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



Shirley Beccue
February 23, 2022

Interview conducted by Perri Meldon and Lu Ann Jones
Transcribed by Rev.com
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

SHIRLEY BECCUE

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Interview conducted by
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The narrator has reviewed and corrected this transcript.

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

[START OF FILE 1]

- Perri Meldon (00:00): I begin with a little intro and then we'll just jump into the questions.
- Shirley Beccue (00:04): All right.
- Perri Meldon (00:05): And Lu Ann, you are recording?
- Lu Ann Jones (00:09): Mm-hmm.
- Perri Meldon (00:09): Today is February 23rd, 2022. My name is Perri Meldon, and I am interviewing Shirley Beccue, who has held different jobs with the National Park Service over many decades. We are conducting this oral history today over Zoom. NPS staff historian Lu Ann Jones is also joining us, and the oral history recording will be stored with the National Park Service. So, thank you for meeting with us, Shirley. Let's start off with the beginning. When were you born and where?
- Shirley Beccue (00:51): I was born in Chicago, and I spent most of my young years in the suburbs of Chicago. I was born in 1943 and stayed in Illinois for 25 years going to high school and college in that area. So, that's my beginning.
- Perri Meldon (01:21): You said you grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and you attended school there. Did you go to public school in Chicago?
- Shirley Beccue (01:30): Well, I went in the suburbs. I lived in Bellwood, Illinois, and I went to public school there. College was about an hour away in Northern Illinois University. I did one semester in Urbana-Champaign at the University of Illinois after my injury, because the University of Illinois had begun to set up accessibility after World War II for veterans. And so, it was one of the few schools in Illinois at the time that I was in college that had more accessibility options and actually a very active, accessible department at the University of Illinois. So that was very helpful to be able to finish out my career, or my college years at the University in Illinois.
- Perri Meldon (02:27): I would love to return to that, and we will. That's quite a historic school in the history of disability in the US. Let's stick with your childhood for a moment. Did you or do you have siblings?
- Shirley Beccue (02:43): Yes. I have a sister two years older than me and I have two brothers younger than me. We are very scattered at this point.

[Momentary Zoom glitch interruption.] My sister presently lives in Georgia and my brother, two brothers, one lives in California and one in Indiana. We don't see each other often, but we are in contact by phone and by Zoom fairly often, especially with my sister. I'm probably closest to her.

Perri Meldon (03:23): That's lovely. What sort of activities did you all enjoy as children?

Shirley Beccue (03:29): Well, I was definitely a tomboy. I was outside as much as possible. In the winter, my parents had to call me in by nine or 10 because I was still building snow forts or just being outside and enjoying the winter season. We had a fairly active neighborhood. There were quite a few children on the block that I lived. Bike rides, playing baseball, football tag, hide and seek, all those things that children often do were a big part of our afternoons or especially on the weekends. Some of those children, I stayed in touch with through high school. I was probably the oldest one of that particular group. But after my toboggan accident in 1964, one of the childhood friends from those early years contacted me, which was really nice to hear from him because he had been someone that we played together all the time. So, it was very, very nice.

Perri Meldon (04:44): Yeah. Absolutely. It sounds that for the first portion of your life or so you stayed local, but I do wonder, were national parks, a part of your childhood? Was your family going out visiting them?

Shirley Beccue (05:01): No, we didn't really travel very much when I was young, probably not until high school. Then my father did take us out, down to Florida. We did a trip down there. We did stop at Mammoth Cave on the way, and it was in the winter. I remember it being very, very cold in the cave. A few years later we took a trip out to California. We stopped at the Grand Canyon, looked over the rim, got back in the car, and then we went to Petrified Forests because my dad and mom had been through Petrified Forests soon after they got married, and so my dad wanted to show that particular park to us.

Shirley Beccue (05:46): And I don't recall when we got to California that we went to any other national parks. I was familiar with them, the big names, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Rocky Mountain, but had no real connection to them as far as visiting or reading about them in any extensive way. So, it was fairly limited as a youngster.

Perri Meldon (06:13): I'd say you did pretty good getting down to Florida, California. Places I have not gotten to see all those yet, so it's neat that you got to do that with your family. As a child, did you have a dream job what you wanted to do when you grew up?

- Shirley Beccue (06:33): Well, when I was about six or seven, I wanted to be a magician, probably not a well-paying job or a career that would take me very far. But then I think as I got a little bit older in grade school, I thought I'd probably be a teacher of some sort. Because I really enjoyed sports, I thought maybe I would be an athletic teacher at a high school. That was what I was thinking of as I got older and as I went to college, that would probably be where I would end up. But somewhere probably around eighth grade or so I began to think that maybe art was a possibility for me. As I went to college, that's what I ended up getting my major in was in art education. I had close to a minor in physical education at that time as well.
- Perri Meldon (07:32): That's so interesting. So, you said you did continue on this to college. What year did you begin in college?
- Shirley Beccue (07:45): I graduated from high school in '61, so it would've been the fall of '61. In '64 after the accident, there was a rehab period, and then I finished up at University of Illinois in 1968, I believe is when I actually graduated.
- Perri Meldon (08:03): Can you repeat again? I apologize for missing it, the first school you attended, the first college.
- Shirley Beccue (08:14): I'm sorry?
- Perri Meldon (08:15): Can you repeat the name of the first college you attended before Urbana-Champaign?
- Shirley Beccue (08:20): Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. It's in the northwest corner of Illinois.
- Perri Meldon (08:27): Okay. And it's there that you began studying art education?
- Shirley Beccue (08:31): Correct. Yes.
- Perri Meldon (08:34): Did you continue to study art education when you went to Urbana-Champaign?
- Shirley Beccue (08:41): Yes, I did. I took several art classes and then there were a couple of required classes that I needed to take to complete my college education. I don't remember what they were. I guess they weren't as interesting as my art classes were. Probably something like history or geology, something like that.
- Perri Meldon (09:09): What is your preferred medium?

- Shirley Beccue (09:12): I like oil painting or now I'm looking more at acrylics. It's just a little bit friendlier in terms of environmentally, and when you're in close contact with paint all the time, some of those chemicals can cause some respiratory issues with people. So, acrylics are a little bit better on the body, so to speak.
- Perri Meldon (09:42): I understand. It's nice that you were able to keep that up before and then after the accident.
- Shirley Beccue (09:50): Right.
- Perri Meldon (09:52): Yep. So, prior to your accident, what sort of activities were you involved in during college?
- Shirley Beccue (10:02): In college I was in several intermural sports--mainly basketball, a little bit of volleyball. (Chuckle) One required class was creative dance, which I probably would never have made it on Broadway with my dance performances. But those were the primary ones. Basketball was one that I particularly liked and was fairly good at and baseball as well. Baseball had been something that I had enjoyed ever since I was old enough to throw a ball basically.
- Perri Meldon (10:52): Really were active.
- Shirley Beccue (10:54): Yeah.
- Perri Meldon (10:55): So, I will actually turn over to Lu Ann and just check in and see if you have any questions off the bat.
- Lu Ann Jones (11:02): I don't think so at this point. I guess I would say I'm always impressed when children, young people are encouraged to pursue art since so many people think of that as not a particularly--it might not be a particularly lucrative pursuit. So, you must have had some good teachers who would have encouraged that, encouraged you to pursue that talent.
- Shirley Beccue (11:29): Yep. I did. I can't say that I was a stellar artist, but it was a real strong interest to me, and especially pottery in college also was something that I really enjoyed. It sounds maybe a little silly, but at night, sometimes I could actually feel the clay in my hands going around the potter's wheel. It became a part of me in a way that I hadn't anticipated. It was really quite startling at first. And then it was quite a feeling of accomplishment to be able to be that close to something that I really enjoyed. You mentioned not being very lucrative, I remember after I graduated from college, my father sent me a clipping from a newspaper article, and it said that the

average artist makes about \$10 a day. And he said, "And this is what your college education has come to," in a joking way. He was always very supportive of what I did. But you're right, it isn't very lucrative for many artists.

Lu Ann Jones (12:57): Thank you.

Perri Meldon (13:01): I'll be interested to hear how you're able to or how you have incorporated art education into your career later in life, but we'll have time for that, too.

Shirley Beccue (13:12): Okay, yeah.

Perri Meldon (13:17): And I love your description of being able to feel that clay at night. I know that when I'm in the garden weeding, when I go to bed at night, I feel like I close my eyes and I just see weeds. It's funny how intense, when you're up close with something, you sense it intensely.

Shirley Beccue (13:32): Right.

Perri Meldon (13:36): So, we've hinted around it. And if you are comfortable telling us about it, could you share what exactly happened with this accident, when it happened to you?

Shirley Beccue (13:51): Right. It was a sorority-fraternity outing at college in DeKalb. We went up to Rockford, Illinois, which was about an hour's drive from the university. We went to a park, which I wasn't familiar with, but I have some aunts that live in that area. And we took different runs down this very steep hill. It had been, at one time, a place where there was actually a wooden toboggan run, but they had taken the forms out and so it was just an open space at that point. At the bottom of the run not too far away was a lake. So, they took that toboggan support out, I think because the fear of someone ending up in the lake. When we went, it was just a path through the woods down the hill. We went down and all of a sudden--there were three fellas behind me. I was in the front. And when we went down, we started to veer off a little to the right and the fellas were able to roll off.

Shirley Beccue (15:14): But me being in front and being the smallest person, I fell back onto the toboggan laying down. And then we swerved and hit a small tree. I hit my back and immediately there was a very, very sharp pain. People realized that I was injured in some way. The ambulance came and they picked me up. I don't recall if they put a sliding board under me or not, but it was painful when they picked

me up and took me to the hospital. Of course, I was sedated right away, and then I had surgery right away. A little side story to that if you don't mind. The fella I was dating at the time went with me to the hospital and he said when they had me in the hospital bed, they cut my clothes off because they didn't want to move me anymore than necessary.

Shirley Beccue (16:18): And he said, "All you kept saying was, 'Please don't cut my girdle. It's brand new.'" And he said, "I can't believe that was what was on your mind at the time." So, that's a side story from that. But anyway, I had an injury. They took out some fragments. It was a low injury. It was a T11, L1 paraplegic and was there at that hospital for probably a month. Then this fellow that I was dating, his father was a Shriner, and he was able to help me secure a spot at the Rehabilitation Institute in Chicago. And so that's where I spent another probably seven months or so in rehab in Chicago. At the time at the Rehab Institute, it was the beginning of cutting edge at that time treatment for paraplegics and amputees and so forth. So, I was very fortunate to get into that particular institution and start my rehab.

Perri Meldon (17:42): Were you placed in an adult or children's ward?

Shirley Beccue (17:46): No, it was all adults, as I recall. I don't recall any children in my particular ward. There were people with various types of injuries. Some were automobile accidents, which included head trauma. There were other paraplegics or amputees. It wasn't a very big facility. Today, it's quite a large facility, well-funded and again, leading technology. There's several throughout the country, several rehab institutes that have made major contributions to rehab for people with disabilities, and that is one of them. It has a different name now. It's named after one of the major donors for the institution.

Perri Meldon (18:42): Looking back on disability history in the US, the 1960s is seen as this watershed moment for especially rehabilitation and vocational rehabilitation, but you weren't thinking about that at that time. You were just a young adult in a hospital. Did you regain feeling over the course of while you were there or was it immediate severing of certain feeling?

Shirley Beccue (19:15): Yeah, it was a compression, but it was severe enough that I didn't gain any true feeling. There's some numbness that I have just right below the waist in a couple of spots, but it was pretty immediate that it was realized that I was probably not going to walk again, at least on my own. Maybe with advanced technology, maybe at

some point, but it was pretty immediate that the possibility of walking again was very limited.

Perri Meldon (19:55): Where were your parents and your siblings during this whole time?

Shirley Beccue (19:58): Well, they lived in Westchester, Illinois, at that time, which is right next to Bellwood, the town that I spent most of my younger years in. They came up immediately, not my sister and brothers, but my parents were up there. One of the real cheerleaders of me getting through that initial point of the change in my life was the dean of women at the university. Her name was Ruth Haddock and while I was in Rockford, the hospital, and when I was at the Rehab Institute in Chicago, I received letters, little notes from her every week, sometimes twice a week. She came to visit. She would call. When I got well and moved to different places around the country, Florida and here in Maine, she still stayed in touch with me. I saw her several times, but she was so instrumental in that she wasn't someone I wanted to let down. [Tears up with emotion.] Sorry about that.

Perri Meldon (21:24): No, that's okay.

Shirley Beccue (21:26): My parents were the same way and friends, but she was so persistent in that you are going to have a good life, was her attitude. And that really helped me to focus on not the past and not what was, but what can be. I still have a couple of her letters. She sent me a telegram and all it had on it was Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. It was right at the time when the Mary Poppins movie came out and she said, "You are," and then put this long string of letters together for that comment. I think that's whether a person has a disability or not, it is the people around you that get you through the crisis, the happy times of your life. I recently read a quote from, I think it's Don Hall, Don Halse, I think is his name, but he said, "In the end, we're all just walking each other home." I think that is so true, whether a person has an injury or not, but it is the support that we have that lifts us up when we fall and helps us maybe lift up others.

Perri Meldon (22:59): Yeah, yeah, yeah. While we all certainly have different experiences on this call, I think we can relate to that. You said that you didn't want to let her down. What did that mean to you at that time?

Shirley Beccue (23:24): Well, I guess I wanted to see in me what she saw in me, and when you have a traumatic event in your life immediately you're overwhelmed by where do I go from here? How can I make the life

that I envision I might have had? She was one that I guess I tried to see me through her eyes, and it helped me when I had moments when it was difficult to think about another trip to the doctor about some issue that I might be having, a sore or something. It helped me just say, "Okay, this is what we need to do right now, but this isn't the end." There's a light at the end of the tunnel, if you will, kind of thing.

Shirley Beccue (24:33): I still carry her with me. She passed away probably maybe 10 or 12 years ago, but I often think about her, and she was just one of these very positive women. And I'm sure I'm not the only person that she helped in this way. She had within her the capacity to be the person who lifted up many, many people in her life. And so, she's one of my heroes.

Perri Meldon (25:06): She sounds remarkable, and I am so glad you crossed paths with her. What was rehabilitation like during those seven-plus months that you were in the hospital?

Shirley Beccue (25:23): They weren't hard in any physical sense. I think it was more emotionally. It's like, "When will I be able to sit up in a wheelchair?" I was on my back for six months before they got me upright. And so, they were constantly turning me to prevent any sores. It wasn't difficult. It was just tedious that there wasn't an opportunity to sit up. That was, I think, probably the longest stretch. Once I was up, they started, slowly doing that so that I wouldn't have any balance issues and so forth and then fitted with braces and then would take walks, stiff legged walks with the therapist, so we did that quite a bit.

Shirley Beccue (26:28): There were all kinds of exercises on mats to strengthen and keep my limbs moving that sort of thing. That's pretty regular. Also, occupational therapy was part of that as well. How to dress yourself and get in and out of your wheelchair, in and out of the tub, those kinds of things. Of course, things have changed so much now. Now people if they had an injury like mine would be up probably within a week with a brace on. So medical advances in technology that's come along have moved rehab along substantially over the years, which is, understandable and remarkable in many ways. It was a long process. I wore a brace after I left the hospital for quite a while and encountered some things along the way that I hadn't anticipated. But again, there were people there to help me through those more difficult times.

Perri Meldon (27:41): Do you continue, if you don't mind sharing, continue to wear a brace? Do you use crutches? Do you walk?

- Shirley Beccue (27:52): No, I dropped the brace. I think we were thinking of maybe making a lamp out of it at some time. [Chuckle] I was able to do that. My back had strengthened and so I didn't need the brace anymore. Was not able to walk except with the crutches in parallel bars. I could not ever do it on my own. At time, it became difficult to do that just because I began to get busy with things. And so, I didn't keep up the walking. I probably should have. After probably oh four or five years, my legs began to fuse in a sitting position rather than straighten out. So, I regret not having done more exercises in the parallel bar in hindsight.
- Shirley Beccue (28:50): We lived in a tri-level house. And so, it was up and down several flights of stairs, with me bouncing up and down the stairs and someone bringing the wheelchair along until I went off to college. And then until I left Illinois and moved to Florida. Then I was on my own. But I didn't continue any significant rehab in terms of exercising and stuff, other than getting my chair in and out of a vehicle and doing some weights with my arms continually, that I have kept up a little better, but I still fall down on that some.
- Perri Meldon (29:34): I can relate to that. I will share as well. And I hope this is okay, I grew up wearing a back brace for scoliosis and my back brace is patterned. It is cow patterned. It is white with black cow splotches across it. And so, I haven't thought about turning it into a lamp, but we hold onto these things. [PM and SB chuckle.]
- Perri Meldon (30:08): So before we shift to thinking about college and where your path led to next, I do want to go back to Lu Ann and check in to see if you had questions.
- Lu Ann Jones (30:19): Well, I was wondering if in rehab, if emotional rehabilitation was a separate part of the rehab, or was it embedded in the physical rehab? The more that you can do the better you will feel emotionally, or did that come from professionals there or did it come from family and friends primarily?
- Shirley Beccue (30:52): Yeah. There was a component to deal with the emotional trauma that someone might have from an injury. I do remember it was probably--well, I went into the rehab center in December and probably somewhere around May when I knew it was time for me to come home, I had an incident at the rehab center that sent me into a depression that I hadn't experienced beforehand. There was a garden on top of the building on the very outside area where you could go up to. I was still on a stretcher. So, I was laying down and the orderly took me up there. There was a canopy that you could be

under, or you could be out in the full sun. It was a nice day, so I was out in the sun.

Shirley Beccue (31:45): He got a call on his phone to come down to do something. He said, "I'll be back in about five minutes." And I said, "That's fine." And when he left in a few minutes, I began to realize, or in my mind, I thought, "This is what it's going to be like to be paralyzed. I am going to be so dependent on someone else to move me from this place to that place." I was just overwhelmed with the feeling of being incapacitated and having to rely on other people to get from here to there, or to take care of myself in any substantial way.

Shirley Beccue (32:27): And so, he came back, probably in seven minutes even. But for me, it was just this I can't move this thing that I'm laying on. I felt overwhelmed by that. And so, for, I'd say, for probably three weeks to a month, I played that scenario over and over in my mind. I talked to the therapist about it, and we talked about it, and it helped me through that period of time. I don't recall that I had another feeling like that. Once I was back in my own setting at home and I was moving around more each day, I could sit up and so forth. But that particular moment was a startling moment. I really am disabled.

Lu Ann Jones (33:24): Well, one more thing, I believe in Nancy Russell's article that she quoted you quoting your father giving you a pep talk and saying, "This isn't the end. You're going to be okay." What role did your dad, your mom, those people closest, friends play in that whole rehabilitation?

Shirley Beccue (33:48): My family was wonderful and there was never a moment when, well, we can't go to this concert because it's only bleacher seating. We'll never be able to get Shirley up there. Well, my brothers hauled me up and down bleachers to see Bob Dylan and other concerts. My dad said, "You're going to have a job." When he said that he was standing at the end of my bed and I thought, "What is he talking about? I can't sit up yet." But again, he believed in the science of rehab. He believed in me. He believed in the family that we were, that we would support one another, no matter what. And my mom was the Florence Nightingale in many ways.

Shirley Beccue (34:40): And not only initially, but later on when I had surgery on my shoulders and stuff, she was there, helping me into a Hoyer lift, bathing me in bed, those kinds of things. She was there. My sister, who was a couple years older, she was very good. And her daughter--she had little children at that time, her and her husband, and the children were wonderful to be around because they're so

accepting and asked so many questions and so forth. So, I remember my one little niece-- And now let me know if I'm getting off on too many side stories.

Shirley Beccue (35:22): I was probably, I don't know, maybe a year into being disabled and I had a vehicle by then. I was babysitting her one day at home and I took her to the mall, and we walked around, we bought a few things. We had lunch together. When we came home, we sat on the sofa together and she was going through these little treasures, and she said, "Aunt Shirley," she said, "We had such a great time today." She said, "You bought me these things. We went to the mall; we had lunch together." She said, "Aunt Shirley, you're just like a real person." [Tears up with emotion.] That was another one of those moments that really, I have carried with me that I hope that people see the real person in me and that through the years that I've been able to see the real person in other people if they're different in some way. So, it was one of the best compliments I've ever gotten in my life. I don't usually get this emotional about things.

Shirley Beccue (37:03): But anyway, my family was tremendous, and I saw several other people. One was a roommate of mine at the Rehab Institute. Her family lived about three blocks away from the Institute. They never came to see her. They never called. She cried herself to sleep every night and asking, "Why don't I hear from my family?" And that was such a sad thing to see that someone that just wanted the love and affection and support by the people that you hope care for you the most.

Lu Ann Jones (37:45): Thank you for answering those questions.

Shirley Beccue (37:49): Yep.

Perri Meldon (37:51): Thank you. You said you were driving then?

Shirley Beccue (37:56): Yes. I had hand controls on the car. Yeah. Yep. First time I backed out of a parking lot, I probably backed out about 50 miles an hour, not realizing how to handle the controls yet, but I quickly learned.

Perri Meldon (38:12): Not bad. So, you eventually decided to return to college. Was it intentional to go to Urbana-Champaign?

Shirley Beccue (38:25): Well, it was because of better accessibility. They had ramps. They had higher toilets, they had showers and so forth. The university, again, had done a lot of rehabbing because of the vets in World

War II, and Northern [Illinois] wasn't set up for that in any extensive way.

Perri Meldon (38:53): I believe that's one of the first sites in the US that smashed curbs to create their own curb cuts.

Shirley Beccue (39:01): Probably so. I know that they were one of the few colleges after the war that veterans had access to, people that had disabilities.

Perri Meldon (39:16): Were you then surrounded by other students with disabilities?

Shirley Beccue (39:22): I went in the summer, so there wasn't a big population of students on campus at that time. I don't recall anyone in my dorm or in my classes that had a disability, at least a physical disability that was obvious. There was a department for disabled students to go to. I remember talking to one of the counselors there; and they were available to help if someone had an issue, either with access or even some emotional issue.

Shirley Beccue (40:03): I remember talking to the counselor and he said, "Every day you wake up, you're going to remember that you have a disability." He said, "You can either let that become your focus every day, or you can move on and live your life." That was one of the things. He was telling this to a class of us. It wasn't just me. I tried to keep that in perspective as well. You have lapses every once in a while, where you're like, "Oh, this is so awful," kind of thing, but you can get wallowed down at it if you allow yourself to. I think I've overall been pretty successful in moving beyond that, and it's because of so many people that have surrounded me that are positive people and supportive people. I don't know. It's not been easy sometimes, but it's not been the end of the world either.

Perri Meldon (41:16): What were some of the ways in which activities changed for you? You enjoyed ball, sports, you were on this art education path. In what ways did things stay the same? Did they change in the rest of your time in college?

Shirley Beccue (41:36): That's a good question. I don't know that much changed in my art in terms of finishing out my degree in terms of how I approached things. It was a little awkward carrying some supplies here and there to classes and stuff sometimes. But as far as sports, I became more of a spectator. I wish I had gotten more involved in some disabled sports like basketball or some other wheelchair sports, but I guess I just got busy with so many other things, just living day to day that I didn't pursue those to any significant degree. After my accident, I was an avid sports watcher. I still followed baseball, the

Cubs and the White Sox in Illinois and so forth but wasn't active myself other than pushing around to get some exercise outside parks and so forth.

Perri Meldon (42:49): And it also sounds that there were spaces for disabled students to get together. What sort of activities would've happened in those spaces?

Shirley Beccue (43:00): It was more of a center for counseling. I don't recall us gathering as a group much. There might have been opportunities for that, but I don't recall either remembering that or that that was an option. Again, it was summer, and so there weren't a lot of students in general and probably not too many that I encountered that either had a physical disability that I was aware of. There was no one that I met on campus that was in a wheelchair or had another physical disability that I was aware of at that time.

Shirley Beccue (43:44): Our class, our art class was quite small. I think there were only about seven of us in the class. One was a nun who I got together with her several times, just we had maybe lunch together at the cafeteria and stuff. But other than that, I did go home several times on the weekend. I was not on campus sometimes when maybe other events might have been happening that I might have attended otherwise.

Perri Meldon (44:12): So, you said you finished your degree in 1968 in art education. Did you have sights on a particular job or career path?

Shirley Beccue (44:24): Well, I thought I would go into teaching, and I did at some point put in an application for a job in, I think it's Springfield, Massachusetts. I had a partial interview, and I was thinking of going out there and then I thought, "Well, maybe I need to do something closer to home where family is." I didn't pursue the teaching right away. I went to work at an insurance company in a nearby community, which was probably one of the worst jobs I ever had. The people were wonderful, and I did the job fine, but I thought a lifetime of this, I don't think so. Rating policies, it just wasn't for me.

Shirley Beccue (45:25): There was a fellow that sat next to me the same age and he was an art major. So, he said, "I can't wait to get behind the canvas again." He left a little bit before I did, but then I had an opportunity to move to Florida, which I eventually did. I guess I was there maybe about seven months before I left that particular job.

Perri Meldon (45:49): Okay. How did you find yourself living in Florida?

- Shirley Beccue (45:55): Well, it's an odd story. I'll try and make it short. One of my sister's girlfriends--well, let me back up a little bit. I had lived in Illinois with my mom. My mother and father had divorced shortly after my accident, but they were on very good terms. We saw my dad every week, we'd go to dinner like a family and so forth.
- Shirley Beccue (46:23): So, he went to Florida. He bought a house in Pompano Beach, which is town right north of Fort Lauderdale. And he came back and said, "Well, we're moving to Florida. It'll be a better environment for Shirley. There won't be any winters and snow to deal with." I said, "Well, I'm not going because I want to go where I want to go when I want to go." So anyway, he sold the house, my mother and brothers went. I think he thought I'd follow right behind them. I went to live with my sister. She and her husband went down to Florida to visit my mother. They liked it so much they decided to move. So, I went to live with my father, and he was in an apartment in another town.
- Shirley Beccue (47:04): I was living with him when one of my sister's girlfriends saw in the Chicago Tribune that there was a nursery school for sale in Gainesville, Florida. She knew that I had a teaching degree in art. We pursued that and eventually my dad and I went down, and I purchased the nursery school, and then I moved to Gainesville. My mother and sister were down in Fort Lauderdale and shortly thereafter, my father moved to Vero Beach, which is in the middle of a state on the coast. We all eventually ended up in Florida, but in different places. So that's how I got in Gainesville, Florida. I loved Gainesville. It was a college town, lots of activity. The nursery school was just amazing, the kids, the staff. I never in my wildest dreams thought I would be doing that. And it was just really wonderful those 10 years.
- Perri Meldon (48:09): That's incredible, both the ad and the newspaper and that your whole family ended up there just trickling down. So, 10 years then you ran this nursery school?
- Shirley Beccue (48:22): Mm-hmm. Or sometimes it ran me, I'm not sure which some days.
- Perri Meldon (48:28): I imagine you were not the only staff member there, or were you?
- Shirley Beccue (48:32): No. We could have a total enrollment of 52 children, but we never had more than maybe 20, 22 at any one time. There were a lot of different combinations of half day students, morning students, full-time students. There was a lot of variety in how many children we had, but it was never, I don't think any more than 20, 22 children at any one time. Although some days it seemed like 50 children with

those 22 children, depending on who they were. I had several teachers. It was a college town. So, I had several students or spouses or partners of students. I had an accredited certified kindergarten teacher, and we became very, very close friends. I had fellows as well as women.

Shirley Beccue (49:32): And then there were some women that lived behind the school, and they had already worked at the school. They came in the afternoon, and they mainly were there to watch the children when they were out on the playground in the afternoon. In the morning, we did more formal things, a lot of art. We had an art show every summer where we collected all the products that the kids had made throughout the summer. We baked cookies. We made giant animals out of cardboard boxes, an elephant that you open his trunk and it's a trash can. We had a painting station for parents to paint a picture while they were there when they came on the Saturday for the day of our art show. So, we did a lot and a lot of field trips.

Shirley Beccue (50:23): I was very, very proud of the school in terms of the people, in terms of the program that we provided for the children. Again, they were these lift-me-up little people that lifted me up and made me want to go to work every day. I always appreciated those little kids and I'm in touch with several of them through Facebook. Actually, one of the fellows came to the area about seven years ago with his wife, and we got together for lunch. For a week or so, I think my wheelchair lifted up off the ground. I was just so elated to see this young man that I knew as a child and the wonderful young man that he turned out to be. It was just so rewarding to see him as a grown up.

Perri Meldon (51:16): They sound so lucky to have gone there. I'm jealous. I wish I could go there now. I can't help but thinking as you're describing all this, this is well before the ADA. What accessibility features were throughout both the nursery and the playground?

Shirley Beccue (51:39): Well, my dad and my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, built ramps. There were three different entrances. They built three ramps to get in and out of the playground or the parking lot and so forth. The toilets, we raised up one of the toilets. Excuse me. The building itself was an old building, but it was a very open layout. So, there wasn't much that we physically had to do to the building to change it as far as accessibility for me. So there really wasn't much to do other than the ramps and the restroom.

- Shirley Beccue (52:20): We had at one time, a young boy who was autistic, who came to the school for about a month. I partnered with the University of Illinois, not the University of Illinois, but University of Florida on several projects. One of them was to have students come evaluate how the nursery was run and the interaction with teachers and so forth. Also, how this young autistic child interacted with the staff and with the other children. That was another thing that we partnered with this particular group of student teachers, and they wrote up evaluations on their visit to the nursery school.
- Shirley Beccue (53:10): We also partnered with the University of Florida architectural department. They created some large playground equipment. There were big blocks that each side had something different, something you could crawl through, or you could climb on. You could turn those big blocks--they were probably about six feet tall or square--and you could turn them in different ways to create a different play experience for the children. So that was real exciting to be able to partner with other university students and also other departments at the university.
- Perri Meldon (53:57): Absolutely. I'll turn to Lu Ann now and see if you have any questions to ask?
- Lu Ann Jones (54:06): I don't think so. What an interesting interlude to run a nursery school. Again, I think you told Nancy, and you alluded to that the kids, because they much like your niece had been very curious, no holds barred, just very open and accepting. So, it seems like that could have been a very good interlude in your life at that moment.
- Shirley Beccue (54:38): It definitely was. Yeah. They asked questions that adults often wouldn't or didn't ask and that's understandable. I would see them sometimes imitating me. If I crossed my legs, of course, I had to pick up my leg and put it over the other, and I would see them sometimes sit down and do that. Children do watch what you do, so be careful what you do. They helped me do something I never thought I would do. I became a storyteller. I read books occasionally to them, and I don't even know how it happened, I created this whole series of characters. They were called the Gainesville Gypsy Stories. And that's the name the kids gave to them because the Gainesville Gypsy was as big as my thumb, and she had several important friends. One was the Miami Moose who was a full-grown moose, the Fort Lauderdale Fly and the Micanopy Mouse. Micanopy was a town nearby. They had these little adventures all the time. The Gainesville Gypsy was quite prone to getting into trouble and her friends were always bailing her out.

- Shirley Beccue (55:59): And she loved cheese and crackers. She'd do anything for cheese and crackers. So that was one of the snacks that we would often have at the nursery school in the afternoon was cheese and crackers. I would ask the kids to tell me what they had in their pockets. Someone might have a little car or a coin, and we would build a story around whatever the kids had. They were just spontaneous. It wasn't something that I wrote out. Although my mother gave me a bunch of tapes and said, "You need to tape these and write a book sometime," which I never did and regret to some degree that I never followed up on that. There were a lot of components to having the nursery school that brought out sides in me that I never knew that I had or developed in ways that I hadn't thought about in the past. Again, let me know if I'm getting too much into storytelling here.
- Lu Ann Jones (56:55): No, you're excellent. And I guess I was thinking without knowing it, perhaps you were doing some self-training that would prepare you for becoming a park service interpreter.
- Shirley Beccue (57:11): Right. Yeah. I think the exposure to the kids, and also just more interaction with adults, the parents and the teachers, it always helps develop your interpersonal skills. So, I attribute some of that probably to working at the school.
- Lu Ann Jones (57:32): Yeah. Thank you so much.
- Shirley Beccue (57:33): Sure.
- Perri Meldon (57:38): Sure. I am curious then hearing all this, why after 10 years you decided it was time for a change?
- Shirley Beccue (57:47): I guess I was exhausted because I was the teacher. I was the bookkeeper. I was the cleaning lady. I was the carpenter and sometimes the cook. I didn't have a lot of personal time. So, I was just physically tired and maybe I got the seven-year itch at 10 years instead of seven. I was thinking that maybe it would be nice to be a little closer to my family. I was about six hours away. I would go down for holidays and other events, but it wasn't that I saw them on a very regular basis. So, I thought maybe I'd do that. I started to look into some other options for careers. I took a year off and did a lot of volunteering in Gainesville, a nursing home, a prison, the park district. I don't know. There were several others in there. I started to take some classes at the university thinking, "Well, maybe therapeutic recreation might be something that I might be interested in." I took a couple classes thinking in that regard.

- Perri Meldon (59:06): And that's so interesting, just the variety of volunteer work you took on. What led you then to the national park service?
- Shirley Beccue (59:16): Well, at some point I thought I really do need to take on a summer job to see exactly where it might take me in terms of something more permanent. I applied at the local employment office, several parks, couple of them up in the Northeast, one in New Hampshire, one of Massachusetts. I also applied to the National Park Service too, not really knowing exactly the opportunities might be there. I was interviewed and offered a job at one of the New Hampshire sites. It was for a summer job—
- [END OF FILE 1]
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- Shirley Beccue (00:00): They said, "Well think about it for a couple days," and then let us know. In those couple of days, I got a call from Everglades National Park, and I talked with the ranger there, Doug Cuillard. He said it's a summer job. It's a special appointment, and there were special hiring appointments at that time for people with disabilities, which I didn't know about. I learned later about that. He said it's a summer job. He said, "But if you work out for us and you like us, it could turn into a permanent job." When he said that, I thought, well, a summer job in New Hampshire or possibly a permanent job somewhere closer to my family as well, because they were then only two hours away. So, I took the Everglades job, and the rest is history, as they say.
- Perri Meldon (00:57): What year was that? And what was the job?
- Shirley Beccue (01:01): It was an interpretive job, a summer job working at the visitor center giving some programs. It was 1969, or-- No, '79. I'm sorry, 1979.
- Perri Meldon (01:17): That was the first year of the National Park Service's accessibility program, too. It started at the end of 1979.
- Shirley Beccue (01:26): Mm-hmm.
- Perri Meldon (01:29): What sort of work were you doing there at the visitor center?
- Shirley Beccue (01:33): Well, it was orientating visitors to the park with the map. At Everglades, I don't know if you've ever had a chance to be there, but there's a trail--I mean, sorry, a road 47 miles long or 42 miles. I forgot my statistics. There were stops along the way, a Pinelands trail, a hammock, a freshwater slough, and so forth. So, orientating them with the park map on getting down there.

- Shirley Beccue (02:03): Then the programs I did, there was a demonstration area at the Anhinga Trail, which is only about four miles from the visitor center, and did talks on alligators, tree snails, night walks. One of my favorites was a car caravan. We only did that on the weekends. It was a four-hour trip where people would follow in their own cars, follow the ranger down and stop at these various trails along a park road and explain about the environments that are part of the Everglades. So, it was quite a variety of things. Then in the office, I was in charge of the slide file, which was a lot of slides at that time and odds and ends. I can't remember exactly the other office type related work that I did. That was the initial job I had.
- Shirley Beccue (03:04): When the job became permanent, I was more of an assistant to the supervisor that was supervising me. Then I began auditing the staff programs, the ranger-led programs, which was one of the jobs that I really, really loved at both parks. They were just such incredible young--well, they weren't all young--but incredible interpreters. I learned so much about the park from them, not only the history and the natural and cultural history, but also style of interpretation. That's primarily what I was focusing on initially was helping them in ways of maybe engaging people more, or ways of engaging people in presenting their information. They were role models and some incredible interpreters at both parks that are standouts, several of them winning the Freeman Tilden Award in their careers, so very stellar people. Yeah.
- Perri Meldon (04:17): I'd like to go back a little bit. You said the car caravan trip was your favorite. I love hearing stories about Everglades, so it's hard to imagine that one job could be better than another except perhaps the slides. So, what made car caravan so special?
- Shirley Beccue (04:35): I think I liked it is because it was a four-hour program that you got to know the visitors and they got to know you. The exchange between the ranger and the visitors was not only longer, but it was more in depth at times. You found that you had some commonalities in between the visitors and things that you were interested in. So, I think that was a real plus in that particular program. There's so many great environments in the Everglades; it was just fun to be able to have an opportunity to focus on some that were further away from my quote "home base" up near the visitor center that I got an opportunity to explore them with the visitors as well.
- Shirley Beccue (05:33): Also, the one thing about Everglades that I realized very soon on was there were a lot of return visitors to the park. You might see them season after season. And so many of them came to the same

ranger program, not just mine, but everyone's that they probably could have done the programs themselves because they just enjoyed being there as part of the group. So, it was a really nice exchange of connecting with the visitors on that longer program, but also the shorter ones as well, return visitors. Yeah. Yeah.

Perri Meldon (06:18): That's very special. And Everglades is a very special place. I wasn't familiar with a task you just described about auditing ranger-led programs. Can you just describe that a bit and how you ended up doing that?

Shirley Beccue (06:34): Mm-hmm. Well, it was something that my supervisor felt that would be a good learning experience for me. We went out a couple times together. He was doing the major auditing, and then we would go back to the office, and he would say, "These are some of the things that I saw in this particular program," or he would ask me, "What did you see in how the ranger presented this particular topic? What would you say that he did really well, or she, and what do you think they might be able to improve upon?" We went through several of those type of exercises together, and then he sent me out on my own eventually, and I would do a writeup for the staff person that I was auditing and share that also with my supervisor. That became part of their file. I enjoyed that a lot.

Shirley Beccue (07:37): I felt that I got pretty good at it. I felt that many of them knew more than I did in terms of the actual subject matter. But I think in terms of being able to help them with their presentation; sometimes it's a small thing. Sometimes it was larger things. But I thought that I did it in a way that they went away feeling positive about us talking about the program. It wasn't like, "You should have done this." I'm not that kind of a person, and most people aren't, but I know some people have had experiences with other audits that have been devastating sometimes. I think I was always cautious about that. I like to feel that I was helpful with making them better interpreters, although some of them, there's no way they could get any better than they were. They were born to be interpreters.

Perri Meldon (08:43): Wow. By this point, with the knowledge and skills you had gained with the Park Service, did you find that you had a conscious career path with the Park Service?

Shirley Beccue (08:57): I did. I didn't know how long I'd stay in Everglades, but I really felt comfortable. I think the first year it was sometimes I felt like a fish out of water or an alligator out of water. I'm not sure. There's park speak, that's the language, and like, "What are they speaking about here?" And just realizing that I didn't have the background

that a lot of them had, but then I learned that the assistant superintendent, his background was in English. It wasn't in Everglades ecology, so that that helped.

- Shirley Beccue (09:41): But I think it wasn't very long after I became permanent that I really felt I was in the company of some incredible people that were so committed to what they were involved in in their careers, not their personal careers, but in telling the park stories. I thought how lucky I am to, by this kind of odd circumstances, ended up with these people. I remember going up to Big Cypress, which is on the border of Everglades National Park on the north side of Everglades. It was on a permanent staff tour of Big Cypress, and someone was giving several different lectures on various aspects of Big Cypress.
- Shirley Beccue (10:33): I remember on the way home, we were all kind of quiet because it was a long day and we were tired. But I remember looking at these people who I'd gotten to know in the course of the year or so, and thinking these people are the kind of people I would want to be in if I was ever in a crisis situation. They were people that were well grounded in humanity, for one thing, but also in terms of sensibility, and they were extremely fun to be with. So, I thought I would really like to stay in this kind of work environment. So, that's what I chose to do and have never regretted it. Mm-hmm.
- Perri Meldon (11:23): It sounds like you've had really supportive colleagues throughout the way, along the way. I'm just wondering, when you arrived, did you have accommodation? Were there accommodations in place in the workplace? Did you face resistance or assumptions from colleagues about what you could or couldn't do?
- Shirley Beccue (11:48): No. I don't recall any difficulties in that regard. I was staying in park housing, and I did the whole time that I was in Everglades. It was a duplex. They had put in a ramp in the front, and there was a little screened in porch in the back. There was a short ramp that went into that area. The restroom was small, but I had a device on my wheelchair that I could maneuver. It was kind of like a crank that pulled my wheelchair together, and I could get into the bathroom to take a shower and so forth. Then I could undo the crank once I got back out of the restroom. So, housing facilities were not an issue.
- Shirley Beccue (12:39): They put hand controls on one of the park cars for me to use. In the main offices where I was, there were already wheelchair accessible restrooms. It was all level, and one of the attractions about Florida is that most of it is level. I think the highest point was like about

four feet in one section. (I'm just going to grab a little water here). So, there weren't any physical obstructions. Again, as you mentioned, there was much more awareness and actually action being taken, not only in the parks, but around the country, especially in government facilities.

Shirley Beccue (13:37): A friend of mine brought over some "In Touch" magazines. I don't know if you're familiar with those from the Park Service. They were done by Hoofnagle, I believe. There were several issues that had articles specifically about access in the National Parks. In fact, I even wrote one of them, which I hadn't remembered until my friend brought it over. There were other parks doing the same thing, that there was more awareness. There were more people being hired, more opportunities, whether it was by special appointment or otherwise, being able to be part of the Park Service family. So, it was a timing thing in many ways for me, that there were more opportunities out there. Actually, the Everglades, the fellow that interviewed me, said that they were looking for someone with a disability who also had some management experience, which of course when I had the nursery school was a big part of what I did.

Perri Meldon (14:38): Mm-hmm. Absolutely. Well, I just want to take stock of where we are. We're at an hour and 20 minutes and just wanted to see how everyone's feeling.

Lu Ann Jones (14:52): I'm doing fine. I do think we might want to think about cutting this into two because you were at Everglades and then at Acadia for a good long time. I wouldn't want to cut short your Acadia experience, for example, so was wondering if we might think about that as a separate, doing two parts. What do you think, Perri and Shirley?

Shirley Beccue (15:19): That's fine for me. Yep.

Perri Meldon (15:24): I think we should do that then, so we can feel a little refreshed, shake ourselves out a bit and then get back together in a week or two at most. I also want to cover I think you went to Albright Training Center --would love to hear about that experience as well.

Perri Meldon (15:46): Before we would break today, are there any thoughts that you wanted to share that you didn't get to earlier?

Shirley Beccue (15:59): I don't think so. I mean, I hope I'm not going off too far on some of these little side stories. Some of them I haven't thought about in a

long, long time. So, it's kind like *deja vu*, reliving my past, so to speak. No.

Perri Meldon (16:18): I mean, it's a pleasure for us to be able to listen. Thank you for just opening that space to share with us.

Lu Ann Jones (16:26): Yeah. I think you're a great narrator here. Just really good.

Shirley Beccue (16:31): Oh!

Lu Ann Jones (16:31): Yeah. Yes, I would echo Perri that Ranger Skills, it's such an important moment for people in the National Park Service, and you went at a time when Ranger Skills was really an intensive training, not like fundamentals it has become now, a very truncated kind of orientation to the National Park Service. So, I would really be interested in hearing more about that.

Lu Ann Jones (17:02): Can I ask another question about Everglades, though? I mean, on the one hand, Everglades is special. It's also awfully buggy, [laughs] and I got as close to being eaten up by mosquitoes at Flamingo one time as I've ever come, and I grew up in a pretty buggy part of Eastern North Carolina. So, what part of the Everglades, just natural area, did you enjoy and were there challenges? I mean, it's an intense environment. Were there parts of living there--? It's also hurricane country, et cetera. Were there also challenges to being in that part of Florida?

Shirley Beccue (17:44): Right. Yep. I was in the district from the visitor center all the way down to Mahogany Hammock. It was about a halfway point between there and Flamingo. But most of my time was spent either at the visitor center or the Royal Palm area where the Anhinga Trail and the Gumbo Limbo Trail was. That's where our interpretive staff and myself did most of our programs was at Royal Palm, night walks and other, bird walks. I did quite a few bird walks there and other little presentations. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones (18:26): Mm-hmm.

Shirley Beccue (18:28): You asked something else about--.

Lu Ann Jones (18:31): Well, it can be a challenging environment. One, it's hot; it's humid. It can be where hurricanes come, for sure. So, any of those weather extremes that you experienced firsthand?

Shirley Beccue (18:45): There was. There was a hurricane, and it was Hurricane--. I can't remember the name of it now, or the year. But it was quite

devastating for South Florida, and we were all on watch. I was on one of the watches, like from 1:00 in the morning till like 7:00 in the morning kind of a thing. So yeah, it destroyed quite a bit of the area closer to Flamingo than it did up where we were.

Shirley Beccue (19:23): Then I had moved here shortly before Hurricane Andrew hit, and that was extremely devastating to the park itself and the park staff. I was more of a viewer on that, but I still had a lot of friends down there at the time, and so was in touch with them a lot and really concerned. The park management, one of the first things they did at that particular storm was to secure the park staff, whether they lived in the park or out of the park, because they needed to get the personnel feeling comfortable that they and their families were secure before they could deal with anything in the park. I thought that was the right way to go with that.

Shirley Beccue (20:16): So, there was a hurricane when I was there, and it was a little scary, well, actually it was a lot scary because you just don't know how that's going to affect you. But people always pulled together, and there was such a camaraderie among the staff in terms of wellbeing of other staff members, whether it be for something you were doing in the interpretive division, or just in general that you were safe. But yeah, it got very buggy at times. That's for sure.

Lu Ann Jones (20:52): Yes. One last question here, which we could answer now or later. Do I remember correctly, again from Nancy's article, that you helped promote making one of the backcountry chickees accessible? Am I right about that?

Shirley Beccue (21:13): Yeah. I was involved in that. Actually, my boss, Deb Wade, she was environmental ed supervisor. She kind of instituted or initiated that. So, we did. We built a larger chickee. This is like a platform with a canopy over it and an outhouse in it. The one that was designed for Pearl Bay was going to be wheelchair accessible, and so it had a little slip to pull the canoe into and a stairstep arrangement that you could bump up out of the canoe and get on the main platform. A friend of mine and her husband, and then one of the other rangers and I took a trip out there after it was built, and we stayed overnight there. I just kept wondering, "I wonder if those alligators could climb up steps?" [Laughs] So, it was like I slept with one eye open. But yeah. It was a thrill to be back there.

Shirley Beccue (22:16): But Deb, who became my supervisor here at Acadia, was always involved in access. Actually, after I was hired at Everglades, she

hired a woman who was legally blind, but she did all the reservations for the environmental ed programs at Everglades. She was there several years before she left to go somewhere else. Deb was real, real instrumental in moving employment of disabled people forward at Everglades.

Lu Ann Jones (22:55): Well, it seems like in many areas in the National Park Service that you can have policy, but policy depends on particular people to make sure it turns into action. So, it sounds like Deb was one of those. It could have been that there would not have been a Deb at Everglades. But would you say that that's generally true in the Park Service, that some people have been promoters of those policies, others more reluctant or foot dragging?

Shirley Beccue (23:30): Yeah. I think, yeah, having a point person so to speak was very pivotable in a lot of parks and she was definitely that. In this park as well, when I came here to Acadia, there was a young man. He was an SCA [Student Conservation Association] and he was a paraplegic, and Deb had found ways to find that. She was good at management. She was good at finding finance. She was good at looking at the need and filling that need. She's my best friend, too. So, that tops it at all. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones (24:08): Well, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure to kind of have been an eavesdropper/spectator watching for you and Perri's dynamic. I like it a lot today. It's been great.

Shirley Beccue (24:26): Well, thank you. It's been nice being with you all.

Lu Ann Jones (24:26): It has. It's been great to be visiting with you.

Perri Meldon (24:32): Thank you. Shall we schedule a part two?

Shirley Beccue (24:36): That's fine with me.

Perri Meldon (24:39): And I'm going to stop recording.

Automated Voice (24:41): Recording stopped.

[END OF FILE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]