can. For example, the other day I got someone calling saying we needed to cut the Brazilian pepper, it hadn't been cut in over 10 years. And the preserve they referenced, we had already spent quite a bit of time managing exotic pest plants with contractors and staff. She was looking out her backdoor, straight into the condominium association's property where they live, where there was no management taking place.

EH: Oh, okay. So in that sense, it wasn't something that you could take care of?

SB: It's nothing that we could take care of. It was something that—you know, we have an incredible seed source on adjacent properties, that it's good for, you know, job longevity, but not great for the site.

EH: So we've recently had a new administrative change in the state, and in the county, and in Tampa itself. Are you—what do you see as the future of support now that we have this new administration in? Are you concerned over whether you'll have the continued support for programs like this or—?

SB: No, not right now.

EH: No?

SB: We have a lot of support, and we're really grateful for it.

EH: Why is ELAPP important? Why should the everyday person, the voter, the citizen be concerned with conservation efforts like this?

SB: Well, I don't think they all are, but as far as their values of where they live and the habitat quality, and the value if they do own property or even live here—they'd be concerned that some of these national areas are buffering them from storms. They're buffering them from flooding. I mean, a lot of people who live adjacent to these preserves have higher land values, and the people who don't own property, or just live in [an] apartment have a place to go that's not extremely overcrowded or developed. So I think that whether or not they own property or they—no matter what their means are, they would have someplace where they could go and see nature that's not involving driving hours and hours.

EH: So I think my final questions for you are—can you tell me about some memorable moments in ELAPP or just your involvement in this? Because you've been involved since the culmination.

SB: Some of the more memorable moments, I'd say, you know, we were excited when we'd buy or acquire large parcels of land that we didn't think we were going to get. There was quite a few places that ended up—since the program's voluntary, they were—they ended up being developed, but there is a lot of them that we were excited when the closing happened. Some of the memorable moments for me, I mean, when we find something that we didn't know was there on a piece of property that was endangered or rare or threatened, it was pretty cool.

I was walking down a nature trail one time at Violet Cury's Nature Preserve, and there was a short-tailed snake.⁶ And I took a picture of the snake—I didn't know what it was—and just, like, sent it to my supervisor, and they just couldn't believe it, because it's something that is extremely difficult to find and very rarely seen. And I believe it's threatened—state threatened. I might be wrong about that.

But when we would find—a lot of our program revolves around the Florida golden aster, which is a plant, and it's endangered. And they based quite a bit of their efforts on trying to protect the last remaining populations of that plant. I mean, it was in Hillsborough—they knew it was in Manatee and Hillsborough County, and there had been a couple of other populations across the state. I think Pinellas' populations needed to be re-established. They were gone.

But we dedicated quite a bit of our efforts to finding the populations and managing for them so that we'd be able to maintain them. And we still put a lot of effort into that. But back in the 1980s, we were collecting seeds because we felt that there—we were—we didn't know what the extent of those populations were. We thought maybe they were going to go extinct. Maybe we would—nothing left but artificial populations, but fortunately, we were able to save them to the point where I believe the federal government right now may be considering de-listing it to threatened because of the populations being protected and managed.

⁶ The short-tailed snake (*Lampropeltis extenuata*) is found only in north-central peninsular Florida and is listed as threatened by the state.

EH: Wow.

SB: So that was a big accomplishment on our part, you know, to see something like that evolve and happen from going out and having to collect seeds, or thinking about digging up plants to transplant them somewhere else, to being able to say, look, we've got sustainable populations that are reproducing, and that have been in the same place for over a couple of decades now. And we know that they're going to be—we think they're going to be okay.

EH: That's amazing. [To Jane Duncan:] Do you have any specific questions?

Jane Duncan (JD): Yeah, I do. With regard to prescribed burning, how does that specifically help other plant species?

SB: A lot—most of them are adapted to fire. A lot—people think that they're just going to die. A lot of the biomass of the plant's underground, and it will—they normally come back within a week or two. You'll see green grass starting to come back up. Within a year or two, you practically can't see that we've burned it, but it stimulates flowering and fruiting. So when the fire is suppressed or a fire just stops, usually you get a canopy of oak and other species that just shade out the understory, and you end up with less diversity or losing the understory, or it evolves into another type of plant community.

So a lot of the plants that we have—I mean, sometimes you'll see things hanging on along roadsides or right on the fence lines because they are not—they're just completely shaded out. And with that, you have a whole different type of plant and animal. Gopher tortoises can't live in these areas anymore. Species like fox squirrels have to go to other places, and eventually, there's nowhere else for them to go. So if you can't continue prescribed fire, you end up losing the benefits of—in many cases, the reasons that you purchased the site or tried to protect it in the first place.

JD: And was—wetlands—what kind of special management did they require, as opposed to regular dry ground?

SB: A lot of it, from invasive exotic species. There's—they're extremely vulnerable, and there's new invasives coming into this area all the time. Sometimes, and in some cases, those plants used to freeze back or maybe have been limited by cold weather, and now they're not anymore because we're not getting any—as much cold weather. So that would be the first thing. Some wetlands do need fire, and they don't get that anymore. Or they need some sort of habitat management, so they're not overgrown with woody, shrubby plants if they are maintaining open

habitat. A lot of open water bodies end up, you know, with invasive species going across them, like water hyacinths or torpedo grass. And they also need maintenance of good water quality.

JD: What reasons are wetlands important to Florida? To our environment, specifically, here in this state?

SB: Well, several reasons. First of all, to protect the water quality, because they do filter out a lot of the pollutants. Secondly, to buffer you from storms, storm surges, and weather in the area. I live in—I live next to a wetland and—between a wetland and a pine plantation, and the wind has been cut back drastically. We've had two category 1 hurricanes go over our homes since 2004, so—and we've been mostly protected because of the trees that were around us. Wetlands also provide habitat for animals, but they need wetlands and uplands, not just one or the other. And that was one thing that this program was good at doing, is it wasn't trying to purchase—we tried to connect habitat as much as we could, and not just purchase isolated—whether it was an isolated wetland or an isolated upland.

JD: Thank you.

EH: So I guess, just the final thing. The whole point of having these resources—we host them online so that anybody can access them, and we really hope that students use them as a resource for their own research or to get inspiration for those, like, those things. So I guess, is there anything you want to leave the listeners with? Any final thoughts or anything like that?

SB: I would say to try to visit these properties as much as they can. Find out where they are, and learn about them. We're always willing to organize or lead field trips or answer questions. And [we] thank them for their support of the program—that we really appreciate their support, and we hope that they are able to come to understand them and not be afraid of them. And that's especially a message to younger people, who I think have been, you know, been cut off from that—from the environment.

EH: Great. Awesome. Do you have anything else?

JD: Thank you.

EH: Yeah.

JD: Thank you so much.

EH: Yeah, I think that's it. Yeah, that we have.

SB: Okay.

EH: Yeah, thank you so much.

End of interview.