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Telling Our Own Untold Stories:
Civil Rights in the National Park Service Oral History Project



Kevin Cheri
June 28 and July 5, 2018

Interview conducted by Lu Ann Jones and Isis Plaza
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
508 compliant version by Lauren Pash

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28 June 2018 and 5 July 2018

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The narrator has reviewed and corrected this transcript.

[START OF TRACK 1]

00:00

Lu Ann Jones: We're going to record this. I just turned the recorder on. I think we're going to be able to get some pretty good sound using a speaker phone here. I also sent you what we call a release form through email that I would ask you to sign and complete and maybe scan, if you have a scanner there at the park, and send back to us. Because we really have to have that in order to preserve and use the interview. So, it just signifies that you understand why we're doing the interview. We have permission to use it for research and educational purposes, and also to get it into the archives of the National Park Service.

Kevin Cheri: No problem.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay. So, I usually start out with an introduction. Today is June 28, Thursday, 2018. I'm here at the Main Interior Building. This is Lu Ann Jones with the park history program. And also, here in Washington is—

Isis Plaza: Isis Plaza.

Lu Ann Jones: And she's with the HBCU Intern program. And on the phone, we have—

Kevin Cheri: This is Kevin Cheri, retired superintendent, Buffalo National River.

Lu Ann Jones: Great. Thank you. And again, just to get on the recording, do we have your permission to record?

Kevin Cheri: Yes, you do.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay. Thank you so much. One of the things that I usually start off asking people is just a little bit about your family background and where you were born, when you were born, and just those early family influences.

1:38

Kevin Cheri: Okay. Well, I was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1954. October fifth. I'm the sixth of seven children of Ferdinand and Gladys Cheri. My background, my father was a career postal worker, letter carrier. And my mom worked only for a brief period as a cafeteria worker at a high school where my sisters had attended school. But most of the time she was just a housewife raising her seven children.

Lu Ann Jones: That's a pretty big job.

Kevin Cheri: Yes. (laughter) My family's Catholic, and I was raised in Catholic schools. I went through Catholic schools from kindergarten through college, starting in an elementary school there in New Orleans from kindergarten through eighth. Then I went to Minor Seminary, because my two brothers were interested in becoming priests, and it was cheaper for me to attend the same school that they went to. So, although I had no intentions of becoming a priest, I ended up going to Saint John Vianney Preparatory School, a college preparatory school, for aspiring seminarians. After I graduated from high school, I attended Xavier University of Louisiana, which is also a private HBCU that was founded by Catholics. I went there with the intent, initially, of becoming a physical therapist. Because back then, there weren't many colleges that had four-year physical therapy programs, I opted to go where I could afford to go, for one thing, in four years as a health physical education major. I minored in mathematics with the intent of then applying for graduate programs in therapy at the universities I was aware of that had those physical therapy programs.

Kevin Cheri: But it was by fate that during that first year as a freshman at Xavier University, I was approached by the cooperative education program director, who was looking for a student to fill a park interpreter coop position, cooperative education student position, at Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Odd thing: Carlsbad actually hires many seasonals, and about half of them were cooperative education students back then. Most coming from Texas Tech and Texas A&M, of all places, seeing that it's in New Mexico. But they kept one slot for an HBCU student. And Xavier happened to have that connection. I don't know how they acquired that connection with the Park Service, but Xavier had a slot there. And the student who had gone the previous year but not finished his program opted to leave it, and wanted to graduate with his class, so he needed to take summer classes. So, he opted to leave, and because of the short notice he gave the director, they were frantically, he was frantically walking around the university trying to find a student who might take on this job.

Kevin Cheri: Well, back then, it was just as hard to find work. Wanting to help pay for my college education, just hearing "job," I just jumped at the opportunity, despite absolute ignorance of the National Park Service and anything outside the city of New Orleans. We really never went on vacations and traveled anywhere. So, everything that I was about to embark on was foreign to me. And I was completely naïve of even what I was stepping into. The thought of working at Carlsbad Caverns, I envisioned this place that, you know, a cave that may have had a walkway that went back in, maybe about a quarter mile at most, and an opening about the size of a couple of doorways, or something. And if you've been to Carlsbad, or at least seen pictures of it, you know how far I was from reality. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) It was quite an eye-opening experience to show up there and to see an opening big enough to fit a couple of homes through, and to know that I'd be walking a trail system that extended three miles long and dropping down below the surface as deep as 800 and I believe 30 feet, and then having to take an elevator back up at the 750-foot level.

Kevin Cheri: So again, my curiosity was definitely piqued. Despite the fact that I was somewhat of an introvert, joining the Park Service would probably be one impactful decision in my life that changed that in me. It did pull me out of my shell. And as I now had the responsibility of talking to the public and educating them about the cave and the desert environment of the Southwest. One of the new things that was occurring at the park, they had just begun giving lantern tours in a new cave. And actually, the name of the cave was New Cave. Not very original, but that's what they called it. And where we also went to that different location and met people who reserved a tour, to be able to walk through the caverns on its original surface, no manmade improvements, and be led by two rangers carrying lanterns.

Kevin Cheri: Like I said, it was quite an experience for a young man coming out of the city who had absolutely no idea of what he was getting into. But it didn't take me long to fall in love with the mission of the agency, as well as the people that worked there. I think I was so impressed with the attitudes of people in the park service that worked together. The family atmosphere, the support and you know, their whole energy they showed toward what they did, that it was contagious for me. And I began, of course, to seriously begin to consider that as a possible career.

Kevin Cheri: Now, the cooperative education program requires that you put in a certain number of weeks. After you've worked this time successfully and you fulfill your graduation requirements, you were eligible for a permanent job at the entry level, non-competitively. You had 90 days after your graduation, though, to be offered an opportunity. If that 90 days passed, then you would have to apply and compete like any other applicant. But that was the opportunity for the cooperative education program to help the park service bring in diversity.

9:50

Kevin Cheri: The irony, I thought, about the program as it was described, was seeing so few diverse candidates. Like I said, Carlsbad would hire almost 40 seasonals if not more. And yet, at least a third of them seemed to be coop students, you know, I was the only minority, African American. There may have been one Hispanic employee at the time, male, but that's about all I remember ever seeing in the cooperative education program. So, while I was very grateful for that opportunity, I was confused, because I heard people in the Park Service saying there was more pressure on federal agencies to bring in some diversity. I could obviously see that there weren't many minorities, especially African Americans, who visited parks, or were aware of them.

Kevin Cheri: I'll tell you, back step a little bit here. Really, the only thing that came close to me having any idea about the Park Service, was watching the Yogi Bear cartoons, and seeing Yogi in Jellystone National Park. That was about the closest thing I can actually connect with this new experience that I was going through. That oh,

something on that cartoon was actually somewhat real. Because you know, the ranger on the show wore the hat. But you know, that's how confusing it was for me to describe to my family. And half of my family, just to show you how unexposed and ignorant we were of what's out there that other Americans could take advantage of, they couldn't even connect that I was in New Mexico. Half of them thought that I was working in Mexico, and the other half thought I was working for the Forest Service. But the Park Service was just not something that they were familiar with. Even though within a few miles, or right adjacent to New Orleans, in Chalmette, Louisiana, was the Chalmette National Battlefield, or National Monument, where the War of 1812 was fought. We were never really well-informed or educated about that site. And the one time I ever went there, I never saw a flat hat.

Kevin Cheri:

So anyway, that's just a quick rundown of my introduction to the National Park Service. I finished four consecutive summers, because I started so early. Normally they recruited sophomores or juniors into the program. I was just in between my freshman and sophomore year. So, I put in four summers consecutively, from '74 to '78, to '77, and I had more than the required weeks work time accomplished in order to be eligible to be picked up in a job, should one be offered. So, I'll take a break there. I've been talking a lot. But that was my intro to the National Park Service.

Lu Ann Jones:

Well, you're a great storyteller, great talker. Did you spend all of those summers at Carlsbad? Or did you go to other sites?

13:37

Kevin Cheri:

No. I spent them all at Carlsbad. I was so intrigued. You know, one of the things, like I said, I was very introverted, but I was all of a sudden around these other cultures. You know, New Orleans is a melting pot, but yet there are very distinct neighborhoods. I mean, you know, I knew that there were people of maybe Hispanic background in New Orleans, but I never came in contact with them. The only Spanish speaking people I was exposed to as a child were refugees from Cuba who were usually at the Catholic orphanages, and a couple of those students attended our elementary school. So, there were a couple of young Cuban children who were separated from their parents, or at least one parent back then, when Castro would not allow professionals to leave Cuba. He'd let the wife and child leave. But a lot of doctors and other professionals, he would not let them just leave and devastate his country by losing all his professionals. So, a lot of them ended up in orphanages. So, a few of them went to my elementary school, and I also had one in my high school that I attended. But you know, them and then other people of other backgrounds, whether it was Asian backgrounds or whatever. They might have lived in their corner of the city, but you just didn't run into them that much. And so, you might see someone at a distance or whatever, but you just didn't have great experience and exposure to them. So, all of a sudden now I'm in Carlsbad, and everything was so unique to me. I was raised

Catholic. I was surrounded by many Catholics. And now I was exposed to an area where there weren't as many Catholics. I was being exposed to people of different backgrounds or religions. The different culture, the Hispanics that were there, the Mexican Americans. And that was at a time when even Mexican Americans were like the African American community. They didn't know if they wanted to be called Chicanos, Mexican Americans, or what. They were struggling with their own identity and trying to, I think, improve their own status among their own people. And it was just really interesting being around it. Even the food.

Kevin Cheri: I'll tell you a quick, funny story. Because New Orleans, we have such wonderful food. And some of it is interesting looking, to say the least, to others who are not familiar with it. Well, I get up there and I go to eat at the lunch counter. I'm sitting down. And they bring me my food. I may have ordered tacos or a burrito or something. And I never ate much, hardly any Spanish food. I'm looking at this brown glob on my plate. And I said, "What is this?" And they said, "Well, that's refried beans."

Kevin Cheri: I said, "Refried beans?" I said, "What's wrong, they couldn't get it right the first time? They had to re-ry them?" And I was serious. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) But that was my perspective of this. Where I was at, red beans and rice was a delicacy. Here I'm looking at this concoction on a plate that just threw me off. And the rice was colored, and all this other stuff. And it was like, wow.

Kevin Cheri: So you know, as I went on and continued to, I was now more curious to try some other things. Like I said, it was bringing me out of my shell, because I wanted to learn more about what these people did, why they did it, what they ate, why they ate it. It all became both a learning experience of learning the agency, learning about the site, learning about caves and desert environments, and then learning about people.

Kevin Cheri: And that has been pretty much the story of my career. I mean, from there, I just continued that curiosity to just—you know, everywhere I went, it became, and as I tell you more about my life in the Park Service, you'll see it was just one big learning experience after another.

18:10

Lu Ann Jones: Isis had one question, a little follow-up on some of your earlier comments.

Isis Plaza: Yeah, I was just wondering, did your parents influence you to go to a HBCU? Or did they have any influence in your life?

Kevin Cheri: Oh, well, my father's work ethic, certainly. And my mother's. He drove into us respect others, work hard, take care of yourself. That was the influence that he had on me. He constantly talked about getting out there and being responsible and being respectful. Representing yourself well. He didn't know anything about the

Park Service, so he certainly didn't influence me there. But he was very pro, if you can get a government job, he knew that that would be good. So, when he heard that well, this was a government agency, government job, he certainly did encourage me to, or certainly didn't discourage me from pursuing that.

Kevin Cheri: My mom, she was a very giving, loving person. And that strength of her support allowed me, this introverted young man, to leave. I think that normally I might not have just made this decision. But I felt a tremendous pressure as the sixth of seven children to help my father out. He was working three jobs at the same time, in order to put seven kids through school. You know, it was the reason that I went to the high school I went to, because back then, the first child that went to school paid full tuition. The second child paid two-thirds tuition. Third child paid a third. So literally, I was going almost for free to attend that school. I had been accepted at another school, but I had made the decision to go there to help him.

Kevin Cheri: And I'd do the same with college. I wanted to play football. But I didn't get recruited with a scholarship, and I would have had to try being a walk-on. The university I was looking at, it would have cost a lot more money for me to attend. So, I just couldn't do that, put that pressure on my dad. And I didn't have the money. So, I chose to go to a school within the city of New Orleans, where I could still live at home and commute back and forth in order to save him money. So those were things that influenced those decisions is trying to recognize the fact that you know, we weren't wealthy, and my parents were working so hard for me that I just felt a need to make those kind of decisions to help them out. In the end, it all paid off, because I wouldn't be where I'm at now had I not done that. But again, as far as them influencing me, the support for, first of all, letting me go, and to trust me to be able to go, that told me something. In all honesty, I didn't know that my dad had enough confidence in me to leave home and be on my own. But he did that. That truly started that breaking out of the shell. That confidence that he showed by just approving of me to go ahead and take this job on said a lot.

Kevin Cheri: As I go through my story, I'm going to tell you about some real significant things that occurred to me that anybody else would not have necessarily done or continued to do. But mine was impacted by the support that I got from my parents and the rest of my family.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, thank you. That was a great question, Isis, and important point for us to know. So, when you had finished with the coop program, what was the next step?

22:36

Kevin Cheri: Well, the next step, then, was basically, as I knew it, I had to keep an eye open for jobs. But it was also the hope that with my name on this list of successful coop graduates, that someone in the agency would offer me a job. The first offer I did get was at Carlsbad. They offered me a permanent job. But because of some of the things I had learned from folks in the agency, some other employees, in

learning how the Park Service worked, I thought that, you know, I had done four summers at Carlsbad. And I knew that if I wanted to really experience Park Service and get out and move around and be taken seriously as a park ranger, that going there might label me as just an urban type, Carlsbad type of person. Like I wouldn't be considered as strongly for maybe some other bigger parks, natural areas, etcetera. I didn't want to be stereotyped into one, you know, that's the only kind of place he works. Because I didn't get the chance to go and do coop assignments at different parks.

Kevin Cheri: So, I was talking to the person who offered me the job (Unit Manager Jack Linahan) at the time. And I told him, I said, "Well, I'm struggling."

Kevin Cheri: He said, "Well, I understand." He actually thought that it wasn't a bad idea to maybe give it a chance and see if something else would open up.

Kevin Cheri: So, then I got offers at Gateway and Staten Island. And I really didn't want to go that far north. But also, again, I knew that they saw me as an urban site candidate. One thing about the Park Service, there's stereotyping that occurs. A lot of the rangers that I got to meet, these people came up being around natural areas, vacationing. They know how to ski, they know how to fish, they know how to do all these things. They're experienced with outdoors. When urban parks were being established, it's like they almost looked down on the urban areas, and they almost felt, I get a sense or an attitude that they didn't think people from the city could make it anywhere but in the city. I didn't want to be labeled going from New Orleans right to New York, because I thought that then when I wanted to try to move out of those sites, I might have a harder time competing against other rangers. That I needed to get another experience outside of a city.

Kevin Cheri: So again, I declined those. I lucked out, because then Lorraine Mintzmyer, she was one of the first female superintendents that I know of in the Park Service, was down here in Buffalo National River. And she was looking to bring in some diversity. Of course, this area definitely did not have much minority representation. And she, I guess, I never knew exactly how she found my name, other than I was on the list. But I get a call at home. She spoke directly to me, offering me a job here at Buffalo National River in the lower district, the Buffalo Point District, as a park ranger intake trainee. I would be in the law enforcement division. At Carlsbad, I was a park interpreter.

Kevin Cheri: So, to my good fortune, one of the seasonals I worked with at Carlsbad was a teacher who worked summers for national parks. And he (Tom Cotton) worked at Carlsbad. I respected this gentleman a lot. He was a few years older than me. He said to me one day, he said, "You know, if I ever had an occupation other than teaching, I would want to work for the Park Service. And I would love to go to this, there's a new park up in Arkansas called Buffalo National River. And I think that would be a neat place to work." I remembered that.

Kevin Cheri: Then I also, the next summer, met a young lady, Margaret Littlejohn was her name. She was a park ranger intake trainee. And she educated me about the intake trainee program. She said, "If you're ever offered an intake position, take it. It's an accelerated program to bring you up into the professional series."

Kevin Cheri: So, I remembered those two things. Well, here all of a sudden, I'm getting a call to take an intake trainee position at Buffalo National River. Well, I said yes, before she can almost finish offering me the job. Then she's trying to slow me down. She said, "Wait, wait, I've got to tell you some things." She went on a litany of trying to explain everything that was not so great about being here in a nice way. But still to let me know that, for example, I would be the only black person in a 50-mile radius of where I would be living. I kind of heard it, but it just went in one ear and out the other. I said, "I want it, I want it." You know? Then she started, said, "What religion are you?" I said, "Well, I'm Catholic."

Kevin Cheri: "Well, there's no—" Then she went on. The nearest Catholic church is 50 miles away. Well, I want it, I want it. So, she just kept on and on trying to explain, so she knew I was aware. I realized later that of course the need to do that was because all the other previous attempts to bring in minorities failed because if they did think they would come here, then they'd change their mind once they researched it or they showed up and they said, "No, this is not for me."

Kevin Cheri: So, in the end, I did take the job. I started a couple of months later because they had another intake trainee in the park that I was replacing that hadn't left for his new assignment yet, and I was going to start as soon as he left. So, I was able to work that summer in New Orleans for the New Orleans Recreation Department while I waited to start my job with the Park Service.

Kevin Cheri: And so, I came to Buffalo River in this new position. Again, it was just amazing. But the reception was one I wasn't quite ready for. Of course, the park family was great. You know, just what I expected. But as I was being introduced around the various communities, it would be rare someone would offer a handout to shake my hand. Sometimes when they'd say, "Well, I want to introduce our new park ranger, Kevin Cheri," I might get a grunt. Or the first words out of their mouth might be, "Well, how long are you going to be here?" And stuff like that. So, it wasn't the most welcoming—

30:00

[END OF TRACK 1]

[START OF TRACK 2]

Kevin Cheri: --introductions that I received. But again, here's where the influence of my parents helped. I think that I was raised right to just respect others and not, you know, just don't cause trouble. Just be yourself and do your thing. I was too naïve

to know how much danger I was in, and too excited about the new job, that I just said Well, I'm just going to do my thing and stay out of people's way.

Kevin Cheri: But I also began to learn that yeah, most of these people I was in contact with had absolutely no exposure to a black person before. I began to realize you know; I have a unique opportunity here. Because I'm representing black America to them. So, I better put my best foot forward. So, I put a little pressure on myself to say well here's my opportunity to change the way these folks will see black people in the future, and how they may treat them in the future, if they just get a chance to get to know me. So, I think it was partly the influences of the Park Service. All we did was consistently educate people about these great places, and to be good stewards, and that knowledge was valuable if you were going to protect something. I thought, well, maybe if they get some inkling of what black people are like, maybe they wouldn't be so hostile or negative toward them. Because they truly were, they just didn't have a clue.

Kevin Cheri: I also again was extremely curious about these hillbillies. I said God, you know, what are they like? It was like a different culture. I'm dropped right in the middle of it, and this might be interesting to learn what they're like. And so, I was intrigued by that, and I continued here.

Kevin Cheri: But at one point about a year later, I did run into some old law enforcement reports, called case incident reports. I was looking through them and I saw case incident reports written on me. It was about the new black ranger who was coming into the park, and the statements that the rangers documented, they were threats against me. They actually were death threats against this new ranger. Where they (park staff) were feeling out the community and letting them know that they had hired a black ranger. And the responses were, you know, "Well, he won't last long," or "We're going to kill him," or stuff like that. And that was eye-opening. And I didn't realize that they—Miss Mintzmyer never said there were death threats against me.

Kevin Cheri: When I talked to some of the other employees, I remember the chief of maintenance, we were sitting down together, talking, and he said, "Yeah, I can remember, every Wednesday we'd have squad meeting. The main thing on the discussion topic was how we were going to keep you alive." He was saying it like a joke, and funny, and then I'm thinking wow, no one told me that. But again, by then, like I said, I'd been here for a while, and I'd already started to establish a relationship with the people. But it was kind of eye-opening to think that it was that bad. And had I known it then, I may not have stayed. My reaction may have been as well, they don't want me, I'm out of here.

4:00

Lu Ann Jones: Do I remember from our conversation in December that somebody actually slashed your tires?

Kevin Cheri: Yes. The worst thing that ever did happen to me was later in my time here at Buffalo, two of my tires were slashed. However, I strongly suspected that it was a local coworker. The coworker who, back then, initially most of the Park Service employees were non-locals, you know. We brought in people to set up parks and to be rangers and to be various things. so, you might have an administrative person or two who was a local, and you might have a few maintenance people who were locals. But all the other series usually consisted of people from outside the community. But by then, I mean, we were seven years in our creation. And my district ranger, my boss, had filled a vacant position with a local person he hired from a sheriff's office to be one of our park rangers. I cannot prove it, but all the coincidences, the things that were, conditions that were in place, suggest strongly that this was not just any person in the community. The person who did this had to know that I was out of the park, but my car was still in the park at my residence. They would have had to know that there was no one on duty that night because that same individual went home sick, or called in sick, and that there was just no one else around. Everyone in the community, my coworkers, we all went out to see a movie that night. So, it was just too many conditions that were just too perfect for someone to come in and pick that day of all days to do it that I felt that this individual, who, by the way, I also had some authority over, I was the acting district ranger at the time. I had to approach him about being late for work, and so he was angry with me. So, I had a disgruntled employee, or coworker, who knew that I was out of the park. The car was there. Everyone in the park was out. And then he just conveniently called his immediate supervisor and told him he was going home sick so that then he would not be there to protect the park as the only park ranger. So, there was nobody in the park. And no local could have known all those conditions. So that's why I strongly suspected he did it. But that's the only negative thing that really happened to me in that time there.

Lu Ann Jones: Was that your personal car, or the park car?

7:21

Kevin Cheri: No, this was my personal vehicle. Like I said, typically when I left the park, I was in my personal vehicle. And this time I jumped in a car with my other coworkers, as we all decided to go see a movie that night.

Lu Ann Jones: Can I ask, do you think that some of that racial hostility or suspicion of you stemmed from the fact that you were law enforcement, you carried a gun, you had that kind of law enforcement authority? Or do you think that didn't make any, if you had been an interpretive ranger, for example, the same kind of treatment?

Kevin Cheri: No. This park was established like several where many of the locals weren't happy with the way it was established.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

Kevin Cheri: Some people, their families or friends lost property to the government. So, there was definitely a strong hate against the Park Service. However, mine was specifically amplified by the fact that I was black. There was no doubt there that there were those who – again, they weren't hostile hostile. It's like, to give you an idea. When my dad finally came to visit me, my parents did, I went to the grocery store with them. We're walking through a store here in Harrison and my dad, who's always a pillar of strength to me, I can see the tremendous worry in his face. So, I asked him, I said, "Dad, what's wrong?"

Kevin Cheri: He says, "Everybody's looking at me." He said, "I don't know how you can do it. They're all just staring at us." I'd never seen any weakness in my dad before, until that point. I mean, he was truly nervous, if not scared. Because yeah. Everywhere we went, everybody – not just the workers of the store, every customer, you know, they'd turn, and they'd look. That's how rare it was to have a black person in this community. And so, he said, "Well, how do you deal with this, son?"

Kevin Cheri: I said, "Well, Dad, I just look back at them. But when I do, I smile. And one of two things are going in their head. They either think I'm a nice person, or they think I'm crazy. Either way, they leave me alone." That's what I told him. And I was serious. I mean, people don't attack a person who's smiling at them, usually. And so, I said, but if I looked at them with – and I really should have told him I learned it from him. I didn't look at them to start trouble. So, I knew when I looked, I needed to smile so they wouldn't think I was challenging them, intimidating them in any way to harm me. But that hey, I'm here, you know. Deal with it. But that's how it was. And like I said, while I never told him that, it's basically through his example and my mom's that I realize that I just have to be myself and be a good person, and I should be able to get through all this. I wasn't going to let them, at that point I had enough time in the Park Service to know man, there's so much in this world that my family and friends have been prevented from getting any experience and exposure to. I wasn't going to let them rob me of that. I said no. I have a right to be here.

Kevin Cheri: Like I said, I had success. People were beginning to invite me to their homes, to their churches. Because they were curious. They're being nice, but also, they were curious. They wanted to learn about me. They had all these different stereotypes about black people. They'd offer me watermelon and I'd tell them look; I hate watermelon. I don't like watermelon. That was like dropping a brick on them. It was like, what do you mean? You're black. I'm sorry, but we're not all like that. So, they had all those stereotypes. And here all of a sudden, they were beginning to see me as an individual and as a person. So, I was being accepted. So, of my time here really turned out to be quite productive and good. I had two and a half years. The program required you to be in it for two years, and then you were moved. It took them a little while to find me another spot. So, I was here two and a half years, which I was so grateful for, because I didn't even want to leave. But you know, it was part of the program. So, from 1978 to the end of 1980, I was

down there as a park ranger. I went from a GS-5 to—well, I was a GS-7 when I left, but I was placed into a GS-9 position when I moved, because that was the intent of the program, to bring you into the journeyman level.

Kevin Cheri: So, to my good fortune, Lorraine Mintzmyer offered me the job. But before I started here, she was promoted to the deputy regional director of the Southwest Region. A year later or so, she became the director of the Southwest Region. By the time I was leaving Buffalo, she had then been moved to Rocky Mountain Region as that regional director.

Kevin Cheri: Well, because, I guess, her curiosity and concern over me, having brought me here, she kept tabs on me. When she learned that I hadn't been placed yet, she called the regional director of the Southwest Region, Bob Kerr at the time, and asked a favor of him, and asked would he mind if she stole me from this region. I was what at the time called a regional intake. They had national or Washington intakes who could be placed anywhere in the country through their program. And then each region, or most regions, had their own intake programs. I was a Southwest Region intake trainee. So, the idea was I'd graduate out of that program and be placed in a Southwest Park.

Kevin Cheri: Well, she got permission to offer me a job in the Rocky Mountain Region. So, with that good fortune, she brought me to Canyonlands National Park in Southeast Utah. Again, this is my third park. Never been there. I've never been to any of these parks so far. It's the third job I'm taking. I have no clue where I'm going, other than I remember seeing some either car or Marlboro commercials of these buttes in Utah, and I thought that would be a neat place to visit. I thought oh, well, I'm getting a chance to go work up there. So, I took the job. Again, sight unseen, not knowing much about what I was getting into. But I also would have done anything for Lorraine Mintzmyer. She gave me my big break. So, she wanted me? So, I said, well I'm going to go. So, I took the job.

Kevin Cheri: So, my next move was Canyonlands National Park, Island in the Sky District. It was, oh, love at first sight. That red rock country, the beautiful scenery, the semi-desert environment on the Island mesa, where I lived, down to the Green and Colorado Rivers and all those canyons, surrounded by mountain ranges. It was heaven to me. I was just, again, quite happy and enthused by having taken the job. But I lived in a little bitty two-bedroom trailer that was mouse-infested. You know, so it was quite a change there. There were only three of us. It was a time when the park was still not well known. There were three of us who lived in the Island District, two rangers and a maintenance employee. Then we hired a couple of seasonals and also hired SCA [Student Conservation Association] resource assistants as well to assist us dealing with the public when visitation increased.

Lu Ann Jones: Could I ask you, what kinds of law enforcement challenges were in a place like Canyonlands? What were your duties like there, and how were your duties kind of accruing as you moved up the ladder?

16:40

Kevin Cheri:

Well, now I'm a district ranger. I'm over, you know, the entire law enforcement resource management program. But also, initially I started out as a sub district ranger. I had a supervisor in Moab, Utah, who was there for about a year. But then he left, and they didn't fill the position, and they converted all the sub-district rangers underneath him to district rangers, and we ran our own operations. We were doing it anyway. He was more of a figurehead down there in Moab. But now I also supervised directly my maintenance employee as well. So, I was running that whole district. The park was over 330,000 acres. My district was at least a third of that. So, we were involved in dealing with the public, the campers, the visitors, search and rescue, fire, we fought fires. We built fence line to keep cattle out of the park that were grazing on adjacent BLM land. We documented archeological sites and tracked sightings of, usually the rarer animals. We helped with resource management projects, like relocating bighorn sheep. Capturing some of our herd and helping them be transported to other parts of the parks or other areas of Utah. So, it was a very large range of skill. Even some structural fire training, too, because we were it for our site. So, we did a little of it all. But then we also did interpretation. I mean, it was part of the job because there were no other park interpreters there at the time. So, we would occasionally do a little program or if requested, give a little tour somewhere, something like that. But it was a lot of patrolling because it was a big district. We had a backcountry area. We would drive these roads way down into the canyons and camp out. And one loop trail that went around this island mesa was in total length a hundred miles. So, you didn't want to do that in a day. So, you had to do overnight camping as you patrolled the backcountry.

Kevin Cheri:

So that was the change as I was getting more varied law enforcement experiences as well. I was dealing with tour guides coming in, bringing people in to tour the canyons in their vans and four-wheel-drive vehicles. I saw the evolution of the mountain bike use in that park and stuff like that. I was there for eight years. It was a tremendous experience because in the process, my job changed a couple of times. We went through some organizational shifts. I was starting to get greater responsibility. I started to divide out the responsibilities of interpretation from the other ranger duties that we did. And actually, hiring specific seasonals to do interpretation. Eventually as I ended up with a second park ranger on my staff, I shifted his responsibilities to be more of a lead, to be the leader of those interpretive seasonals, and my other permanent employee was the leader of the law enforcement seasonals I had. I also increased my maintenance staff to get a couple of extra individuals as a result of the reorganization. And my staff went from a staff of three to, I think the most I had working there at one time was 17. So even when I filled out my application or resume for future jobs, I divided my eight years at Canyonlands as three separate jobs to emphasize the transitions I went through and the responsibilities, and how I functioned differently and with greater responsibility during that time.

Kevin Cheri: I was also quite involved in the construction of the paved road up there and other improvements. Which a lot of times people at my level, like I said, I was just a GS-9 district ranger, a lot of times managers necessarily didn't involve you in a lot of planning sessions and all. But my superintendent and unit manager at the time did allow me to be a part of a lot of the planning sessions and the establishment of the road up there, and visitor contact station, etcetera. I supervised the installation of exhibits and tracked and monitored some of the contractors that were doing work. So, it gave me a lot of experience beyond just ranger skills. I started to get a lot of management type of experience just by the nature of what was happening in the park.

Lu Ann Jones: We know Lorraine Mintzmyer is one of your first real important mentors. At what point did you, or maybe in collaboration with other people, begin to think about what career path would be in the Park Service? Or did you begin to think in those terms?

22:48

Kevin Cheri: Definitely, once I became an intake trainee here in Buffalo I thought, yeah, I think I like the law enforcement side of things, because I enjoy being able to help people, but also educate folks in how to protect the park. It wasn't just about catching people doing things wrong. It was about making sure they understood how and why they needed to do things the right way. I felt more comfortable doing that than interpretation because I was still somewhat introverted. I didn't have that confidence that I was that great a speaker. And so, I leaned more to the law enforcement as the career track that was meant for me, rather than interpretation. And like I said, I was always into physical fitness. And the requirements of the ranger to be in shape, to be able to do search and rescue, EMS, firefighting and all that stuff appealed as well, the law enforcement side of it. So, you know, the side of just being able to talk to people that I liked, the connection with people, was still there in law enforcement. You still got the opportunity to educate folks and have that experience of communicating with the public, but it wasn't the formal stuff where I didn't have as good of a background or a sense of you know, strength in skill level to do that. That continued, like I said, in Canyonlands. Again, I just loved the patrolling and being out there, and being able to connect with the people that were enjoying the park.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. So, what propelled you on to the next park?

Kevin Cheri: Before I say that, I've got one important part about Canyonlands. Lorraine did it again. I was again not only the only black person working at the park, but I was also the only black ranger in the entire Rocky Mountain Region.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, my gosh. Yeah, you told me that. Yes.

Kevin Cheri: Yeah. And a few years later Bill Gwaltney was hired at, shoot, Bent's Old Fort that the two of us became then the only two. And then he left, and then he came back. So, there were periods where there were two of us. But then there were a lot of times when we're sort of back to being the only.

Kevin Cheri: But what finally happened, like I said, I realize in Park Service folks expect you to move around. And you just don't normally just stay in one spot. So, I started to wonder about, I knew Lorraine was interested in me moving on. I started to worry about what am I suited for? Because now my peers were developing their skills in law enforcement. They were developing their ranger skills; they were either becoming EMTs or fire crew bosses or but taking some ranger skills and developing higher experience levels. But because of what was happening at Canyonlands, I didn't have the opportunity to pursue higher skill levels in some of those areas. I was worried about how well I'd compete for a chief ranger's position at a small park, or a district ranger position at a larger park, which would be maybe the next logical step.

Kevin Cheri: Well, I met the superintendent at Arches at the time, Paul Guraedy, became a good friend of mine. He was born in Louisiana, and we just connected when we met. He was telling me, he says, "Kevin, what you're doing at the Island in the Sky is very similar to what I do as superintendent at Arches." He was a GS-12 back then. This was all before Ranger Futures had elevated all these grade levels. And here I'm a 9. He said, "You know, you're doing the work of a small park superintendent. You've developed that road, the visitors' center, all that stuff." He says, "You really need to consider applying for a management assistant type position or a small park superintendency." And I thought, you've got to be crazy. Again, I lacked self-confidence. But he said, "Yeah, go ahead. I think you should. And by the way, there's a park called Fort Davis National Historic Site, a park I would have loved to go work at. But now I'm a 12. It's only an 11. So as much as it appeals to me, I'm not going to go backwards." But he said, "It's open." He says, "You ought to throw your name in on that one." I said, "You've got to be kidding."

Kevin Cheri: He said, "Well, at least you'll see how well you compete." And I said, "Well, that's good logic." And I said, well, okay. So, I filled out my application and put it in for Fort Davis National Historic Site superintendency. Again, back then, regional directors usually did not hire someone into a GS-11 superintendency, unless they were already a GS-11 supervisor somewhere--district ranger, and district interpreter, or chief interpreter. Typically, you lateralled over into your first superintendency. You rarely got promoted into a superintendency. Or at least, from my knowledge of what was going on in the agency. But I threw my name in. And sure enough, John Cook, the Southwest Regional Director at the time, offered me the job. The funny thing about the story is we had the old radio phones back then. These are like party lines. Your student there might not be familiar with those.

Lu Ann Jones: (laughs) We are.

Kevin Cheri: Okay. But you know, you actually literally had to listen to someone's conversation to wait for them to get off so you could make your call. I mean, if it was important, to beat the next person before they dialed a number. But they were, you know, sometimes very scratchy and hard to hear. But I get this call. He introduced himself. Says, "This is John Cook. I understand you want to come work for me. And I want to offer you the Fort Davis job." Well, the day he did it happened to be Halloween of that year. And while it wasn't April first, I still thought this was a joke. I thought somebody was playing a joke on me. So, I wasn't sure how to respond. And I literally stuttered and paused. There were these long pauses between my response as I went on in this conversation.

30:00

[END OF TRACK 2]

[START OF TRACK 3]

Kevin Cheri: Afterwards I thought, I'm surprised he kept the offer on the table, because I had to come across pretty badly. But that's how funny it was that I received this call from him on that day on that particular system, and I didn't believe it was him. So here I'm getting an offer from Fort Davis National Historic Site, so I'm shocked to even be getting the offer in the way I'm getting it. And I accepted it. None of that would have happened if not for Paul Guraedy's encouragement. Again, I respected him a lot. He was a really talented, smart, caring superintendent. I always went to him to get his advice. He was good to listen to. He taught me a lot about how the system worked. Again, I'm taking another park that I've not seen, or know anything, really about, other than he thought it was a good choice. I certainly owe John Cook for taking a big chance on me to take on this, as my first superintendency. That was in 19, let's see, I think it was '88. In December of '88 when I moved down to take that job.

Lu Ann Jones: You're going to have to tell me where that is.

1:38

Kevin Cheri: Okay. Fort Davis National Historic Site is in west Texas. It's a frontier military outpost. With the purpose of protecting the settlers coming across from the Apaches, the warring Apaches, basically is what they did. Fort Davis is tucked right there in the Davis Mountains of west Texas. A lot of people don't realize that Texas has mountains. But right in that little corner of Texas you have this beautiful, beautiful area. So that's the Davis Mountains.

Kevin Cheri: The interesting thing, on the way down I stopped at the regional office in Santa Fe on my way to Texas to introduce myself to Mr. Cook and the folks there. He

pulled me in the office, and he said, “Now, I want to tell you something. There’s a congressman for your area has gotten a hundred thousand dollars put aside to do a feasibility study on the Davis Mountains. There’s a scenic road through the mountains, and they’re thinking about the possibility of establishing it as a scenic byway in the National Park Service. Or at least do to the feasibility to see if it’s worth protecting.” But he said, “But I don’t want you to say anything about it. Don’t bring it up. Just go down there. But just be aware that there’s that issue.”

Kevin Cheri: So I get down to Fort Davis and there on the front page of the newspaper is on one side, “Kevin Cheri, new superintendent, Fort Davis National Historic Site.” And then on the other side of the front page is, “Davis Mountain Study Coming.” (Lu Ann Jones laughs) And it was not received well. There were a couple of areas associated with the Park Service that were already being challenged by this new coalition on private rights. Some of the folks down there just got the wrong impression about what this might entail. They thought that their lands were going to be taken when really it wasn’t. They just didn’t take the time to even want to hear what the value and benefits of what this could have provided. So, it was doomed from the start. But it became a real hot topic and issue down there. And just what he didn’t want. It was blowing up. So, I knew without him saying that Mr. Cook was now worried at what he had done to put this wet behind the ears young man down there to deal with this extremely hostile group of Texans.

Lu Ann Jones: So how did you deal with those Texans?

4:36

Kevin Cheri: Well, you know, again, it was with respect. I respected their opinion. I said, “Well, that’s why it’s a study. We need to hear from you. So, nothing’s definite. So, here’s your time to speak out.” We had a meeting in a church hall that was probably suited for maybe 200 people, but we had over 300 people. They were literally standing on the outsides of the building with the windows open looking in as we held this meeting. Quite contentious. So much so that by the time that this first public meeting was finished, the congressman just told his aide to just announce to everyone, “I’m pulling the money. We’re not going to do it.” But like I said, until that public meeting, in that whole period of trying to plan this thing out and work with the people out of Denver, to get it all set up, it was quite contentious. There were some of the folks there that were convinced that the Park Service was going to literally level the town of Fort Davis in order to establish this park. People’s exaggerations went wild. And there were those who fed that paranoia to fight this, they made them believe it was going to be just so bad that there’s no way they would want it. So even people who would have otherwise supported it and trusted me were not about to. So, it was dead on arrival.

Kevin Cheri: But what Mr. Cook was worried about, he could care less that the study--he was more worried about how it would impact my relationship with the community. But the community, it was a good community. They were quite proud of having

saved their fort. The fort had two histories, pre-Civil War, and post-Civil War. And in the post-Civil War period, there were Buffalo Soldiers there. And coincidentally, the only black employee who had ever worked at the park prior to me was Bill Gwaltney, as a park interpreter. So, they'd gotten to know Bill, and Bill did an outstanding job as an interpreter there. So here I was, the second only black employee, but first black superintendent. Another first. Now it was a matter of seeing--it's one thing for them to accept a black man as a worker. It's another thing to see if they would accept me as the boss. And I was quite conscious of that. Now I've had a few years in. So again, I know I'm breaking ground again. I'm doing the unexpected. But I'm still just as intrigued by another culture. Again, now I'm in a very strong Mexican American community. I'm dealing with these sort of elite type ranchers, the big power money of west Texas. They had long histories of owning their land and tradition and power over their Hispanic neighbors as well. It was quite an interesting experience to deal with them.

Kevin Cheri: But a little funny story about what happened. I knew that okay, as superintendent I needed to connect to the community and get them to know me if I was going to establish any types of support and partnerships, whatever. So, I was in church, a Catholic church there. And you know, like I said, I'm figuring out ways I could get to know some of the community. Well, most of my life I've been in Catholic choirs in the schools I attended, and churches. The priest announced that they were going to start a choir in the church, and anybody interested should stay after the service and they'll pick a day to have practice.

Kevin Cheri: So, the first practice, the priest was there with his pianist, but he had no director. And so, we were there, and we had a pretty good turnout. I was kind of surprised that this little town had at least over a dozen people to show up for the first practice. I thought, that's not bad for a little town like this. But they didn't know what to do next. So, I raised my hand, I suggested we warm up. And "Oh, would you like to be the director?" Well, no, I just threw that out. "Well, how do we do that?" So, in the end, the pressure was put on me by all the people there to be the director. I don't even read music. I am basically singing by ear. But I could not believe this, that before the night was out, I was now the director of the church choir. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) This had such an impact on the community.

Kevin Cheri: Because in the end I used my family. My brother was a priest. My other brother, who started out to become a priest, didn't. But he was a very talented choir director. And when I told them about what had happened, my oldest brother, the priest, said, and I told him, I said, "I'm so lost. What do I do?" And he says, "Well, why don't you have our other brother come down—" (Loud beeps)

Lu Ann Jones: Uh oh. I think we got cut off.

10:57

[END OF TRACK 3]

[START OF TRACK 4]

Lu Ann Jones: So, we're recording again then. I didn't know quite what was going to happen.

Kevin Cheri: I don't know where it broke off.

Lu Ann Jones: You were talking about being the choir director and getting some help from your brother.

Kevin Cheri: Right. My brother came and did a workshop. It went so well that it became the talk of the town. It was funny because my choir was mostly Mexican Americans, and they're very shy. It was so interesting to get to know this community. The people were hardworking. But they lacked any interest in leadership roles. It was like they were conditioned to work for the rich white ranchers and businesspeople of the community. They lacked a lot of self-esteem to take on leadership type roles. So, when the community saw me bringing out in these very shy people these wonderful performances and that [unclear] like I said, the support I got from my brother, and just my joy for singing, that all of a sudden, they were extremely impressed with this. So, the next year, I literally got unsolicited donations from white non-Catholic members of the community to fund bringing my brother back for a second workshop.

Kevin Cheri: But where this ties into my job is that, like I said, I became more well known for being the director of the choir as I was for or being respected as director of the choir as I was being respected for being the superintendent of the park. So, with that and other organizations I was a part of, I was extremely well known in the town. Then my transition or, I should say, my getting over that initial disturbing event of the feasibility study was much easier. When my regional director came down to visit me soon after the feasibility study, I'd been there maybe about six months or so, I think he was extremely, I think, surprised at how well I was doing. Because he really thought that the failed feasibility study damaged my ability to maybe develop some trust and working relationships in the future with the community, because they associated me with the feasibility study. Or he was afraid they would. Because we came kind of at the same time. And yet even though there was some who still were very suspicious of government after that, and were watching everything we did, it never became personal. I felt like they always were willing to talk to me. I ended up having a very good three and a half years at Fort Davis as a superintendent there.

Kevin Cheri: One of the things that they really liked, again, being a minority, being very conscious of the fact that the agency lacked diversity, I realize now I'm a superintendent, and all these criticisms I may have of others who lacked success in bringing in diversity, that I had no excuse. I was in a position of power. I needed to lead by example. I needed to get some diversity here. Especially

because my park told the story of the Buffalo Soldiers, the post-Civil War site was where the Buffalo Soldiers were sent to serve.

Kevin Cheri:

So, I immediately started working on that. I successfully was able to recruit two young men out at the University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff. I coincidentally connected with someone as a result of my time here at Buffalo who informed me of a young student. And I had the money flow for one. But she said, "But I have a no black community, where you would be alone. I said, "You know, even though I'm here as a superintendent, I realize the significance, importance of success that I could have if I can bring two people together to be each other's support." So, I called John Cook, the regional director, and I told him, I said, "You know, I have an opportunity to bring a young black student here. But I don't have money for two. But there's one available. If I can get the money, my chances of success would be much greater. Because I know what it means to be the one and only." He said, go for it. He supported me. He said, "If in the end, you don't have enough money in your budget, we'll handle it." And so, I was able to bring in the two young black men to the park.

5:32

Kevin Cheri:

The other side of my efforts was to focus on the Hispanic community. Many people don't realize, but a lot of our military outposts back then were not owned by the government. Government didn't always buy land. They would lease it and build a fort on it. (Weird noise) Well, Fort Davis was one of those properties. The property was being leased, and they built a fort on it. And a lot of that fort was built by many of the ancestors of these folks that were living there. So, I had a way of trying to connect the Mexican American community with the fort. Because they were proud of it but weren't really connected to it. Some of them had been to it. But they didn't volunteer at the park. They didn't participate in a lot of things. So, my other attempt was to try to get more of them involved in the park as volunteers and just coming to events. I was very successful in being able to do that. Because, like I said, I dove into all the things going on in the community. I participated in the chamber of commerce and travel association. I joined the Lion's Club of the town. I of course was the music director. I even started competitive volleyball playing in the evenings, two evenings a week, to give the young people something to do in town. The high school allowed me to use their gym. And we would set up nets and play volleyball. You know, the idea is to play competitive games and improve your skills. So, I did that, too. But I was doing all these things in town. So, I was kind of connecting with every outlet that I could, in a sense. Business community, the youth, service community, everything. It allowed me to, like I said, draw people into the fort to do exactly what I wanted them to do--take more pride in their connection to the fort.

Kevin Cheri:

And so, it was a lot of fun. A lot of success. But unfortunately, there was also some tragedy. Two young men I had hired from the University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff, it was the Fourth of July. We had just marched through, done a parade in

town. Had the annual Fourth of July parade. We all marched in it. And they finished their workday. After work, they joined two of my seasonal employees, two young men that were at the local college in Alpine, Texas. And the four of them went up into the mountains to shoot off some pistols and all that. That's what people do in Texas. They don't just do fireworks. They shoot their rifles and guns. On the way home, I guess, I don't know if they'd been drinking, but the driver went off the road. The white student was driving. One of the black students was in the cab with him, and then the other two were in the back of the truck. They were thrown from the truck when it hit a tree. And the two in the cab were killed. The other black student broke his leg. So, the whole town, of course, it was a tragedy for all of us. But it was one of the tough things to have to do. And this was only the second time in my, well, it was the second time in my career that I had to make a call to a parent of an employee to tell them that they were killed. So, you know, there were many good times in the service, but this was one of those where you never forget. Because it was such a tragedy. And the town had accepted the two young men so well. It was just really beautiful to see how everything was working out. But you know, those things happen. But like I say, it was just a significant event in my life.

Kevin Cheri: I'll also take another back step. I'll tell you when I was in Canyonlands as well, I lost two employees to a lightning strike. Two SCAs (Student Conservation Association interns). They were out on a bike ride after work. And we got a call. And when we responded, we learned that our two coworkers had been struck by lightning and killed. And there's nothing worse than having to call a parent miles away to tell them that their child was dead. It's been a wonderful career, but it has not been one without some very tough experiences of being responsible for people and dealing with loss.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, it takes a special gift to be able to convey that message to parents, or to loved ones.

Kevin Cheri: Like I say, so it was a tough time. But like I said, overall, it was something that we were overall quite proud of, of the success we made. In the end, I moved just a little further south of Fort Davis and took the job of deputy superintendent at Big Bend National Park.

Lu Ann Jones: Mr. Cheri, I'm having kind of a dilemma here, so maybe you can help us resolve this. When we scheduled this interview, I didn't realize that Isis has a lunch associated with her internship that starts in just a couple of minutes. Actually, about five minutes. And you and I could continue this conversation. Or I think our conversation is really important, and Isis is enjoying it, and it's part of her learning experience. I'm wondering, would it be possible for us to pick this up like next Thursday morning? Is that a possibility? Or should we keep going now?

Kevin Cheri: Can I put you on hold just a second?

Lu Ann Jones: Absolutely.

12:48

[START OF TRACK 1]

Lu Ann Jones: And I'm going to say again that this is our second interview. Today is Thursday, July the fifth, and this is Lu Ann Jones. I'm in the Main Interior Building in Washington, DC. I'm joined here by—

Isis Plaza: Isis Plaza.

Lu Ann Jones: She is an intern with the HBCU intern program. And on the line is—

Kevin Cheri: Kevin Cheri.

Lu Ann Jones: Thank you. And you are at—

Kevin Cheri: Buffalo National River. I'm the retired superintendent at Buffalo National River.

Lu Ann Jones: Thank you. And do you give us permission to record this interview?

Kevin Cheri: Yes, I do.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay. So where were we last time? I know that you had already become a superintendent. You were moving along in your career at a fairly good clip. You were already a superintendent last time when we were talking.

Kevin Cheri: Right. I think I ended at the first superintendency, which was at Fort Davis National Historic Site.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes. Yes.

Kevin Cheri: That's where I served three and a half years there. I think I more or less explained some of the major events that occurred. The initial start there at the park, with the Davis Mountain resource study that was an issue then. And also, just covered some of the goals that I had in trying to develop diversity, more diversity there.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

1:28

Kevin Cheri: Community relationships that I established, and things that I'd done to more or less have a fairly successful, productive three and a half years there. So, we pretty much covered that. So, in 1992, I was approached by the new superintendent of

Big Bend National Park, who was a good friend of mine. He happened to have been my first supervisor here at Buffalo National River when I got my first permanent job with the National Park Service. His name was Robert Arnberger.

Lu Ann Jones:

I know him.

Kevin Cheri:

Yes. Remember retired eventually as Alaska Regional Director. Rob mentioned to me that he was establishing a deputy superintendent position at Big Bend, and he wanted me to throw my name in to compete for it. It just so happened I was engaged, I'd met my wife who had been raised in Fort Davis, and we were scheduled to be married in June. The position was going to be filled that summer. So, with her concurrence and willingness to travel and follow that type of a career, I did go ahead and throw my name in for the Big Bend position. At which point we learned of my selection just prior to our marriage on June thirteenth. A month later or so is when I moved down to Big Bend to take on that position. Or yeah, somewhere. It was fairly quick. It didn't take too long before I moved down, soon after I was married. And basically, served another three and a half years in west Texas, down in probably one of the more remote areas of the National Park Service as far as the mainland. No one accidentally shows up at Big Bend. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) That's something we used to say about our visitors. We never had accidental tourists. Because you have to travel so far from the nearest town to get down there. And the nearest neighbors to us are basically our Mexican neighbors. So, we're right on the border of the Rio Grande. And you know, it's a very big park, beautiful park.

Kevin Cheri:

It was a very interesting part of my development to then become a deputy superintendent, where I was now supervising a much bigger operation than at Fort Davis. But I had a boss who allowed me to do, as he described, a true deputy's job. And that is, you run the park. I have the political and international issues to deal with. And that's the way it should work in a big park. So, it really provided me a great opportunity to do what I love, the operational part of being in a park--managing that and working with that large operation. It was a great learning opportunity as well as like I said, career boost to be able to hold that position. It was a great park. We dealt with lots of significant issues with trying to maintain relationships internationally with Mexico, whose development was having an impact on air quality within the park. And then also dealing with changes in concession operations, horse concessions that was eventually relocated outside the park, and other things that were occurring in its growth. Improvements in housing, etcetera.

Lu Ann Jones:

Can I just ask you, what size staff were you dealing with at that point, in a park like Big Bend?

6:03

Kevin Cheri: We easily had about a hundred employees, not counting all the seasonals. So, we had from, well, I would say 80 to 100 permanents. It varied, of course, with budgets. Then it easily bumped well above that when you were picking up your seasonal crews that help support park operations during the busier season. So, you know, like I said, it could easily run from 90 to maybe as many as 100 and, oh, maybe even as much as 150 people, depending on the kind of crews you ended up having. It could be quite a big staff. And you know, it was my first dealings with a big concession operation. My other parks had concessioners, but they were smaller operations, or operations that were outside, like at Canyonlands where they were really commercial operations operating outside the park and just bringing in tour groups. This one ended up having initially two in the park, and then, like I said, the horse concession eventually moved out. It was a horse guiding concession. And they still operated, but they just located all their stock and business operations outside the park. Which was good for the park, actually. So again, it was a significant time in its growth and changes in operation and dealing still and always with significant issues. The park also went through many changes and again, I really focused on diversity, trying to get more people of various backgrounds into the park. And I think we were successful in doing so. You know the park had a longer history, but I don't think a black person had ever worked at Big Bend before, certainly not in management. None of the managerial positions. So, I believe I was the first African American to work down there.

Lu Ann Jones: What kind of community were you; you talk about being very remote. But in terms of where you were living, were you living in the park and in park housing there?

Kevin Cheri: Yes. Just about everyone lived in park housing. There were a couple of staff that had homes in a very small town on the border of the park called Terlingua. But the vast majority of the staff had to live there because the nearest town where there was a hospital, high school, and other major amenities, was a hundred miles away. Alpine, Texas. It wasn't until much later, just, it was either just before that, or I think it was just after I left, that they finally established a small high school in Terlingua. Yeah, a couple of years after I left. But they had an elementary school inside the park. San Vincente Independent School District. It ran from kindergarten to, I believe, eighth grade. Yes. And so, the park tended to recruit people who either had kids in elementary school or didn't have kids at all. But once people, their kids started to get to high school age, they had to get out of there. Or, on a rare occasion, the spouse would move to Alpine with the kids and the working spouse with the government, I should say, with Big Bend, would have to still stay and live in the park and just go visit his family on weekends. So that was a really tough thing. And it didn't happen that often. It did happen a few times, but not that often.

Kevin Cheri: So, you could see the kind of people, there was like a gap in ages. You had young, single couples, or younger couples with the young families. Or you had people toward the end of their career, or much, much more mature within the agency,

whose kids were grown and no longer in high school. Maybe in college or married. But that high school group just, you know, that was a strain.

Kevin Cheri:

So here I was with a young family. When I married my wife, she had already had a seven-year-old, which I adopted immediately. And then we started to raise kids. One funny story I'll tell you real quickly. When my daughter, when the school year just finished and my wife was pregnant with our son, our first together, and she went to labor that day or two after. School had just ended. So, we had already had it all arranged how if she went into labor, we'd get on the road to Alpine and the neighbor would take care of our daughter. I told my staff well, I'll carry a park radio with me so if things go bad on the way, we can start sending EMTs to meet us along the road. But otherwise, we'll try to make it into town. And sure enough, so she told me she was going into labor. We followed our plan, we headed into town. I was about 10 or so, maybe 15 miles from the city of Alpine and a state trooper pulled up behind me and started to pull me over, because I was exceeding the speed limit a bit. Not real bad, but just enough to draw his attention. I couldn't help having this big smile on my face, because you see this in the movies all the time. I couldn't have planned or envisioned myself being pulled over where I'd be telling a cop, "My wife's having a baby." I just thought that was so funny. I was trying to not give the cop the wrong impression that I'd be laughing when he walked up to my vehicle. But in this case, the state trooper made me, he called me to his vehicle. So, I had to get out of my vehicle, walk over to him. Then he motioned me to get in the passenger side of his car, and I got in. He asked me for my license and everything. And the funny thing is, I left it in the car. So, I have to go back and get my license. But the whole time I was thinking of the humor in this. I explained to him, I said, "Look, my wife's in labor. I was trying to get to the hospital. That's why I was exceeding the speed limit a bit." He showed no emotion, no interest. And it wasn't until after any thought of anger with the cop occurred, but I just thought it was so cold and callous how he just went, "Okay. I need to see your license." I went, oh, all right. So, I gave him the license and the registration, and he checked all that out. He didn't write me a ticket. He said, "Okay, just watch speed." All he asked was kind of, "You know your way to the hospital?" Yes, I do. And that was it. No escort. He didn't come check my wife out. He didn't ask further if she was having difficulties or anything like that. I just thought it was, you know, it didn't reflect well on the Texas state troopers at all that this guy showed absolutely no concern.

Kevin Cheri:

I didn't at the time think the race card. But it was only later that I thought yeah, this could have been a lot to do with the race I was, he didn't think much of us and didn't care. And it made me wonder, would he have treated a white person the same way as he now treated someone, he knew from my driver's license was black, or maybe thought because of my complexion I was Hispanic. Either way, he did not show much concern.

Kevin Cheri:

But it was interesting, again, being an African American in an area where the prevailing culture of Mexican Americans still were more in subservient positions.

We did have a division chief who was Hispanic, and not from that immediate area. But other than that, there was little diversity within the professional ranks. And, you know, trying not to continually think about how I would be perceived, how people would work with me. You know, it was interesting. I think I was well accepted by the staff, and things went better than I thought. But when you are in the Park Service and you're constantly the first or the only when it comes to your minority status, it really does, you struggle not think that every negative thing or questionable thing that occurs has something to do with your race. It's just very hard to leave that element out of the equation. Because a lot of times, it is. So, I had to be careful to be myself, again. And I think my worry level was more pointed towards upper management than my dealings with lower management, my point here being the staff and I got along well. I think being there and easily getting to know me helped with that relationship. So, I wasn't treated any differently than any other boss. But I always did still worry about how the Park Service upper management, the regional office level and above, would react to any mistake I made. I maybe, unnecessarily so, put tremendous pressure on myself. Constantly worried how when I messed up, or if I did, if something did go south, serious, or not so serious, how would they react? One of the things that kind of led to that was something that happened to me at Fort Davis if you don't mind me backtracking a little.

Lu Ann Jones: That would be great.

18:01

Kevin Cheri: I had a situation where, you know, the people there are very proud of their fort. They had a very good friends group, very supportive. Helped raise funds to restore barracks, and quite proud of their accomplishment. And many of the volunteers were some of the local ladies who were part of that friends group and had been volunteering for years. They enjoyed dressing up like the soldiers' wives and doing living history programs. So, we had a strong volunteer contingent led by a very capable and dedicated employee at the time, and they were quite devoted to her. Well, this employee was also the historian for the park. The park was going to be doing an administrative history. And prior to my getting there, management, her boss, the chief ranger, and the superintendent at the time agreed to put her, to give that task to her rather than contract it out, to do the administrative history for the park. You know, she was the park interpreter/historian. She was quite involved in running that VIP program, like I said, a very time-consuming one because of the number of people involved. We weren't getting very far within that history. I mean, everything was conflicting. To do a history like that, you've got to be focused. You've got to have time when you're not being interrupted. And it just wasn't happening. It wasn't working.

Kevin Cheri: So, it wasn't a matter of lack of respect for the individual or her capabilities. It was just not getting done. I needed her to understand look, you either have to give up being a volunteer coordinator which, you know, and they were like her

children. It was hard for her to break away from that. And yet they demanded her attention, because there were constant questions, and/or focus on the history. One or the other. She asked to keep it. So, I tried to minimize her time with having to babysit the volunteers, and delegate some of that to another employee. And it didn't sit well. I think she just vented her frustration of being pulled off some volunteer activities to some of her volunteers. Well, next thing I know, they (some park volunteers) wrote a letter to the regional office accusing me of not supporting the volunteer program, and of other things that caught me totally by surprise, because I otherwise had a wonderful relationship with everyone. And it was just their total dedication to this individual who was now not happy, that they turned on me with this note. And it was just that. It was a complaint that stated he's doing this and that. And I could easily have explained what was going on.

Kevin Cheri:

But the regional office sent down Bill Gwaltney, who was now working in the Interpretation Division of the Southwest Regional Office at the time, and another employee, who was over VIP Program Coordinator for the region, to investigate. It was very insulting. Because again, it was a minor issue. It was my park to run, and they had to live with my decision. They (Gwaltney and the Regional VIP Coordinator) actually held a meeting with the group without me on site to let them vent and hear what they had to say. And the stuff was so ridiculous that even one of the people that went to the meeting out of curiosity, stated he didn't witness any of this. He thought I was doing a great job. But he was there to also support his friends. He didn't know, he just kind of wanted to know what was going on. The whole point was nothing happened. I didn't get reprimanded. They knew I did nothing wrong, and they fully understood what was happening. But the fact that I went through that, it was kind of telling the community that they had more control over me than they should have. It was an insult to me that my region didn't back me up by just allowing me to deal with them and meet with them and try to talk through their concerns. But yet immediately sent two people down to investigate. And that made me feel like again, here's a perfect example. Here's where I didn't even do anything wrong. But they felt for some reason they had to hold my hand through this.

Lu Ann Jones:

Yes.

22:55

Kevin Cheri:

That I could not work this through myself. And that's where I truly felt like I'm being treated differently. So then when I'm thinking well why is that that was one of the times where I couldn't help thinking, if I were white, would I have been treated this way? And I just didn't think I would have. I saw other superintendents, my peers, having issues in their parks, and a team was not sent down to investigate or help them work through an issue with a stakeholder group. So, this, like I said, this was part of that constant and consistent paranoia I dealt with. And then later in my history here, you're going to hear other examples of this, too.

- Lu Ann Jones: Can I ask, what about like there at Big Bend? Was there anybody that you could confide that fear in? I mean, what about the superintendent, for example? Or was that something that you had to basically carry yourself?
- Kevin Cheri: For the most part, I carried it myself. But no, Rob Arnberger had always been a good mentor. From the time I first worked with him, throughout my career, I could pick up the phone and call him and discuss these issues. He definitely agreed with me, because he knew the agency, and he knew how they thought. He said no, you have every reason to believe that way. And so yes, I did confide in him with some of these concerns. But he was truly a good mentor in helping me think through how to continue on. I knew he spoke on my behalf at times when he could, when he can get the ear of those who he felt needed to hear what I was doing, at least he made sure they were aware of the success that I was having and the support I was to him. So that helped a lot.
- Kevin Cheri: When he left and the new superintendent came in, Jose Cisneros, I stayed with Jose about a year before I moved on. Leading into my next move was interesting because a year before I left, I was recruited by Bob Belous, who was superintendent at Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve in New Orleans to run the newly established New Orleans Jazz Park. He was trying to find a superintendent for that park and Cane River, both of which were established the same year. More or less, all that was being handled by Jean Lafitte. So, they were initially under the umbrella of that larger park. So, he was trying to find someone he thought could relate to New Orleans politics and would be a good fit. He knew of me, he'd worked in the region under the regional director in a special assistance type position, and then was sent to Jean Lafitte for his first superintendency. He recruited me and I traveled down to meet with him about Jazz. I declined the offer because I honestly felt that that park deserved someone who had a music background, who can relate better to directing development of a park with such a focused mission, and unique mission. The board members of that park, the advisory board members, were people like Wynton Marsalis's dad and other known people in the music world and jazz world. And I thought, you know, you need someone who has some credibility with those folks. And I just didn't feel that that was the right timing for me. I also wasn't real encouraged to go work for Bob. I know Bob, a lot about him. He was an excellent writer and extremely talented in many ways, but he was also a micromanager. I just wasn't that encouraged to go work for him. And I was loving my time in Big Bend. I really liked these rural and remote areas that I had been in and wasn't ready to move back to a city.
- Kevin Cheri: Later that year, much later, my father passed away. Bob re-approached me about coming to work for him as his deputy superintendent at Jean Lafitte. His deputy was moving on to another park. And he really wanted to hand pick someone. He wanted to bring, again, someone in who would be comfortable with this urban park, this unique operation, and dealing with the unique politics involved. And so,

he approached me again about that. Now my attitude had changed because the first thing I thought of, we had just had our second child together, so we now have three kids. And I kept thinking about well my dad passed away. They didn't get to know their grandfather very much. But maybe it would be good to go and move back down, and not knowing how long my mom would be around, at least my kids might get to know their grandmother.

Kevin Cheri: So, despite my feelings about Mr. Belous, working for him, and being happy under his management style. And also, whether I would like the park. The funny thing about Jean Lafitte, considering I was born and raised in New Orleans, when I went home for vacations at least once a year, I would occasionally try to go and check out Jean Lafitte. And I could never find the park. It kept moving. Every time I'd look up their address and then I'd go there, they moved. And it was so hard to find out where they were, it frustrated me. I'll catch them next time, or you know, it just frustrated so much I lost interest. So, I had a very low opinion of this park I could never find. So here I was, I was going again to a park that even though New Orleans was home, the only thing I knew about it was I knew where Chalmette Battlefield was, I had been to it—

30:00

[END OF TRACK 1]

[START OF TRACK 2]

Kevin Cheri: --once. And the Chalmette Battlefield was incorporated into Jean Lafitte, the bigger park, when it was established. But all the other areas of the park, I literally knew nothing about. And so, I didn't have the highest opinion of it. So here again, I'm going to more or less of a park that's sight unseen before. And I fell in love with it. I mean, when I saw all the potential, and things that weren't getting done or could be done, it truly was an exciting moment for me. And it was home. Surprisingly, even at Jean Lafitte, I was surprised at the lack of diversity in the non-typical divisions. You know, sure we had minorities in maintenance, and we had them in administration. But in a lot of other divisions, there was still room for improvement. Being able to continue my goal of improving diversity within the agency certainly was one thing I was able to do there. But just all the other things. I mean, I wasn't there a year, and I totally reorganized the park's structure. The organization that they had at the time; they had a superintendent who had unit managers. There were like four- or five-unit managers. One over Chalmette, one over the French Quarter Unit, one over the Barataria Preserve, which was their natural area, one over the Acadian cultural centers, three different ones in three different cities. As a matter of fact, my furthest unit was three hours away from headquarters. So, it was a very unique, spread-out park, with units that covered historical, cultural, and natural resource, you know, with complex issues and topics with an overall mission to interpret the Mississippi Delta region. It was just

an awesome experience, because like I said, I was constantly able to make change.

Kevin Cheri: We had several affiliated sites. We had actually uniformed personnel working in an Isleños Cultural Center, two Native American centers located within Indian reservations. And also, a German American Center, who, through working with the park was able to get funding for exhibits produced by the National Park Service Harpers Ferry Center. They also were hoping to have staffing support from the National Park Service.

Kevin Cheri: Well, we had just gone through you know, more and more cuts and cuts, and the park could barely keep its own visitors' centers open. So, I was also there at the point of pulling all these resources out of these affiliated sites, changing operations, and having to deal with these stakeholder groups accepting the fact that they weren't going to get support they were getting before from the National Park Service. So that was a big, big change for the park. But we still worked with them in partnership to help train volunteers to help with exhibits and stuff like that. But we just weren't going to be depended on to run their facilities. They would have to find their own staff or volunteers to do that.

Kevin Cheri: So that was the other thing, besides changing the organization of the park from unit managers to a more traditional NPS organization with division chiefs managing operations. The other strange thing about that unit manager approach, the chief of maintenance for the park was there in New Orleans under the superintendent. But he had no line authority over the maintenance people in the field who reported to their unit manager. The same thing occurred with the chief of interpretation. They were supervisors that didn't directly supervise field personnel. The interpreters reported to the unit manager. So again, when I got there, it was like all these mini parks doing their own thing. And there was no consistent message or direction in how things were done. And that's why I pressed for going to a traditional organizational structure. It was time to move on. It wasn't a new park where you needed unit managers to help the superintendent establish rapport with the local politicians. We were well established and known, and in today's age with better phones and faxes and things, you didn't need that sort of representative within each community to be your go to person. You could do it yourself. Or better. Especially with a deputy running the park and having the superintendent who could easily deal with those politicians and stakeholder groups.

Kevin Cheri: So, this was the change I made. What also facilitated that was only a month or so after I got there, Bob Belous, out of the blue, decided to retire. He was upset by not being able to establish the park into an SES [Senior Executive Service] park. He was hoping to keep Jazz and Cane River under him and get promoted from a [GS-]15 to an SES. Roger Kennedy would not go for it. And so, in his disappointment or anger or whatever, he never talked to me about it. He just out of the blue announced his retirement and quit the National Park Service.

6:22

Kevin Cheri: And to my good fortune, I was sorry that he felt that way, but it wasn't long into the job I knew that we were going to bump heads. He was such a micro-manager, I knew I wouldn't be able to do my job as a deputy the way it was, the way I understood it should work, and how it worked at Big Bend. So, what ended up happening is Geraldine Smith, who was over the Office of Legislative Affairs, I believe, in Washington, was assigned her first park, and given Jean Lafitte. The interesting thing about my peers, her peers within the region, you know, was you could hear the rumblings. "She's never had a park before, and this is not going to work." And "Oh, they're going to have to rely on Kevin to run the park." It was very insulting to her to have to go through that. I didn't like it. I didn't like the fact that people were so vocal about how I was going to run the park. Because I said, I've got to get along with this person and I respect her ability. Why should I question it? They're sending her here. But the fact that they were so judgmental before giving her a chance, as a black woman in a park, yet Bob Belous' first park was Jean Lafitte. And no one, you never heard any grumblings about this white male who was given his first park being able to be successful. There was no question. And yet with her, I mean, that was all you heard. So again, it showed you how the culture within the agency had not changed. That whether it was a woman or whether it was a minority, you were going to be judged differently and treated differently. I mean, even the regional director said, "Oh, this will work out good. Because I know Geraldine doesn't know much about running parks, but you'll be running the park." It's like gosh, you know, I hope he doesn't say it that way to her.

Kevin Cheri: Well, I'm sure he said it somewhat to her that way, because for a while I could see she was feeling me out. She needed to know that I had her back. It didn't take long for us to click. She, I think, eventually felt very comfortable with me. She turned out to be the best boss I ever had in the National Park Service as far as really allowing me to do my job, but also knowing just when to reel me in and help me through, I won't say difficult times, but times when maybe I was overreacting and just make me rethink about either what I was saying or what I was planning to do. She just had that style. And the office itself went from an office where people walked around with their heads down and no one seemed happy to an office where there was laughter in the hallways. It was like a cloud was lifted to see her take over and make everyone comfortable. Because they were just, you know, I mean, Bob's style was just different. He rewrote everything that left the park. Any letter, document that left the park went through him and he pretty much rewrote it. He was an excellent writer. He wrote many legislative documents for the region when they were assisting a politician develop language for a new bill or whatever. That was his forte. He was just a very good writer. But he micro-managed everything coming out of the park in a way that no one really learned from him. And here comes Geraldine, who was just as particular about documents going out, but she let people do their jobs, and she depended on them to do their jobs.

Kevin Cheri: So, it was quite a transitional time for the park. So again, I felt very fortunate to have been there at that time. Also, the idea of helping two other parks get established and taking off on their own was a unique experience for me to have that. So that was a very productive and happy four years in the service.

Lu Ann Jones: Could I ask you a question here? So, one of the things, and you've observed this a couple of times. Talking about how the Park Service really had not caught up with kind of the cultural issues of diversity and would say things that were really insulting to women, to minorities, kind of questioning their abilities, etcetera. Where do you think, I mean, this is the 1990s, after all. It's not the total dark ages. (laughs) Where do you think the Park Service was in those conversations about diversity?

12:03

Kevin Cheri: Oh, I think they felt, I can't remember what year it was, but the Forest Service back in maybe the '80s had a lawsuit by women that they lost and were almost forced by the courts to hire women. And I think that opened up the park service's eyes that they needed to do things before the same thing happened to the Park Service. Because our numbers were as bleak as the Forest Service when it came to diversity. But I think that typically people had plans and they went through the motions, but they didn't have accountability. So, yeah, people acted like you know, we're doing recruiting or we're doing this, but they really weren't committed to bringing folks in, and no one was held accountable for any success. And at the same time, I was having success within the service. But I had to constantly live through, you know, going to superintendents' conferences I remember, or EO training classes, and people saying, "Well, nobody's really applying. There's nobody out there really interested in coming." And I'm going no, that's not true. I'm here. And I knew nothing about the agency. It's just, I was given an opportunity.

Kevin Cheri: They did not think, they still thought it was a quota program and didn't understand that for years these different groups, whether it was a minority group or women, were not getting the opportunities to, or even the knowledge of the agency and the opportunities within the agency to take advantage of them. So, when you were approaching them, it was so foreign, yeah, recruitment might have been a challenge, but it was not impossible. When I became a manager, I was having immediate success. Well, why was that? Well, it was all about attitude. I didn't look for the excuse. And I found that people just leaned on that excuse too much.

Kevin Cheri: You know, it's also, it's kind of reflective of what slaves, free slaves went through at the time of Reconstruction, while much of the North supported the slavery ending, they were soon and later convinced that some, that blacks could not rule or govern themselves, because the South had convinced them that by its false imprisonment systems that we couldn't. People only looked at these

statistics and saw how many people were in jails in the South. They had no clue how that was being done and why.

Kevin Cheri: I think the same thing happens in the Park Service culture. People, they aren't necessarily racist, but they hear things, they begin to believe it. So, when they hear that minorities just aren't interested in it, then they believe it. Or they can't live in these, they're not comfortable in these remote areas. They're not this, they're not that, they would never take on these kind of jobs. I think people were too easily willing to grab hold of that same excuse and move on. They were dedicated Park Service people doing jobs and wanting to do a lot of things. And this just wasn't a priority for them. And they had an easy excuse, you know, because that's what everybody else said. So, they repeated it.

Kevin Cheri: That's what I mean about park service true commitment. You have to have a certain level of accountability in order to get people to do the right thing sometimes. You know. And so, our goals were window dressing. They weren't real commitments by the agency. You know because people, like you said, here we are it's the '90s. And I mean, I had a resource. I had like four HBCUs right in New Orleans that any manager could call me and ask for help to get employees. Nobody did.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, was that a source that you tapped when you were looking to diversify your workforce?

16:43

Kevin Cheri: Oh, yeah. I went to HBCU. Like I said, in Fort Davis, the two black men I hired were from Arkansas, Pine Bluff. That was, and then working with the universities there in New Orleans, we did hire a few seasonals or interns through some of the universities. I also recruited minorities that were in other parks who I knew it would be beneficial for them to get a second park experience, instead of just waiting or trying to get on permanent in the one park they were at and comfortable at, to say hey, you know, this is how it's done. And come as well when you have support at the management level, where you have those who are willing to mentor you. So, I did that. I literally stole an employee from Tuskegee while attending a conference there. Met him and I said, "Man, you need to come work for me." And he did. And I later ran into him at a job at Chattahoochee, and he came worked for me there. But that was the thing, was trying to get us, and "us" being the minority managers, out into the face of these folks who you're trying to recruit. You know, no one ever asked me to come talk to a group for them. I thought, how can you as a white man go into an HBCU and tell them what it's like to be black in Arkansas, in Utah, in some of these remote areas. They're not going to believe you. You know, you're not using the tools you have. Or they might believe you. Like I was the rare case where I was just ready to go. I wanted, and I was willing to experience it with an open mind. But I knew that even I wasn't, I didn't have this billboard on my back saying that I was that way. It was

by luck. So, these other people who might be like me who might jump at the opportunity knowing nothing about the agency, how would they know who they are? They wouldn't. But the ones that would like and maybe have some interest in these fields that you could approach, still, you then have to convince them. And in selling anything, it's like any product you're trying to sell, you use the tools and resources you have available to help send your message, get your message across.

Kevin Cheri:

Well, you know, I was that resource. I oftentimes offered to help with recruitment. But no one ever called upon me to do that. My time was focused on my own park. Like I said, I did a great job of increasing diversity at every single park that I worked. Like I told you before, that's one thing I'm very proud of within my career. But you know, not seeing much success by other managers, it was frustrating. And I did want there to be at least a more, I don't want to say pressure, but certainly more accountability forced down from the agency to managers to make sure that they were doing the right thing. Again, I just, I had to make sure that at least I could, they couldn't point to me and say well you're not doing any better.

Lu Ann Jones:

Yes.

20:36

Kevin Cheri:

I said I've certainly got to lead by example. So that's, like I said, that was one thing about what I felt I was successful with as well in my career. And New Orleans, like I said, was a great experience. My oldest daughter finished her eighth grade, was going into high school, when I was approached by the regional director, Bob Belson at the time, who wanted—I mean, Jerry Belson, excuse me, at the time, who wanted me to, well, putting it in his words, he says, "I can't have two good black managers in the same park. You're doing a great job, but you should have your own park." So, he wanted me to go to Chattahoochee. He felt that my experience at my previous parks, that he's what I needed there, he felt the park was at a point of needing some change in direction. And so, he asked me to come take a look at it. I traveled to Atlanta, and he took me around the park, and we discussed it. Again, now I wasn't necessarily ready to leave New Orleans. I mean, like I said, it was an exciting park. Lots of issues, a lot of things going on. But I was a soldier, in a sense, and the agency had been good to me. I had so many tremendous and good opportunities that they could have pretty much asked me to go almost anywhere, and as long as it wasn't a tremendous burden on my family, I probably would have taken it out of just feeling an obligation to the agency. So, he wanted me there, so I said, okay, I'll take it. I'll do it.

Kevin Cheri:

This is, from a timing standpoint, at least, I felt strongly about not breaking up my children's time in high school. Any assignment I go to, if they're in high school, if they can finish high school, then there's less chance of having issues with the children. Because especially girls, I think, and I'm stereotyping here but I believe this sincerely, girls establish much more close and long-lasting relationships with

their friends in high school, and it's more traumatic when you pull them away from it, as compared to boys. That was just my own, like I said, stereotyping or perception, based on what I saw in the Park Service.

Kevin Cheri:

So, I took Chattahoochee, and we moved in the summer of 2000 to take on the position as superintendent. And here again, other than that orientation trip, I knew very little about this park. I wasn't excited, necessarily, about going there. But like I said, I was going more for the good of the agency. But again, I found a park that had some significant challenges. It's right in this urban area just north of Atlanta, surrounded by some of the fastest-growing counties in the nation. The metropolitan area of Atlanta, you know, it's four million people plus. And this park was literally getting three million visitors a year. It's only a 48-mile-long river. But it also, it had gone through some major changes. It used to have this annual float that was basically a drunk party. Budweiser literally parked a truck in the parking lot selling beer. There were so many people on the river that the local law enforcement agencies would just organize at the end of the float, and literally stretch a net across the river just to catch everything floating down and the people. Because they were just a bunch of drunks coming down the river. But floating was popular then, and 75 percent of those three million visitors floated the river.

Kevin Cheri:

By the time I got there, things had changed significantly. They had already stopped this annual event where they allowed alcohol and so you had a totally different group of people interested in getting out there. We established more trails. Now we still had three million visitors, but 75 percent of them were hikers, and only 25 percent were river users. So that was a tremendous shift.

Kevin Cheri:

And when I got there, what surprised me was the lack of attention that this park had gotten. It was a sort of an orphan child of the region. It was dumped on whenever it seems like there was a problem person in the region, especially at regional office, who they were trying to get rid of, they got stuck at Chattahoochee. The staff was weak in that sense. There were some people there that just weren't the top of their grade in doing the kind of work that should have been expected. They also, it surprised me that I kept thinking, if I were the regional director of the Southeast Region, and I had Martin Luther King, Kennesaw, and Chattahoochee River in my backyard, that those would be my showcase parks. So, whenever I hired a superintendent for a cultural area or a historic area, I'd take them to Kennesaw and say, "Look, this is how it's done." And for cultural area, I'd take them to MLK and say, "This is how it's done." Chattahoochee, a natural area, I'd say, "Here, this is what I can expect."

Kevin Cheri:

But on the other hand, what I saw is at Chattahoochee, trailheads that were embarrassing. The lack of facilities, the condition of the facilities, were just truly poor. What they called a contact station was smaller than most parks had, or visitors' center, was smaller than what most parks had for a contact station. And the direction of the park and what it was trying to do needed greater focus. Many of the municipalities, governments, even some of our federal partners, seemed to

take advantage and do whatever they wanted in the park. People weren't getting permits that needed to get permits, or permissions where they needed to be get approvals to do what they wish to do. Compliance was a joke. There was so much abuse.

Kevin Cheri: And so basically, my tenure was about establishing our credibility and rapport with these different groups and getting them to understand that we were a unit of the National Park Service, and this is how things worked. So, we didn't always make people happy. But we had to assert who we were. And so, there was always going to be a chance of a call going up to regional office complaining. And while Jerry was there, I believe he had my back. We didn't get that many complaints about me. I had an employee who sometimes, his mannerisms and his tone sometimes was not always perceived to be friendly. He was just direct. He was just a by-the-book kind of guy, and he didn't have a good bedside manner when it came to communicating, but he wasn't offensive. But in the South, it's a different way of communicating. You know, if you don't talk the right way, they very easily, if they're not hearing what they want to hear, they'll be judgmental and accuse you of being difficult. And so, I'd get calls about him, that he was difficult in a meeting. I'd say, "Look, I was in that meeting, and I heard what he said. He was basically describing policies and procedures. And yeah, he may not have been all sweet and Southerly, but he wasn't offensive." But if they didn't like what they were hearing, and so this was their defense. They just complained. And I had to—

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Kevin Cheri: --defend my employee. Fortunately, the region believed me, and they supported me this time. But you know, it was good in some ways that he took the heat, and the complaints went on him, rather than directly on me. But we continued; we didn't bend. I worked to mentor that employee on how to deliver the message better. But other than that, we didn't change our goal of making sure that the park wasn't going to be abused. And so, it was a very tough time.

Kevin Cheri: Also, that park was going through the Tri-state water wars--Georgia, Florida, and Alabama were all fighting over the waters of the Chattahoochee. There was a federal commission, and meetings held with all the federal agencies involved in permitting and managing the waters of the Chattahoochee from its headwaters down to the gulf. And you know, the Park Service almost had to remind them that we need to be at the table. We're a key component of that discussion. So, we were involved in that as well. So that park had also a lot of challenging issues.

- Kevin Cheri: We also were going through a general management plan. Here was another case where, an issue where I wasn't necessarily treated fairly or appropriately. This plan, this was a time when they were starting to contract more GMPs, [General Management Plans] and Parsons, Incorporated was hired to do ours. So, we were working with this contractor to develop this GMP for the park. We went through all our scoping meetings, etcetera, through the process, developed the plan, and by the time we introduced the draft, the reaction didn't turn out the way we expected.
- Kevin Cheri: So, the fishermen immediately reacted to what they read. Rather than try to get any clarification or discuss it, they used their network, which the Internet was really starting to blossom at that time. And before we knew it, we had all these fishermen groups, organizations, attacking the plan, saying this was an awful plan, poorly conceived, it was terrible, da, da, da, da, da. A couple of other organizations jumped in. Well, you know, the regional director started questioning whether we had done enough scoping, because that's what they were complaining. They said, "Well, you didn't talk to enough people." And we explained. We had multiple, six or seven scoping meetings, and several individual meetings with specific stakeholder groups and politicians, etcetera. But the support wasn't there.
- Kevin Cheri: The big change for me was Jerry Belson had retired and I was now under Pat Hooks. Pat Hooks was a lawyer in the solicitor's office who Jerry had hired as his deputy regional director. Then when he left, she went almost a whole year as the acting regional director. Then Fran Mainella reluctantly hired her as the regional director. That is another story in and of itself.
- Kevin Cheri: But Pat, to say the least, was very difficult to work for. And you don't have to take my word for it. You can talk to any of the people that worked during that period, and you'll hear some tremendous horror stories. But it was difficult. For some reason, she wasn't about to give me the benefit of the doubt. It was a very memorable meeting with the contractor and park and the state. She invited the state to come in, because they also had questions, they had concerns about the GMP. She blasted me, my failure to do a good job of scoping the public, etcetera, etcetera, to the point where the state employees apologized to me. They were so taken by how she berated me in this meeting. The contractor also was very disappointed and apologized to me as well. They had been working on Christenson's GMP as well. They said, "Everything she told you you needed to do, is just the opposite of what she complained about with Christenson." They were so frustrated. They said, "We as a contractor have no clue what to do. She complained at you for doing too much of this and not enough of that. It was just a reverse at the other park. And it's like she's complaining to complain, we have no clear direction." So, they were actually consoling me to not take it personally. "It's not you. You did everything right."
- Kevin Cheri: As a matter of fact, when the contractors bidded on the GMP, they told them at the time, I had not started there yet, they told them this is not enough money. It

would take more money to do the appropriate scoping. They only got the bid because they agreed to cut the cost, and the only place they could cut was in some of the scoping. So, while we did quite a bit of scoping, they had clearly identified more scoping was needed. So, it was interesting that here is what they were saying.

Kevin Cheri: But you know, what really happened is, the fishermen misunderstood, and they really didn't read the document clearly. Then all it took was one person to say it was bad and the others believed it. They didn't even read the document. In the end, we had to go back and do more scoping and develop a couple of other alternatives. But when it was all said and done, I had the fisherman groups eating out of my hands, apologizing to me for their failure to really be involved early. And one of the alternatives where they really had an objection to, they said, "Well you know, you're closing off one of our best fishing holes."

Kevin Cheri: I said, "Well, no one told us that." They said, "Well, we didn't want you to know." They were keeping their fishing hole secret. So here we were making a decision that impacted them because they didn't clearly tell us that they had a concern here, or an interest. So, I said, "Well, whose fault was that?" Kevin Cheri: Once they were calm and we were revisiting the issue, then they were like, "Oh, yeah. We're sorry. We should have been more involved." In the end, they were so supportive that we had gotten something in the range of fifty thousand dollars or so in aid and support from them on bank stabilization, etcetera. Because they now became a more active partner with me. But it didn't matter how many accolades I was getting from them. My boss at the time, Miss Hooks, never recognized that this was not, it wasn't my fault. Nor that I turned it around. I'd made lemonade out of lemons. And so, it was a situation where here I have a black manager who is treating me differently than she was treating some others. But in her case, she was difficult with almost every superintendent.

Kevin Cheri: As a matter of fact, in this region at the time we were just, I think, under, or just slightly over 60 parks, we had 20 vacant superintendencies at the same time. That's how bad it had gotten here. Where she had either forced people into retirement, or they quit and left because they couldn't work with her. She was trying her best to force me out, and it didn't quite work for her. But later she tried to get me on another issue. She out of the blue came to my office with her deputy and told me she was moving me to Martin Luther King. Now, Martin Luther King, Jr., site had become a [GS-] 15 park. And I was a [GS-] 14. And she was going to move me there as a deputy. So, her claim was it wouldn't be a downgrade, it wouldn't be a detrimental move, because you would be able to keep your grade, you wouldn't have to move. You could commute from where you live, etcetera. And her reasons were, my lack of leadership. You know, I almost choked when she said that. I'm like, what is [unclear], what is wrong, what have I done? She just, she would lie. She was making up things. She finally started to say that the deputy director on his visit to the park was unhappy with me. You know, that when the director came down a year before that, she wasn't happy.

- Kevin Cheri: Then she really crossed a line and accused the local congressman of not being happy with me. That's when I just put my foot down. I was quiet throughout the discussion. I said, "Wait. My congressman loves me. He has praised me on several occasions in public."
- Kevin Cheri: Her response was, "Oh, he's just being a politician." I knew how she operated. She managed through intimidation. She was just trying to make me quit, and I wasn't going to go for it. But I also wasn't going to—while she thought this wasn't a downgrade or, you know, I certainly knew it was a demotion in position. It wasn't a demotion in grade, but it was a demotion in position. I wasn't going to settle for it. So, the meeting ended with her giving me three weeks to wrap it up and report to Martin Luther King. And I quietly, I touched base with some of my mentors, like Rob Arnberger, who was retired by then, and a couple other people, just to get their feedback on what I needed to do.
- Kevin Cheri: And Rob knew. He said, "Well, you don't have a choice. If you don't, she's affected your reputation. If you do grieve, sometimes those affect your reputation." He said, "That's the way it works. No one seems to win sometimes when you do that." But he agreed with me, he didn't think I had any other choice but to fight it.
- Kevin Cheri: So, I got my notes together and made an appointment to talk to the deputy director -- oh, I can't remember Steve's last name -- at the time. So, when I got the deputy director on the line, I told him what was going on, that she was directing me to relocate. I told him how I thought this was totally unfair, how all I had accomplished, I had felt that in the last two years at Chattahoochee, we had so many great accomplishments that I made the region look very good. I received three awards that I went up to Washington for, just to receive for things that I accomplished at Chattahoochee. Never got any recognition from Pat Hooks on it, but obviously Washington was aware of the success I was having.
- Kevin Cheri: So, when Steve heard this, he said, well, first of all, agency policy and the director's policy hadn't changed, that the regional directors cannot move a 14 or 15 without getting approval or hire one without getting approval from the Washington office. And they hadn't heard anything about this. So, I explained to him, well, that's the way Pat operates. She'll do something like this and when she does tell you, she'll make it sound like I did this agreeing to do it. But you know, I needed to let them know that I would not stand for this. And I wanted to give the agency the opportunity to fix it. Because I had enough to file a grievance as well as an EO grievance. And I said, "I don't want to do either. I don't want to embarrass the agency. I don't want to embarrass Pat. But I certainly am not deserving of this treatment."
- Kevin Cheri: He just told me in that conversation, he said, "Don't worry about it." He says, "I'll get back to you." Within that afternoon, I was copied, blind copied on an

email that he sent to Pat Hooks just telling her to cease and desist from any moving of me to another location.

Kevin Cheri: Of course, that did not make my situation with her any better. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) She resented the fact that I went to Washington with this. Which I thought, well, how naïve. How could you be so arrogant to think that you could threaten people, and they're just supposed to take it. You know, it was so undeserving. There was nothing. Everything she accused me of.

Kevin Cheri: One point I made to them. I said, "Look, I'm not threatening. But she opened the door for me to go to my congressman. She brought him up. I will go to the congressman and tell him what she said, because, if that's what I have to do. Because she told me he complained about me and said he was angry or upset with me." And I said, "She opened that door." So, I had her. I said, "You just can't do that to someone, and bully people the way she did."

Kevin Cheri: It was a very dark period for the Park Service in that region. We really, people, the whole, if you went to the regional office, and I'm not lying. I can go in the regional office, and I go in the men's room, and someone would walk in. They'd say, "Hello, Kevin. How are you doing?" I'd say, "Fine. I'm here to meet with Pat." The next thing out of their mouth is, "Oh, I'm sorry." (laughter) That's how people were.

Kevin Cheri: Then when I won, when I wasn't moved, of course everyone in the region heard it. Because she even kind of announced it, what she was doing. So, the word was already getting out. People would come to me like I was a hero. "How did you do it? No one has ever survived and won when she's tried to get rid of anyone like this. How did you do it?"

Kevin Cheri: I said, "Because she had nothing on me." I said, "I didn't do anything special. I just would not accept it. And Washington supported me." Because, you know, again, I mean, [I lived for?] accomplishments. I mean, it was almost absurd to think that she could say I wasn't a leader when the region itself put me there because of my leadership ability. So, it made no sense. And I knew she had nothing. But like I said, for whatever reason, I knew I had an employee she didn't like, and she wanted me to fire her. And it was ridiculous. It was absurd. I had an employee who received a letter. Well, no, actually, region received a letter accusing one of my employees, my administrative officer, of being a racist, treating her employees like slaves. Now here's where, I'm talking about another example of being treated differently. And even though it's a black manager, that doesn't mean that racism is limited to white on black. Here's where Pat Hooks immediately sent a team, two people down, to investigate and hold interviews on this woman. Rather than pick up the phone and say, "Hey, I received this email," or letter. Most regional directors would have talked to the superintendent before doing anything and would have at least given you the courtesy of knowing that hey, I received this letter. What can you tell me? What do you know about this?

they're accusing your employee of being a racist and treating employees like slaves.

Kevin Cheri:

I could have cut this off right at the knees, right immediately. Because first of all, this white female, she did have a reputation of being a little difficult. But it was just again another thing of communication styles. But she was otherwise a very smart, intelligent, and capable person who, in the time I was there, replaced her entire staff with African American females. And they were white before. Okay so how is she a racist if she's hiring black women and men over white applicants? Number two, she was married to a Mexican. Not a Mexican American. A Mexican national. (laughs) So I said, "You would be ridiculous to think that she would not grieve and win. You're going to call her racist? She was my most active recruiter when it came to bringing in diversity. As a matter of fact, she put as much pressure on her peer, division chiefs and assistants in getting a diverse workforce, as I did." And I said, "So first of all, it's not true, just based on that." I said, "You can't just accuse a person, if they're complaining, if the people she is now hiring are complaining, if any of them aren't happy, well, ask me about them." I could have told them, well one of them got caught doing something wrong and was suspended. So, she's not happy with her boss. But I supported it because she could have been fired. And the only reason she wasn't fired was because this AO was willing to give her a second chance. And I said, cut her loose! But the AO wanted to try to salvage her career.

19:50

Kevin Cheri:

But Pat Hooks never gave me the opportunity to explain that. And she wouldn't have supported, she didn't want to hear that. She didn't like this employee because in a meeting at the park, that employee asked a question, and Pat took it the wrong way. And once you got on her bad side, that was it. But Pat Hooks never even told me, at the time of that meeting when she was upset, that she was upset. I saw it in her face. But she never talked to me about it, so I said, well, let it go. Because she's not dealing with Pat. I have to deal with Pat, and she'll never have any other true dealings with the woman. But that's what it was all about. When Pat didn't like something, she reacted extremely harshly. So here was a situation, again, where I had to have these two people come to the park. It embarrassed me, it embarrassed the AO to have to talk and they interviewed her peers, her employees. They weren't there long. The first thing they did, they came and talked to me in the morning. They left my office. Within a half hour after they left my office, I was able to discover that the gentleman who wrote the letter complaining about her was the live-in boyfriend of the woman who had been suspended. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) And he had no political position of power. He titled his letter as if he belonged to some sort of group like the NAACP, but he wasn't. It was some made up group. It was something. I said, had she called me I would have found this out just as quickly. And they would have reported back to her, and there would have been no more reason for any further investigation. They

could write or I could draft a response letter to this individual, and it would be done.

Kevin Cheri:

Not only did they conduct a full investigation and write up a report, even after I'd told them that information, the AO nor I were ever given a copy of that report. There was never closure for that poor woman. She never got to be vindicated in paper, in writing. And yet, you know, she had done nothing wrong. So as far as her peers and her staff were concerned, she could have been found guilty. And it was an unfortunate period in my career to have to go through something like that, especially at the hands of a black manager who I supported. I had concerns about her capability and background, but mainly because of her background. She was a lawyer. But she really had absolutely no experience in parks management and Park Service, and even maybe in supervision that showed. So, there was a concern about how, I was worried about her not succeeding because where she might not have all the tools necessary for the job she had accepted. But I gave her my full support. I was willing, you know, we'll see what she can do. She's in the job, maybe someone knows something I don't. I never worked against her. But she didn't treat me with equal consideration. And with the exception of that dislike with that employee, I never could figure out why else she came after me. But at that point I had learned, well, although I had survived her attack, I realized that well, I'll never be liked by her. She'll resent me the rest of our time together. While I wasn't interested in leaving Chattahoochee, although I'd been there seven years, I felt now is the time to maybe rethink and go somewhere else. Because in her attempts to hurt me or make me look bad, it's only going to hurt the park. So, I didn't want the park hurt by our relationship. But now, at least, I can move on my terms.

Kevin Cheri:

So, I remember it was 2006, it was December 2006, I asked my wife, I said, "What do you want for Christmas?" (laughter) She said, "I want you to put in for Buffalo National River." I didn't even know the position had opened. And I don't know what, but I think she was just ready to leave the Atlanta area. I said, "Really? Are you serious? Before I moved there in 1978, I had death threats." I mean, beautiful park, I love it. But I said, "I'll have to make some calls."

Kevin Cheri:

So, I called a few friends. The ex-superintendent of Arches at the time that I was in Canyonlands, the one who recommended I put in for Fort Davis, had married a young lady from Arkansas who lived close to Harrison, Arkansas, and they retired there. I called him up to ask him what he thought. He said he thought that the complexion of this community had changed enough and that he thought it would be fine and that I should be all right. I talked to the outgoing superintendent and a few others, and they all thought it would be okay. But I had, I knew that, again, they're speaking from their view, their outlook. While I respected them all, I also knew that it's a big difference being an employee who's black, as compared to being the boss who's black. Again, I had to consider how the staff would receive me. But also, more importantly, how the different stakeholder groups would receive me. Because people are constantly coming to the superintendent to ask to

do this, to want to do this, who are working with you as concessioners or other partners who also want to do something in the park that maybe you can't approve or don't want. So, I knew that as long as the answers were yes, I'd probably get along. But the minute I said no, then the true test would occur. And how I would be received, and how that message would be received. So, I had no illusions over the fact that there could be those issues.

Kevin Cheri: But as long as the family would be safe, as long as I felt that they could be happy and productive, I was willing to throw my name in. Fortunately, I was selected. This became my [GS-] 15, promotion to a 15. In 2007, my three youngest and my wife and I moved here. My oldest stayed in Georgia to go to college. She was very close to her now-husband, but boyfriend at the time, and she didn't want to leave. So, she stayed there. So, we moved here, the five of us.

Kevin Cheri: It was quite the experience. Now I finally moved to a park I actually knew something about. (laughter) And had actually applied for. This is like the seventh park, and I've only applied for two in my entire career. That's how lucky I've been.

Kevin Cheri: Again, I got here, and I was very surprised at how little development had occurred in all those years, over thirty years. There was still very little improvements to the area or changes. So again, I was involved in shifting organizational structure that I felt would better suit the needs of the park at the time. I was very busy. Again, now I'm the, I was the first black employee to ever work here. Now I was the third black employee to ever work here.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, wow.

Kevin Cheri: In all those years. Had a couple of Hispanic employees that had, in the ranks. But most of them were of mixed race, so they didn't necessarily stand out as Hispanics. So, I immediately began to recruit. And this, again, is where the agency had not changed much. Where you had, whether it was SCA resource assistants in the park, you know, back when I was there, Co-ops. Or now we were using STEP and SCEP employees. I found that in a lot of parks, there were still, the majority were white. And if anybody was being aggressive, well then maybe they might have more females than males. But otherwise, programs that were there to assist you in bringing in diversity were still being used mainly to bring in white employees. And so, I got here and yes, I had several STEP and maybe one or two SCEP employees who were white. And I made it very clear—

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Kevin Cheri: --to the staff that while I was here, I was hoping to bring in some diversity. And that they should not feel threatened, but there's a need now to bring in some quality people who will help entice and encourage other minorities to use the park. But we do not reflect the country. This is one of the agency's goals, and so I was going to do something about it. Then I had to remind them also that I still supported and will support STEP employees of all races. And we did. I was able to recruit minorities. But I still also had old and newly acquired STEP employees who were white males or white females. But I told them, I said, "We're going to lose this hiring authority if we don't use it right. Somebody's going to challenge us on this hiring authority if we never bring in diversity using them." I think I was able to convince the staff, because I really didn't want to come in here and get everyone thinking that my only goal was to hire minorities. Because this is the best job in town. I mean, everybody, Park Service has great wages compared to other places you could work. So, a lot of people would look to kind of get into Park Service. Especially in the maintenance ranks. A lot of these old farmers and kids, they're looking for jobs. They're going to try to get in the Park Service. But I wasn't here six months, and this AO, by the way, that worked for me at Chattahoochee had moved on to the Forest Service. She was over a Job Corps, or what is it, you know, the work sites that put out the young kids at risk. Job Corps, I guess.

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. I think so.

2:19

Kevin Cheri: Yeah. So, she had a Job Corps graduate. She called me up. She said, "Kevin, I've got a guy who's, he's mobile. He's actually interested in trying different areas. Would you be interested?"

Kevin Cheri: I said, "You bet I would." So, through her contact, I was able to bring in a Job Corps student, graduate, into the park. So, I talked to the supervisor. I said, "Do you have any problem?" He supported it. So, we had a black student.

Kevin Cheri: I also learned from another division chief of a teacher in Memphis, Tennessee, whose background was also in the sciences, natural resources, and he thought it would make a good addition to the park. So, I recruited him, created a position that I could slide him in that would kind of work to bring natural resource information and science into interpretation programs, and be kind of a conduit for that with his background.

Kevin Cheri: So, within a year, I had hired two African American employees and at least one or two Hispanic. Before a two-year period, I'd also hired a person of Asian background as well as a Native American and more Hispanics. So, with tremendous change in diversity here in the park within a short period. But at the same time, I was also graduating and/or continuing to hire several local people. Some born and raised here, some who had been here a while because their

spouses worked for the park. But the mixture of all the people benefiting from the STEP/SCEP program was not limited to one group. You can see it, it was evident, and so it was well received throughout. What I was able to do, I never got any concerns over not supporting the local hires. And was quite proud of the fact that within every division within this park, there were people who were locals. Who were born and raised, or somehow connected to the local community. So, it wasn't just administration and maintenance divisions that had locals working in the park. We had them in every, even law enforcement. So that made a big difference in the community and gave us more credibility. Because Buffalo was one of those parks when established was really disliked by the locals. A lot of people resented the park, the federal government coming in and taking land from people in the way we did it. And even 35, 40 years later, still there was strong resentments in dealing with people for that reason, and/or people who just never, and never will, like government.

Kevin Cheri:

So, I was very sensitive to that here. For the most part, things were great. We had tremendous success. Relationships were improved with concessions operations, with a lot of the stakeholder groups. One of the first things I did, horses were always an issue. You always had the hikers who don't like horses, complain about the horse users. The horse people felt threatened by all those who were against horses in the park and were worried about a manager who would come in and try to eliminate horses. So, in meeting with those, that horse group asked, you know, they'd talk about their concerns and everything. And one person invited me to come out on a horse ride with them. And I said okay, I'll do it. I'd only been on a horse once before in my entire life. And I jokingly told them, I said, "You just show me where to put the key and point me in the right direction, and I'll be all right." (Lu Ann Jones laughs)

Kevin Cheri:

So, they got me on a horse. Well, that made such an impression with that group, because no superintendent in all the years of establishment of this park had ever gone out and ridden a horse with them. They knew they could talk to me. They trusted me. And so, it also allowed me, then, to deal with them with some issues of illegal trails, and how to approach that. Because if they wanted to stay and have the ability to ride in the park, they couldn't just break rules. They had to help me with the people who were breaking the rules. A lot of times it wasn't them, it was other horsemen who didn't belong to their organization, the Back Country Horsemen of America. And they also were a very active group in helping maintain trails. Because again, they were sensitive to the complaints about horse use, so they were putting their sort of best foot forward and saying we'll help maintain and fix up trails that need fixing. So, they did that. And they've been a tremendous partner. So that was real, you know, big success in the sense of being able to get the groups to work together and kind of talk to one another and you know, when I got here.

Lu Ann Jones: I think you told me when we talked before that there were some, as there are in all parks, contentious issues that you encountered. And again, a little bit of head butting with the regional office out there at Buffalo River, too.

8:17

Kevin Cheri: Yes. I think what happened, there were a couple of things, and they sort of happened. The first thing was that I had a cemetery association. Just real quickly, Buffalo National River is 94,000 to 95,000 acres. Within it, we have cemeteries that we own and manage. We have cemeteries that we own but are managed by outside groups. And we have then a few, or maybe just one or two, that are within the boundary. We don't own the land of the cemetery, and therefore it's also managed and taken care of by a separate group. Well, this one, the last category, this one cemetery called Shaddox Cemetery, was private property. Managed by the Shaddox Cemetery Association. And one day a patrol ranger discovered that they had taken big, heavy equipment in and bulldozed the boundary and expanded outside their boundary of their cemetery on park land. Tearing down vegetation, disturbing an archeological site, etcetera, etcetera.

Kevin Cheri: So, I get the report, and this seems so unbelievable. Why would anyone do this? I convinced, well, back up just a little bit. When I came here as superintendent, and I met with all the delegation of the senators, the congressmen, various congressmen that represented this community, this area, it was almost unanimous that their message being, "We need someone who will talk and work with the people." And I told them, well, that's my style. I don't think that's going to be a problem. But I had to convince them.

Kevin Cheri: Well, when this happened, I asked my law enforcement staff, I said, "Look, I'm not telling you what to do. But would you be willing to let me call them in first and let's meet and talk to them about this? See what was going on in their minds?"

Kevin Cheri: So, we had a meeting. They said they wanted to expand it because they were going to build a fence. Not expand. They wanted to build a fence. I said, well, you know, "You should have talked to us. But you've damaged our property." We didn't, we thought well, this small group, this could really stir up lots of problems. But we think we can settle this easily if they would just be willing. I said, "Look, we won't cite you, we won't take you into court, confiscate your equipment and all that other stuff. But what we do need you to do is pay for a legal survey, so you know exactly where your fence line is, and we know exactly where your fence line is. Secondly, when you go to build the fence, we want to be on site to make sure it goes where it's supposed to go."

Kevin Cheri: So, they went and got a survey. Initially the person just put in wooden stake. And I think because, again, they knew someone who worked for a survey company. They had someone do it, but they didn't do it officially and they didn't pay them.

Well, we made them go back and get it done properly with the proper metal markers put in the ground. I said, "We can't work by stakes. Anyone could have moved those stakes. We need to know exactly where the boundary is."

Kevin Cheri: So, they weren't happy about that. Because [unclear] they didn't have a lot of money. But they had to do it right. Then they were supposed to still get back to us so we would know when the fence was going up. Well, to our surprise and amazement, they hired someone to do the work and it got done without us knowing. When we went out there and discovered it, and the ranger [unclear] patrol and he finds a fence not only built but built incorporating the land they bulldozed. So, they expanded onto our boundary to enlarge their cemetery. While acreage-wise, it was a small amount, I said, this is precedent. First of all, it's illegal. You've done everything possibly wrong.

Kevin Cheri: Again, we called them in for a meeting. This time they came like a couple dozen people, and they attacked me like I was the one who did something wrong. (laughter) I was so taken aback by the meeting; I literally was almost speechless. I couldn't believe how these people were treating me when I could have had them in jail. I said, this is not good. And I said, now how are we going to fix this?

Kevin Cheri: Well, one member, only member in their group who actually was a friend to the park, and a member of my own friends group, came to me and said, "Would you work with me and let's see how we can fix this." So, I worked with her. We tried to see if the local college welding school would come in and maybe do it as a project and help them put the fence in the right place. We were looking at other options of how this thing could be resolved.

13:27

Kevin Cheri: In the meantime, instead of being sorry for their mistakes, this group, like I said, came on the attack. They started to spread the rumor that I was coming after this poor little group and making a big issue about how I could easily just give them the land. And I had the power to just give them the land. I kept telling them no, I don't have that kind of power. That's not up to the superintendent. And they were convinced I did.

Kevin Cheri: The irony of all this, as bad as this got, I found out later that, like I said, the name was Shaddox. The head of the National Park Service lands office is a Shaddox. That's his relatives. If anyone could have explained to them how this works, it could have been him. But I came to find out when this elevated to the Washington level and someone told me, "You're talking about Shaddox? Well, that's, you know, so and so's from Arkansas. I think that's his family. But he doesn't want them to know what he does." (laughter) They were such a crazy group; he never did tell them what he did. They knew he worked in Washington. But I don't think they ever knew his real job. Otherwise, of course they would go to him. But he was not going to get involved. So, I got no help from him.

Kevin Cheri: But anyway, I was dealing with this. Like I said, this was going on for years. And the only reason it was going on for years because this was minor compared to my other concerns. I had floods to deal with, ice storms. I had other controversies. I had a GMP that I had started here that we were very sensitive to how that was going to work, because there could have been some significant changes suggested in that. That would not necessarily be well-received. And it was the first and only GMP this park would have. This park in 40 years of establishment had never had a GMP. So, I had lots on my plate. While I was dealing with this, I used that as, there was no need to rush. You know, we just kept a closer eye on, and we figured we had to figure out how we were going to help them help themselves.

Kevin Cheri: But in the meantime, because the looming threat they saw that I wasn't backing down and giving them the land, they were able to convince the local politicians that I was being unfair to them, that I was harassing them, etcetera, etcetera.

16:21

Kevin Cheri: What also elevated this was, after a couple of years of being here, a hog farm was put in outside the park. Located about five miles outside the park. And this concentrated feeding operation, where there are thousands of pigs—

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

Kevin Cheri: --raised and produces tremendous waste. The waste is then spread on fields, which happen to be right adjacent to a creek, a large tributary to the Buffalo River. So, there was tremendous concern over the impact this would have on the river, and the danger. So, talk about a contentious issue we were dealing with, the battle over this hog farm.

Kevin Cheri: The politicians here, you know, we're an agricultural state. So, the farm bureau has a lot of political clout. You know, politicians would refuse to come out against it or for it. They were going to play the fence and avoid losing their voting base on this issue. So, I wasn't getting any support from them. But I think they were getting so much pressure to get rid of me, because I sounded the alarm on this when I found out about the farm. They snuck it in so improperly, unethically, illegally, almost, and were getting away with it, that when I sounded the alarm, I think I got blamed for it. Everyone was blaming me for all the battle and the whole issue. But it was what needed to be done because the park was threatened. It was a clear threat to the park. And I think they saw an opportunity to appease those that were against me by maybe getting me out of here.

Kevin Cheri: So, when this cemetery group, this little association of a dozen families or so approached them and accused me of desecrating graves, and causing damage to their site and harassing them, they jumped on it. I had the two senators' offices, the congressman's office, but mainly the two senators, call me and berate me over

the phone with a representative from the regional office on the line as well. Again, stating these accusations that I was doing all these things. And I said, this is so absurd. They weren't giving me a chance to defend myself.

Kevin Cheri:

Prior to this, my relationships with all of those politicians had been very good. Actually, I was getting accolades consistently on doing exactly what they wanted. They were hearing good reports about my relationships with the community, all the communities. Because now this park is 132 miles long, river. So, I'm dealing with four counties, four or five counties and lots of different stakeholder groups. And they were so pleased with the success I was having in working with people, and the relationships I had. But like I said, something as simple as well now we've got this group's putting pressure on them to get rid of me. Now we have another group that's unhappy, they weren't going to give me the benefit of the doubt, and I think they used it as an excuse. Now this is a personal opinion. But I think that there's no reason why this is all of a sudden elevated to this level. Normally, when they got complaints about the park, they would pick up the phone. I had such a good relationship that the aides would pick up the phone and say, "Kevin, what's going on with this? Then explain it. Okay. That's what we thought. Draft us a response and we'll be good." Or "We've got this. We'll draft a response. No problem." But that's the kind of relationship I had, that I would at least get a call. Heck, they were treating me better than my regional offices were at times (laughs) when they heard complaints. But now, just like the switch of a light, they were reacting. The only way I could explain it was, I think there's another reason that they're putting this pressure on me. Because this should not be elevated to this degree. There shouldn't be this reaction. They didn't take time, opportunity, for me to just explain what was going on.

Kevin Cheri:

The local congressman who, where the cemetery fell in his district, had already been working with them. So, I had his aides as my witnesses that no, he has been cooperating. He has been negotiating, he's been trying to do the right thing. I even had a letter on my desk, recently signed by him, that stated, that complimented me on my most recent decision on how I was handling it. But yet, the two senators' offices were attacking me, and didn't even give me the opportunity to explain how ludicrous the accusation of desecrating graves was, because the people who worked for me, some of them were related to the people in the ground. There's no way they would desecrate their own relatives' graves. So that's how stupid the accusation was. But they weren't even willing to hear that and let me explain. So again, I think it was more politically driven than racially driven in this case. But I could not be totally convinced that there was not some of that as well in how I was being treated.

Kevin Cheri:

So basically, they took more control. They went to Jarvis' office with their complaint. I think they tried to pressure him to maybe get rid of me. But fortunately, Mr. Jarvis was able to appease them by just saying, "Look, I'll get Kevin some help. We'll get someone else down there to help negotiate."

22:37

Kevin Cheri: Well again, while Jon was probably dealing with lots of bigger issues, didn't need this on his plate, I was still offended. Because number one, why would someone else need to talk for me? I'm the superintendent. I've done nothing wrong. They know I've done nothing wrong because they know the policies. I can't just give away land. I couldn't do what they were asking. But no one called me. I didn't get to talk to the director. I didn't get to defend myself in any way. But they were just going to put someone here to help me negotiate. Like, well why do I need help negotiating, as compared to any other superintendent in the agency? And I've seen superintendents with hotter issues where there wasn't someone sent down to negotiate on their behalf. You know, Washington may have needed to be more kept involved and included, but they weren't taking over the negotiation.

Kevin Cheri: But I wasn't, at this point, again, I had a lot of things going on. I thought, well, like I said, the director probably just wants him out of his office. And he made a quick decision. I'll try not to take it personal, and just go with it. But they decided they were going to try to get me a deputy into the park to then, well, let the deputy be the representative to talk to them. Again, very insulting. But the region was willing to let me kind of select. They had someone in mind who used to work here years ago and was a superintendent at a nearby park. They thought well, he can come in and he'll be accepted and all this.

Kevin Cheri: I said, "No, no." I said, "That's not right. Because then, first of all, he doesn't need the experience. It's not going to be any benefit to him from a learning experience or whatever. And then also it undermines me because they will only talk to him. Everyone will start to go to him instead of me." So, I said, "If you're going to go through these ridiculous motions to appease these folks, then let's bring someone in who I can mentor to the next level, who can gain from the experience of being a deputy in a big operation like this." And this park could use a deputy. It needed a deputy. I said, "So that the Park Service gains. And I will feel better about mentoring and bringing someone in who can really gain from this. But also, who you feel comfortable enough to be able to represent the park in dealing with this little group."

Kevin Cheri: So, they asked me who I had in mind, and I told them. I said, "Laura Miller is a superintendent down at Jefferson Clinton Birthplace Park. She's up and coming, and she's a sharp, good superintendent. But her background's mostly cultural and historical. So, this would be a great opportunity for her if she's interested to get that experience. She knows all the Arkansas politicians, because she's an Arkansas superintendent. So, she'll be comfortable with them, and them with her."

Kevin Cheri: So, we did that, and that worked fine. In her first meeting with the group, their response was, "Look, they sent us a woman." (laughter) So I mean, from the very

beginning I was being vindicated by that, and slowly getting them to realize that this was a very difficult group to work with.

Lu Ann Jones: Did they say that openly?

26:23

Kevin Cheri: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. She heard. They, “Well, they sent a woman.” Also, the congressman, the senator’s office, and the congressman, they agreed to let the congressman’s staff be the main facilitators of these meetings. So, the congressman’s aide, who knew me and knew them already, was running the meetings. They immediately attacked him and accused him in such a way that the congressman put his foot down. Said, “That’s it! I don’t want anything else to do with these people. Senators, you all take it over!” And pulled his people. He said, “I’ll stay in the loop. But my folks are going to have nothing to do with this group anymore.” Because they insulted his employee. They berated him. And the senator was so angry – I mean, the congressman – that he pulled his person. So, it was beginning to unravel as they were starting to just proceed.

Kevin Cheri: Meantime, I was benefiting greatly and so was Laura. It was a perfect fit for me. My background was not interpretation. And while I wasn’t ignorant of running those operations, I thought it was great to have someone who had a stronger background. She was a historian by training. She had experiences in private industry before coming to Park Service. But my background was more in the other operational areas of law enforcement, maintenance, resource management. And we made a good fit. She was getting exposure to managing those operations that she had never managed, especially the biggest maintenance operations, and then a resource management program, and law enforcement programs, fire. We have a fire module here at the park. Where she also was able to help me get interpretation more focused and in line with my goals and the needs of the park. So, she was getting just what I wanted for her, that experience and development dealing with this group.

Kevin Cheri: But in the meantime, this thing continued and continued. And everything they tried; this group just didn’t go along with. They kept trying to get it done quickly and simply. And finally, and even things that would actually, offers that didn’t sit well with me, that I thought the Park Service is doing way more than they should here. This is wrong. We keep forgetting these people broke the law. And now we’re looking to reward them? I kept warning the agency and the senators, I said, “Look. Just know that while you’re trying to make this little group happy, a lot of people in the community, surrounding community, know these folks. Some of them don’t like them. And some of my staff have been insulted publicly by this group. The decision you make is going to get out to the community. And you can be challenged. And if you are taken to court on a decision to do some of the things that they were talking about,” I said, “we could lose. Or at least be very embarrassed.” So, I kept trying to warn them. I said, “I was not doing what I was

doing to be difficult. I was doing what I was doing to be consistent and within the policies of the agency.”

Kevin Cheri: A year went by. And by then, at the end of that year--

30:00

[END OF TRACK 4]

[START OF TRACK 5]

Kevin Cheri: --the politicians could not get away from this fast enough. They were pulling their own hair out, trying to resolve. They were so sick and tired of this group. I was so basically vindicated by this. In the end, we did move the fence and get it relocated. We even offered to build a new fence and they wouldn't do it! They were so stubborn, and I can't even think of the word. But even when the agency was willing to make me pay for the new fence, which was stupid! I said, "I can only do that because you're telling me to, but I couldn't do that legally." And so, we offered to build the fence, their new fence, and they wouldn't even do it. Because they thought by building the fence, that we would own the cemetery. That's how they thought. They'd think of these weird things that even when you tried to give them a reasonable, if not highly beneficial, solution to the issue. And so, in the end, everything that I was telling them would have to be done in the beginning, ended up getting done. And like I said, I felt vindicated because, but the fact that I had to go through that was hard.

Kevin Cheri: You know, there were a lot of people in the community who, like I said, other stakeholder groups who I got along with well, who were following this. I would get comments on, "Well, hang in there. We know you're doing the right thing."

Kevin Cheri: But what really got me was, I said, you know, I'm doing all these things that they're saying. But no one comes out and speaks out for my behalf. No one's writing letters to my boss defending me or supporting me. It's always just when you're on the side, one on one, someone will say, it's like they were afraid to show they were supporting me. Because sometimes there's a fear in this area that if you support the government, you get your house burned down. Or you know, you will end up with other problems. But I just kind of felt that all these people are staying quiet. They weren't saying anything or writing anything in my support. But if they did, it was just very one on one. Nothing, I was getting no support from any of these folks who were saying, "You're doing the right thing." Like I said, that was hard. Because, like I said, it was brutal. They started a petition to remove me. I forgot how many names they collected, and signatures. I never got to see the petition, although it went to my regional office. The regional director came down for a meeting at one point. And he even stated, "The fence won't get moved. We'll figure this out." And I thought oh, how could you say that?! I mean, you don't know what happened. I kept warning him about potential lawsuits

against the agency. How could we give these people land? And the precedent-setting nature of it. I mean, if we could allow one group to take land and then claim it, who's to stop anyone else from doing the same thing? What defense would the agency be able to say if they can let this group do it, if someone else said, "Well, we want to expand our boundary. We think we deserve this land, and you don't." I mean, this little issue could become a major impact upon the future decisions within the agency, or at least battles within the agency.

Kevin Cheri:

So, like I said, I was quite surprised at the way in which I was treated in the sense of what I had to do to get past all this. And yet never, never got any sort of acknowledgement for my defending the park. You know, no one ever came back. I never got anything from Washington just thanking me for what I went through, what they put me through. Same with the regional office. I mean, by the time Cam came in, at least he did support me in removing the fence. And he did, you know, say "Job well done." He did. But it was just, you know, it was part of where you feel all the articles that were written against me, the amount of, the attempts to try to discredit me within my agency, within the community. All that had occurred, the agency never did what I thought, in a way to help me feel better about myself and what I accomplished. Not directly. But, because of my own success in working with the public, in the things that I was able to do that I think did please people, if not surprise them, of how we moved the park forward, you know, I still remained well received and supported throughout my time. And you know, and in the end, you know, I think folks have been most appreciative that I stuck it out. I wasn't a boss, I wasn't one of those superintendents who came in, put in three years, and retired. The last, my two predecessors did. And that was not thought of highly by the folks here. Even people for or against the Park Service, or the federal government, didn't think very highly of that. And here I had stuck it out for 10 ½ years, through some serious controversy. Of the hog farm, the Shaddox cemetery. I had a prescribed burn issue that was challenged by a normally support group, the Ozark Society. And that one was a, pardon the pun, heated issue. So, I had lots of things to deal with, decisions that were tough. You know, we had damages to the park where immediate repairs were not done because in the case of docks or ramps to the river that were washed out by floods, I opted not to do what my peers had done and just replace, them, but to hold back until we could get proper designs and decisions on where would be the best places to put these facilities. Because we could not afford to constantly be using taxpayer dollars to replace something that Mother Nature was telling us shouldn't be where we were putting them.

Kevin Cheri:

Oftentimes people would – well, not often, but every once in a while, – I'd get a person who would complain because of the inconvenience of not having this road or ramp down to the river who'd say the park was in terrible condition and doing an awful job. But having to defend myself and say no, we're not going to waste taxpayer dollars until we can get the funds directed appropriately to the design people to come up and tell us where we should be putting these things

- Kevin Cheri: Then also with facilities that were close to the river, I also initiated the process of removing infrastructure out of the flood plain. So, we were having floods, and we were spending thousands of dollars, tens of thousands of dollars, cleaning up after floods. I said, this is ridiculous. I mean, people would have to walk a little further to the restroom, then let's put the restroom where it should be. And trash cans being washed down the river because you know, people wouldn't, they were worried people would just leave their litter on the river. So, you know, there were decisions that you wouldn't think would be that difficult.
- Kevin Cheri: But here, where people were left alone, again, a simple step back, like I said, when the park was established, it wasn't very well received. The Park Service, I mean, the staff here, when you went to town, you took your uniform off. You never went anywhere in uniform because you were afraid of the reaction you would get. So, they had this mentality of laying low. And to my surprise, after I left here, to come back and see how long that must have continued. That's why there was not much change in the infrastructure of this park. That's why the relationships with the community had not really developed much, because everyone laid low. They just never challenged much of anything. In 30 to 40 years of its establishment, there should have been my now some education and relationship-building that would have allowed them to make some positive changes that would have been well received, and appropriately received. But you had to be careful how you did things. The key was, is that you educated the public. You made them understand this is for their benefit. This is not us trying to take services away from you, to hurt you just because we're government. But we're concerned about this resource that we know you love.
- Kevin Cheri: This is what the last ten years have been about, for me, is reaching out, getting out in the community. I'd talk to anybody who invited me. Heck, the first group who invited me to talk to them were the Sons of the Confederacy, of all people. (laughter) And my staff actually questioned me. "You're going to go talk to them?" "Well, yeah. They invited me. Let's go hear them out." Again, well received. Didn't do bad. But I made it a point. I never turned down an invitation to go talk and meet with people, and then also made an effort to try to be invited, and to get an opportunity to talk to the local politicians, the local user groups and stakeholder groups that were here. Because they needed to understand how government worked, and that we weren't a threat, and that we did care about what they wanted to do here and how they wanted the park to be managed in the future.
- Kevin Cheri: That, I think, had the biggest impact on getting us to where we are today. I think we have the best community relations that this park's ever had. We have tremendous support. Even when we went through the sequestration and we had to cut a tremendous amount of services, I had four separate groups come up and offer actually maintain restrooms and a campground for the park. They were just volunteering to actually clean our restrooms so that they can stay open where we had lost 40 percent of our workforce in maintenance. And we physically could not maintain all the infrastructure we had. So, we had to cut back. They were so

sympathetic and supportive, rather than angry and accusatory or negative, that they came up with ideas of how they could help. And we had that going for a couple of years in a row, until we were able to reconfigure some of how we worked, and also eliminate unnecessary facilities, that we were able to not have to depend on other people to actually take care of our facilities.

12:48

Lu Ann Jones: Isis has got a question for you here if you'll take a question from her.

Kevin Cheri: Okay.

Isis Plaza: So, you kind of answered it. But I was wondering why after everything you had been through, all those challenges and what not, what made you decide to stay in the National Park Service instead of going somewhere else to another job?

Kevin Cheri: That's a good question, and there's a good answer to it. Because I think it was what drew me to the service in the first place. First of all, I loved the mission. I thought it was such a noble and good mission for what we were asked to do for the country. I love people. I love working with people and I loved an agency that allowed you to do that. But I also got tremendous satisfaction out of working with the other people within the agency. You know, there are a lot of good people who work for the Park Service. I enjoy working with them. I enjoy their passion as much as my own, and the fact of what we did. So, it was all about what we were doing and why we were doing it that kind of kept me interested in staying. I didn't think that it would necessarily be any better in some other federal agencies.

Kevin Cheri: But you know, like I said, while I had these issues, I can tell you about lots and lots of stories about very touching and rewarding experiences that I had. From things I did to help employees, I feel very good about, one of the things that I was committed to was being a good supervisor within the Park Service. I found too many times that when people had a problem employee, they just wanted to get rid of them. Or they hoped they'd go away. But they never dealt with them. And I took great pride in fixing personnel issues. In getting someone to realize that they could be better, and if they just worked with me or their supervisor, we can make them a better employee. Or getting someone to realize that this isn't what you want to do and let me help you move onto something else. And did. And they're successful in another job. But the whole idea of being able to mentor and fix problems and help situations, and the success I had with that, kept me in the job. You know, I feel like I was good at it. Like I really had a good ear for trying to get to the source of an issue. I was able to help supervisors who were having difficulties with communication and problem employees also relate to other people. Sometimes the issue had to do with folks just not really understanding what the real problem was within a person's work performance or relationships, because maybe it was an issue of their backgrounds being different or whatever.

But I found a lot of pleasure and satisfaction in helping shape people and helping them move forward in their careers or move on in a positive way.

Kevin Cheri: I also got rid of a lot of problem people. I fired several people. But I always felt that I'm doing what's right for the agency and the other employees of the park. Where my predecessors or the supervisor in between me and the employee that's being fired isn't doing their job. They're ignoring their responsibility. I have to now make sure that the right thing gets done. And so, I'm, you know, I have been in several parks where some of the people I got rid of were adverse actions, but they were the right thing to do. In the end, I had a stronger park and a happier park, because I dealt with it. Where in the past, people were frustrated having to pick up behind a poor performer because nobody was dealing with that performer. And so overall morale was increased.

Kevin Cheri: When you have accomplishments in anything you're doing, that's what keeps you going. So yes, there were the challenges, but it was also the success. Finally, in this long answer to your question, at the minority end of it, again, that opportunity to open doors and break barriers, was another thing I was committed to. I said, you know, there's a purpose I have now in life that I can see that I can serve in this agency, and it means putting up with some crap sometimes and things. But in the end, the agency will be better off if I'm doing what I think I'm doing, and what I thought I was doing right. By doing things right and being a good representative of my minority group, not only will I help maybe inspire other minorities to follow in my footsteps, but also I'm dispelling these stereotypes and opinions of people who've never been exposed to a black person, and certainly a black supervisor, that hopefully they can gain a positive outlook in the future, and maybe have better relationships in the future because of their opportunity to work with me. So those personal goals helped give me the drive to stick it out. But yes, there were times, there were a couple of times, I was very close to quitting. Because it was hard. It was very, very difficult.

19:33

Lu Ann Jones: I think you said when, that was a great question, Isis. I think you also said when we talked in late December at your retirement gathering, talking to some of your peers, that you said as much, that this has been, to be the first, to be the only African American in a job, in a park, was hard. It did take a toll. Am I remembering that correctly?

Kevin Cheri: Yes. It was at my superintendent's meeting just before I retired, in Omaha. We, Cam [Cameron Sholly, Midwest regional director] started having annual meetings of superintendent training, I should say. We don't call them conferences anymore. They had the opportunity, knowing that I was retiring at the end of the month, first of the year, to recognize me. When I got up in front of the group just to, of course, thank them for their support and just say parting words, I could not hold back my emotions. I was overwhelmed with that now this is ending and what I

had experienced. I had to be honest with them. I told them how difficult this has been in this agency to constantly be, always have to be the first or the only. In so many cases throughout my career, that it wasn't just in the beginning, or the old days. It was even at that point. I pointed it out to them that look in this room, you know, even now, I'm the only black manager, male black manager. There were about maybe up to a half dozen, not more than that, female managers, young managers, that were black within the room. Then there was a young black man who was only acting in place of the superintendent who couldn't be there. But I said, when you try to tell people things have gotten better, you can't look at this room and say that. I mean, we've got to be honest with ourselves. I said, I'm still finding myself to be the one and only in a situation. Going out over 40 years later, 43-year association with the agency, and 40 service years, plus, and here I am, the only black manager, male black manager in the room. And just to kind of explain to them how difficult that can be at times, and how hard that was. Because again, the constant worry about how you would be perceived. The constant worry about how you would be supported. And having gone through the experiences that yes, these things, I was living through these experiences. So yeah, I could barely get the words out. It was a highly emotional time for me. But I kind of felt they needed to hear it.

22:38

Lu Ann Jones: Do you think they got it?

Kevin Cheri: I do. I got a lot of supportive comments after. Like in the sense of that it was eye-opening, and some felt that, yeah, it was words well stated. You know, it will be interesting to see how it carries over in any possible way. But I just wanted them to kind of understand the perspective of a minority within the agency, and how, why we tend to think the way we do. It's not easy. They don't make it easy. And you know, so you know, that's what I was telling you as well back in December is how within our agency, it is frustrating to see what little in some cases has been done where we've not seen much change. I think that we can do a little better. I don't like the terms "underrepresented groups." I prefer the "underexposed," that we just don't have exposure to these things to know therefore what opportunities are there, or to take advantage of some of those opportunities. I mean, even my own kids, if it weren't for me in this agency, they have yet to go to a school that highlighted anything about working for the National Park Service. You know, so how would they know, if not for me, about this agency? And so, we need to think about, as we're trying to reach out to other groups, if we're doing a good enough job.

Kevin Cheri: But again, on the positive side, like I said, I've seen more diversity in use of this park than I have seen or think existed in years before. I think the word is getting out. So, I think the agency is starting to get increased use by minorities. But we still have a long way to go. The other side of that is in its relationship in dealing with minorities within the agency. For example, at the transition of presidents,

when Mr. Trump came in, there was a lot of people who all of a sudden got brave enough to talk and share their true feelings about the diverse members of this community, of all communities. And started to, and yet I don't know that the agency fully understood the impact that some of this hate and you know, various reactions of these different organizations and groups to feel more empowered by Trump's philosophy and/or examples, what that was doing to its own employees.

Kevin Cheri: Also, in a lot of the things that were happening in social media, more and more witnessed violence on black Americans. So, the hashtag #blacklivesmatter movement, and the impact that that was having upon our employees. We didn't do anything to necessarily try to address that. And again, part of that is when you don't have leadership in the higher parts of management who would be able to say that this whole Black Lives Matter issue is affecting our own employees. And what are we doing to help them in their own emotional and mental stability and health? I mean, I have an employee at Central High School in Little Rock who's one of the maintenance employees. His uncle and aunt were killed and beheaded. They were found at a train track. And [unclear] said that the local police told the family that it looked like it might have been a double suicide. Well, who commits suicide by jumping in front of a train? That's just so unbelievably stupid. And two people. To do it together? No. They'd find another way. Plus, there was no reason why these people would want to take their own lives. But this was just unbelievable type of things. The superintendent at that same park was harassed while, I think she was in Atlanta or DC, walking down the street. And someone yelled at her, "Go back to Africa!"

Lu Ann Jones: Oh my gosh.

Kevin Cheri: People were all of a sudden becoming much bolder about their, sharing their racist attitudes and opinions. Then people within the parks were being encouraged to talk more of the real story, tell the real story. And yet they were already having folks who, prior to Trump, had trouble hearing the real story of racism in the United States, or at their site, or talking about the real impacts of slavery or things of this nature. Now this was happening, and I didn't see a good response from the agency to recognize that we needed to encourage our own managers to talk and hear what's going on.

Kevin Cheri: I tried to talk to my own law enforcement staff about, just to see how they were handling the negative press that was occurring about law enforcement and dealing with minorities, some of the shootings and things that had occurred. The first meeting went south. I actually had an employee who got very defensive and said, "Are you asking us to treat African Americans differently? Are you saying, or accusing us, of not—"

Kevin Cheri: I said, "No, that's not what I said at all." I said, "I wanted you to understand why they perceive your actions differently." I'm giving them my perspective. And I

was trying to open up discussion to get a sense of their own mental and emotional status relative to a lot of the negative press that cops were getting. And—

30:00

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Kevin Cheri: --this innocent attempt to just open up discussion, to show support for them, it got easily turned around to, “Oh, I find this insulting. You think that we would treat people a different standard?” I said, “No, that’s not,” I mean, I did law enforcement. I can relate to everything that they were doing and could do. And I was just trying to get them to understand why if they were to stop someone, why they may react a certain way they react. Didn’t mean that they were innocent of anything, or guilty. It’s just kind of getting an understanding of what they were perceiving. Had they experienced anything, were they thinking a certain way because of what was going on in the country? Like I said, here in my simple attempt just to talk to them, the reaction I got, while it went south as far as accomplishing what my initial attempt was, what it told me was, wow! Look how stressed they are. And this needs to continue. This is exactly what I’m talking about. Because sooner or later we’re going to be talking about a law enforcement person in the Park Service who takes a black person’s life. And, whoa. Why do we have to wait for tragedy to happen before we start to address these issues? So that was my point, is that what are we doing as an agency? We have a law enforcement force within the agency. Are we talking to them? Are we providing training?

Kevin Cheri: I had a mandatory training for my law enforcement for cultural competency. I had a speaker come up from Little Rock. In cooperation with the local city here – and that’s another story – but I co-sponsored this training, and I asked my supervisors to go, and then I asked my law enforcement, my chief ranger. I said, “I would really like your staff to attend this. We’re going to do two sessions. I want you to divide them up and have them go. They need the training anyway.” But I was going to not sit back just because, again, I had a bad experience, it didn’t work the first time. Well, that wasn’t going to stop me. Because, like I said, I’m committed. I was committed to the development of these folks and to try to deal with things ahead of a problem, an issue. Just to let you know, the city of Harrison, if you type “racism in America,” Harrison will come up as the most racist town in America. I don’t know if you knew that.

Lu Ann Jones: You mentioned that before, I believe. Yes.

2:54

- Kevin Cheri: And that was another thing I got quite involved with, was working with the local volunteer group called the Harrison Community Task Force on Race Relations. This town found out just how bad people perceived them. And a lot of it had to do with some of their history. They're one of the many towns in the Midwest and South that pushed a black community out of the town back in the early 1900s. But also, there were other acts of racism over the years here and there. But also, then the Klan moved in in the 1980s, the mid 1980s. And as a result of all these things, Harrison has elevated to this status on the internet of being the most racist town in America.
- Kevin Cheri: When I learned about this group, they had been in existence for several years, I joined them. Because I told them, "First of all, you're trying to convince everyone you're not the most racist town in America. And yet here I am, the manager of a big national park, black man," and I said, "I'm not tooting my own horn, but the fact is, I've had great success in bringing in diversity. And you're never highlighting that." I said, "You've got to show your success, and what has changed."
- Kevin Cheri: So they welcomed me with open arms. And I don't think there's been a media group, whether it's been international press, TV, radio, to national or local TV, press and radio, that has not interviewed me. The only time I haven't is when I was literally out of town and not available. But from that point on, whenever they can get me in front of the camera or talking to one of those groups, they did. Because it's like I emphasized to them. I said, "You can go to the folks in Little Rock or somewhere else and tell them that Harrison is not a racist community. But you're white, telling them. That's what they expect to hear from you." I said, "You've got members of your task force that are minorities. We have to also be side by side or in front explaining what it's like to live in Harrison, for people to believe it." And I said, "So you've got to utilize us."
- Kevin Cheri: Well, I got better reception from them than I did my own agency. And they've been extremely pleased with the fact that, even people who in Harrison were against this group, because they said, "Oh, you're just going to make it worse if you talk about it," they realize that no, it's much worse than everyone thinks. We have to talk about it. But even those people who think that way, I've had some of them come to me and just thank me, saying, "It's so nice to hear something nice said about Harrison."
- Kevin Cheri: So again, stepping, I could quietly just not be involved. But I recognize that again, I'm in a position where, for whatever reason, God's put me in here, or fate has put me here. I could have a positive if not an appropriate impact upon an issue in the community here. Because they're not deserving of that reputation. There are a lot of great people here, and the people I sincerely call friends. My family has been happy and productive and safe. And so have many other people of various minority backgrounds. So why wouldn't I want to help them change that perception? That was my personal reason for being involved.

Kevin Cheri: Professionally, as I told them, I also want and need to be involved because if people are afraid to come to Harrison, they're not going to come to Buffalo National River. If I'm going to meet my goals of my agency to improve diversity within the employment as well as use of the park by diverse groups, then I also need to help you correct this perception. So again, that has been something I'm very proud of. And I continue to work with them in retirement. And quasi representing still the park until the new superintendent gets here. But also, as a, my retired status just continuing to assist them as I can with this effort.

7:38

Lu Ann Jones: So, Isis and I are going to have to leave this conversation before too long. We have enjoyed it so much. This has been one of the, as I think I told you back in December, one of the richest conversations I've had with anyone since I came to the Park Service nine years ago. But Isis often has kind of a final question that she asks people when we interview. So, I'm going to ask her to ask that of you now.

Isis Plaza: I was just wondering, what advice do you have for younger students? Well, younger adults like my age, or minority or not, coming into the National Park Service, or seeking a job within the National Park Service?

Kevin Cheri: Well, I think the main thing is to don't be afraid to step a little bit outside of your comfort level in exploring opportunities that exist in the Park Service. Because it is a quite noble agency with an equally noble mission. And there are significant opportunities that can provide a great adventure and experiences for you if you are so inclined. Give it a chance. By taking advantage of internships, seasonal positions. And then look for mentors. Find, especially if you find yourself, like me, in situations where you feel somewhat isolated and alone, it helps a lot to find someone who you can share your concerns with or just chew fat with. Especially someone of your own background. I didn't have that. And unfortunately, the few people within the Park Service who came before me, Robert Stanton, J. T. Reynolds, no one told me about them, and no one told them about me. So, while I was sitting there somewhat confused and nervous in some of my earlier positions, I lacked the opportunity to lean on them. Because no one, I didn't even know them. I didn't know anything about them. It would have been great to have been able to communicate with them. So, to let young people know, don't wait to find out. See what you can do to find out who's out there who can help you through understanding whether this is the right move for you and occupation.

Kevin Cheri: Because there's challenges in any job. You can work for IBM, Sears, Walmart, you can work for any other agency or company, you can always find things that aren't great or perfect about how they work or operate. It helps to have people who can just kind of let you know how it really is, or how bad something is where you realize I can live through this, I can work through this, if I follow these tips from this individual, or whatever. Because I think that oftentimes we do lose good

people who, they come in, they may have an okay experience, but they don't have a great experience like I did, because there's not someone sharing the stories like I've shared with you about all I got out of this. If they don't see it right away, the way I did, then they're missing out. So, I think it's important that they be willing to explore other options to what they thought they might want to do in their career. If they see that there's something that is at least somewhat appealing to them with the Park Service. And then find a mentor. Find people who can maybe help you have a better understanding, or get through difficult, at least questionable, times.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, thank you so much. Any, I was going to say if after you reflect upon what we've talked about in these two sessions, you'd like to add something else, we could arrange to do that. I'm going to be, I've already sent off the interview that we did last week to a transcriber. And I'm going to, when that transcription comes back, I'll send it to you for corrections. I'm sure that there will be names we don't know how to spell properly, etcetera. And I'll do the same with our interview here today. So, there will be an opportunity to make those kinds of corrections and maybe make additions, too, if you think there are things that we haven't covered. Does that sound okay to you?

Kevin Cheri: Yeah, that will be fine. And if you have any other questions that you think of that we didn't cover today, if you want to send me an email, I'll be glad to answer any questions you have.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, that sounds great. Yes. That sounds perfect. I really appreciate your helping us with this. This has just been fantastic. So, thank you so much. I hope you have a good rest of the day. We're going to go out maybe and battle the heat here in Washington. We'll see. (laughs)

13:25

Kevin Cheri: Yeah, I can imagine.

Lu Ann Jones: Is it as hot there as it is? Well, I think it's supposed to get a little cooler by the end of the week. But it's still in the upper, upper nineties here.

Kevin Cheri: Well, we've not been that hot yet, but it has been pretty hot. We've been in the lower nineties and the upper eighties the last few days. But it's been fluctuating. So yeah, it's been tough for all of us.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes, yes. Well, thank you so much.

Kevin Cheri: Thanks again for this opportunity. I appreciate your interest and going through this as well.

Lu Ann Jones: I'll send you an email. I think one of the things I wanted to ask you, if there were other people that you would recommend that I interview for this project. So, you could think about that. Maybe you could share some names and contacts with me if you think of some folks that would be good for us to interview.

Kevin Cheri: Okay. By the way, I already forwarded you the release form. So, you should have that already.

Lu Ann Jones: All right! (laughs) Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

Kevin Cheri: Okay.

Lu Ann Jones: Excellent. Thank you so much. Take care.

Kevin Cheri: You're welcome.

Lu Ann Jones: All right. Bye bye.

Kevin Cheri: Bye.

14:33

[END OF TRACK 6]

[END OF INTERVIEW]