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



Melissa English-Rias
September 16, 2020

Interview conducted by Lu Ann Jones
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

MELISSA ENGLISH-RIAS

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The narrator has reviewed and corrected the transcript.

00:00

Lu Ann Jones: So, hitting the record button now. I just do an introduction just to say that this is Lu Ann Jones. I am the historian with the Park History Program in Washington. I'm recording today from my home in Alexandria, Virginia, because we're in pandemic quarantine. And I am talking to Melissa, could you introduce yourself briefly?

Melissa English-Rias: Hi. I'm Melissa English-Rias. I work in the Interior Region 2, which is the former Southeast region. I'm an interpretive specialist. I work in the interpretation, education, and volunteer and community partnership division.

Lu Ann Jones: Great. Thank you. And do I have permission to record this interview?

Melissa English-Rias: Yes, you do.

Lu Ann Jones: Great. Thank you so much. Well, I looked at the detailed summary I made of the interview that was done during the training a couple of years ago. I think that that was a really good foundation for some of the things we want to talk about a little bit more in detail. You know, I was interested before we get to the Park Service about just your experience as a student at an HBCU. What difference that made. Could you think about that a little bit?

Melissa English-Rias: Well, I didn't go to an HBCU.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, Lander is not—

Melissa English-Rias: Lander is a small liberal arts college in Greenwood, South Carolina. I did not go to one. My family did, but I didn't. My mother and my aunts and a lot of my family did go to, but I did not go to one.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh. Well, I am sorry. Well, what was kind of the makeup of the student body there?

Melissa English-Rias: When I went, there was probably about 2500 students. I would say probably seven to eight hundred were African American, and it could have been more, this is back in 1983. But it was close-knit. I would say that the counties that a lot of people came from, they were small counties. And also, it was mill. Like I came from Aiken, which was mill, and Greenwood Mill, and all these places had a lot of mills. So, the families were all, you were coming from a lot of working-class families who worked at all these plants. So, I think everybody had kind of the same idea. Some of us were either first, or me, I was a second generation. Their parents had not been to school, or some of them had been in school. So, I think for all of us, regardless of our ethnic background, it was we're going to school, we're going to get in the job market. We don't want to work in the mills like our

parents, you know. So, I think it was really good. I mean, I go back every year to homecoming and see the people who I worked with and everything. So, it was a very close; I mean, the people still even know your name, the professors. So that's why my mother thought, even though she went to Benedict in Columbia, she thought that that school would be better for me because it was close, people knew your name. So, when the professors know your name; I mean, I didn't write the last four digits of my Social Security number. So that's why we chose that one for me. I'm really close to a lot of the people who I went to school there.

Lu Ann Jones: Do you have any sense of what difference it made that some of your family went to HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] but you did not? Any sense from talking to them?

03:17

Melissa English-Rias: Well, I don't know if I really missed. Even though it wasn't HBCU, do you know about homecoming? So, I would go to South Carolina State homecoming because it was in Orangeburg. So, I knew about that experience of going to, participating in the homecoming and stuff. But I do believe for them, especially coming from, their parents were sharecroppers and stuff. It was the idea of getting the education so you could support your family and send your children to school. So, it didn't matter what school I went to. Me and my cousins and my brother, we had to go to college. So, I think that was still instilled, regardless of the school, that we had to go to college.

Lu Ann Jones: And it was a small college experience.

Melissa English-Rias: It was a small college experience. Because first I wanted to go to like USC Columbia. She was like oh, that's too big for you, you'll get lost. So it was that small college experience. Which some HBCUs, that's what you are getting, the small college experience.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, you started working for the Park Service while you were in college. So, tell again how that happened, that particular piece of serendipity.

04:21

Melissa English-Rias: I'll be honest. I was in a history class. The history professor over the department came in. And of course, it might have been what, maybe eight or ten of us, because we were all seniors. Was I a senior? Yeah, I was a senior. He came in, he said, "I have a question. Everybody know about the Star Fort?" We all looking like (makes uncertain sound). And he said, "Well, here's a question. Who would like to work on the weekend? But who has a car? And who wants to make five dollars and ten cents an hour?" I raised my hand, because I was the only one who

had a car in that class. So, they said, “Well, the Star Fort is interviewing.” Which that was not the name, of course, it already changed Ninety-Six.

Melissa English-Rias: I said, okay. I called, called the superintendent. I went down there, and I got so lost. I wound up going all the way down where Benjamin E. Mays was from, Epworth. I saw the sign and I turned back around. I went to a payphone and called and said I’m running late. Then I did my interview, and I got the job, and I started working on weekends.

Lu Ann Jones: And what were you doing? Were you an interpretive ranger at that point, or what were you doing?

Melissa English-Rias: I was an interpretive ranger. When I started working, okay, I started working first I did a card catalog for people to find out if their family members had fought in the Revolutionary War. I did an exhibit. I can’t think of the wife’s name, of the Loyalist who would have lived there during that time. We had lantern tours and different things. I learned how to make cider for the different programs we would have. And we’d recreate the battle. So, I did mostly work the desk and then do the bookstore, the inventory.

06:04

Lu Ann Jones: How did you get from there to your next—or kind of at what point did you decide you were going to stick with the Park Service?

Melissa English-Rias: Well, so then the first person who hired me moved on. Another superintendent came, he had come from Job Corps. So, at that point I was like okay, do I need to go to graduate school? Because I was only working like three days a week, and that wasn’t a lot of money. I knew I had to do more, and I had to get some health insurance and stuff. So, I was like, okay. So, he said, “Well, I know a park you can go to.” But I really didn’t want to go to Kentucky. Because he actually came from Job Corps. And I was like, oh. He said, “Well, if you go to USC, maybe you can work for the senator, state senator.”

Melissa English-Rias: But then I applied for Western, because they had a good public administration program, Western Kentucky. So, the park said, he said, “Well, if you get accepted at Western, they have a position, and you can be a coop student.” And I was like, okay. And he said, “Now it’s going to be a different world there. Because you’re going to south central Kentucky.” So that’s what happened. I got accepted to Western and then I started working at Mammoth Cave as a coop student.

Lu Ann Jones: You’ve hinted a little bit about what the world was that you found there. So, could you-- (laughs) What world had you come into?

Melissa English-Rias: Well, working for the park was really good. But it was south central Kentucky, and it was different. At the park where I worked at that time, except for Job

Corps, there were probably four other African Americans. So, it was another one in interpretation, Etta. I can say their names because they worked for the Park Service. There was a law enforcement, Brandon, Ezra Brandon. Then there was a guy in maintenance, can't remember him. Me. So we were the four. So that was different. It's a different area of the country. I can tell you a difference—like for instance, it was good for me because it showed me what ignorance was. Like for instance, when I went to transfer my driver's license, I was the only one in the room taking the test on the computer. In the other room, it was about twenty or so whites, and they were reading the test to them. Right there for this twenty-four-year-old, I'm going, what's wrong with this? They're reading the test and I'm taking the test. So, I started learning a little bit about ignorance.

Melissa English-Rias: Also how, to me—this is just my opinion—how women were treated there. I felt real bad for a lot of the younger girls. Because you were expected to get married, have children. And even for me, while I was there, I had one of my coworkers ask me, “Is something wrong with you? Are you a lesbo?”

Melissa English-Rias: I said, “Why?” Because they didn't realize I was twenty-four. They thought I was undergrad. And I was like, no. She said, oh, when I passed my comp test and everything and was going to get my master's degree, she said, “Oh, you're the first person to graduate from college?” I was like, “Oh, no.” I said, “I'm the first one to get a master's degree, but I'm not the first person to graduate from college in my family.” You know, all questions, “You're different.”

Melissa English-Rias: I said, “Oh, no. You've got to meet the rest of my people.” I said, “No, we're educated.” So that's where I learned about the ignorance and when you're in a certain place, it's different. It's different. So, for me it was better working with people.

Melissa English-Rias: I have some great friends. I think when I was on the call with our group, I was telling a story about one of my coworkers. Gary Bremen. He now works at Biscayne. But I used to go out with him to eat and stuff. Some days, I just didn't want to go. I never really told him. So, I'm in a sorority. At Western Kentucky, we had a step show. They all came, and we would go out to eat. So, you had all these African Americans, because Western is a bigger school, seven, eight, maybe ten thousand Blacks. And then you had these seven white people who came because they remember step shows from their college.

Melissa English-Rias: When we got out, after we were getting ready to go, they stopped me. And they said, “We want to thank you for go eating, because we never understood how you felt going out. And now we know.” All of us are still close today from that experience. So that's why I say, I don't want to say it was a bad experience, but it was a learning experience. Not necessarily that I want to say racism or anything. But it's ignorance. People don't understand what the other ethnic group is about. So, I learned that at Mammoth Cave. Now I look at it, I mean, it didn't faze me

while I was there, because my job was to get that degree. So, I had a focus, and I didn't let anything deter or stop me.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you—go ahead.

Melissa English-Rias: No, I don't want to say it was a bad experience. It was a great experience as learning, as growing as a woman and a person.

11:01

Lu Ann Jones: I think you said that David Mihalic who was there, told you that you were going to have to learn how to get along with white Anglo-Saxon men. How did that turn out?

Melissa English-Rias: Very good. So, what he did was me and another young girl, Lora Peppers, and that was the big push to get women into law enforcement. Lora stayed in, but then I came back. It was just certain law enforcement stuff that I just wasn't able to do. So, there were sometimes issues with staff people. Like if I said something. "Why you always got to say something?" and everything. I was getting phone calls from people. Can't really prove who it was or whatever.

Melissa English-Rias: So, Dave and them knew. And he was like, "Okay, I'm going to teach you." Because he had a sign on his desk saying, "We need more women in administrative positions." He said, "If you're willing, I'm going to work with you." He said, "I think you have a great career in the Park Service, but I'm going to show you how to deal with Anglo-Saxon men." He said, "Nothing you're doing wrong, because everybody needs to speak up for themselves. But I want to show you how you can do it and not change who you are, but when you walk in the room, have the presence, have all that."

Melissa English-Rias: So, I would go with him to different meetings and everything and stuff like that. Him and Vaughn Baker were very good. Because my office was actually in Vaughn Baker's office. I was in there with the deputy. So, and that was it. Because other than that, it was a good thing. But I think it was more people—and I had a great seasonal supervisor who worked with me, too. Times when he said, "I know, I could see it in your face you were ready to say something." It was not to give that stereotype which people have of Black women being angry. Not putting your hand on the hip. Not rolling your head. It was to look straight and say, "Excuse me, is there a problem?" Those direct questions where people would either have to answer you or say no.

Melissa English-Rias: Me and Dave used to engage. "That's not right, Melissa." So, he really worked with me. And we still talk and still engage in everything, too. So, before he left permanently, I would call and say, "I'm having a situation. How would I deal with this?" So, he's always been available. Actually, almost all my superintendents have been available.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. So, I think also you mentioned that--well, can you tell me, going back to those harassing phone calls, could you tell me the nature of—because you're not the first person who's mentioned that kind of petty but unnerving behavior.

13:31

Melissa English-Rias: Well, they'll be calling, they'll be breathing heavy. (Imitates breathing) I will say, "Are you having fun?" I always had a quick word. Or "Can you talk to me?" And I would say, "Ask your mother." That kind of stuff.

Melissa English-Rias: You go into the guide lounge, and when you walk in there, you know they've been discussing you before you got in there. But I would walk in, "Good morning! How's everybody doing?" And go inside and do my stuff and get ready for my tour. "Who am I working with today?" That's it. So, I had to really put it somewhere else. I'm not saying I didn't take it, sometimes you did take it as a joke. Because you kind of knew that they didn't know what to say. But yeah, that was that. And back then, it was no call waiting, or caller ID and everything. But you know, it had to be my coworkers.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes. That's why I was, yes, it had to be your coworkers. Yeah. Well, how did you kind of walk that line, well, I also took a note that said something like you weren't going to assimilate. This might have been something that Dave said. You don't need to assimilate to the Park Service. Be yourself. But at the same time, there's a certain presence to not fall victim to the stereotypes, or whatever.

Melissa English-Rias: Exactly. Like for instance, he gave me a book from, I can't remember, but it was Norman Lear saying, you have to first figure out who you are first, and then everything else will kind of fall into place. Because when you're not sure who you are, then all these different things. And don't assimilate. Because he said, "That's what you bring. You can hone in them organizational skills. You can sit down and talk with people and you're a good listener. You listen to people and people hear you. And then they know that you were listening to them. But do that." I mean, I'm not saying that I did have the attitude. You could say something, and I would, even with him, I was like, "Excuse me?" He said, "But you've got to control that face. You don't assimilate. You don't change who you are."

Melissa English-Rias: So that's why some days, I didn't go out with everybody. Because I just didn't feel like it and everything. Or like I'll give an example. Sometimes, which they weren't supposed to, and they did get in trouble, they would go into the cave after hours. Well, first, I was scared of radon. Here it is, this African American person coming from, never heard of radon, so I didn't go. So, they got caught. So, he was saying, "You know when to back off." But I think he didn't realize that I was twenty-four, too. I was a little bit older than the people. But I was there to get this

degree, to get a permanent job in the Park Service. They were, too. They were more seasonal. But I had a little bit more focus. So that was it. He was saying, “So you don’t have to assimilate to the Park Service.” What he meant is that the values, the values that you have. So, when I go into these communities, I’m going to tell them the truth, and I’m going to tell the Park Service the truth. I’m here to help the communities understand the Park Service better.

Melissa English-Rias: Like I’ll give an example. When we were going into Birmingham and stuff, you’ve got to tell them it takes a while for the Park Service to get started. So, they’re thinking that we signed that proclamation, the Park Service coming in. No, I’m sorry. This is going to take three and some odd years to get this park up and running. And funds don’t come. The parks are authorized, but they’re not established. So, I think that’s what I learned from him. Let’s be honest. And because he was dealing with south central rural Kentucky. So, he would talk about the water system and how we need to make it clean for the caves. So, you had to be honest with the people and tell them the truth. That’s what he was saying. Tell the truth. You don’t have to assimilate. But you know where you stay in balance and be legal. So, I’ve never, I don’t mean that I didn’t assimilate. It’s just that sometimes for African American when we go into a predominantly white institution somewhere, you sometimes, we do have to assimilate. In our dress, in our hairstyles. Everything. You know.

Melissa English-Rias: Some people, like I have braids in my hair. Well, I’m not going to be judged by having my hair braided in the Park Service. Because we wear a hat. But some of the African Americans, they can’t go to an interview with braids in their hair. I think that’s what he was saying. Stay true to who you are and everything. And that’s what I learned from him. And I learned how to engage in conversation. Like he said, it wasn’t anything against Anglo-Saxon white men, but how to be in that conversation, be present. Don’t change who you are, and still have your same values.

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. But still be able to make an impact.

18:12

Melissa English-Rias: Impact. Exactly.

Lu Ann Jones: That’s wonderful that you had a mentor like that.

Melissa English-Rias: Exactly. Exactly.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, at what point did you decide that you did want a permanent job, and this was a place?

Melissa English-Rias: Well, I go back to, I come from a long line of--of course, for African Americans, coming out of slavery and sharecropping, teaching was the highest. So, my

mother was a teacher, my aunts were teachers. Cousin. And my grandmother, I mean, really, she wanted to be a teacher. She probably didn't have past the third grade. My grandfather, he had a sixth-grade education, so that was really good. Because he did know how to read better. It was always being a teacher. So, I was very lucky when the Park Service called me my senior year. Because I didn't want to have to tell my family and my mother and them that I dropped out of the education. I just went straight for history. So, I was like, hey I can do this and still teach, but in a different way. Because I learned from two years of teaching Spanish to professors' kids, I didn't have what it takes to be in a classroom. So, it worked, so that's what happened. When I decided the Park Service would be good was when I started working it, enjoying it, and seeing that I could do some traveling and that I could be a teacher and I could make a good salary.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. I mean, you could be true to the family but at the same time, chart your own course.

Melissa English-Rias: Yes. My own course. Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: That's great. That's wonderful. So where did you go from Mammoth Cave?

19:48

Melissa English-Rias: I went to Martin Luther King, Jr., National, at that time, Historic Site. Now Historical Park. I was there for sixteen years. I came, and actually, to tell a truth again, the superintendent at Ninety-Six, when I finished, had 120 days, they were trying to get me to go do peregrine falcons, do all this different stuff. I'm like okay, I tried Mammoth Cave. I don't have any problem with the woods. But I'm just saying, okay, but that superintendent at Ninety-Six was like, "Hey, this girl did everything we asked her to do."

Melissa English-Rias: And then Atlanta got the Olympics. So, he said, "Let's see if we can get her to Atlanta." So that's what happened. So, Dave and him worked to get me to--Dave felt that I had enough of rural Park Service. I needed to come to a city. He told me, "I'm going to get you to some urban city to get you, you did a good job."

Lu Ann Jones: Well, what did you think when you came to a place like MLK?

Melissa English-Rias: Well, I'm going to tell you, and I wish I had the picture. I have a picture of when we, and it was 1970. We came down, my family, and we're at MLK. This is when they had the fence. They hadn't built the King Center yet. And me and my cousins, and I'm peeking my head around my cousins, and we're around his tomb. I said I did not think that at that time, at being six, seven years old, that I would come back in the '90s and work at Martin Luther King. I was honored. I was like wow, the Olympics, this is something else. So, I was very honored. And I came and hit the ground. I came as an interpretive specialist, doing education outreach. And then also working with the King Center to move the interpretive program

more in with the King Center at that time. So, it was fantastic. I learned a lot. Okay, so when I started school, college, there really wasn't, the African diaspora was slowly coming into. They had professors at Lander who were Indian and African. So, I focused more on Africa, India, and 19th century Europe. That's where the professors came from. That was more what they did. So, I had to, I did do Gandhi, as I said. And that's when I really started reading. That's when I read Malcolm X, that's when I read the Quran, that's where I read Torah, all that. All of us were there at, Martin Luther King was there at a different time in our life, all of us were young, and I became more aware of African American history and started studying the civil rights movement. So, it was also a learning process. Yeah.

22:16

Lu Ann Jones: Were you doing that kind of by yourself? Or did you all interpreters kind of do that collectively?

Melissa English-Rias: Collectively. We would talk about stuff and different stuff that came up. At that time, compared to now, we could talk about anything. Anything that came up that was [unclear] in Atlanta with the Olympics and stuff. And then meeting these people. I got to see Nelson Mandela when he came to America. Wow. I got to meet Muhammad Ali. I still have a little card he gave me where he had, you know, there's one God whether you call him Allah, whatever, I got to shake his hand. So, I got to meet all these people to give tours and stuff and learn. And also learn about nonviolence. Because I didn't believe in nonviolence. And I didn't believe until I was around Mrs. King and Mrs. [Christine King] Farris [sister of MLK, Jr.] and those people. They really believed this. It's really hard.

Melissa English-Rias: So, we were able to start studying and start reading and learning and engaging. That group, the group that was hired in '91. There were white Americans, Black Americans, young, old. So, we were all able to talk and discuss, so it was good. That's where I started learning and start reading and reading more about different people who were involved in the civil rights movement. So, I spent eight years as interpretive specialist, and then eight years as chief. As chief, with the new superintendent, Frank Catroppa, we started, it was like okay, not anything bad. We couldn't compete with—not to say compete—the King Center is the King Center. And there's not anything bad about that. That is the story, that is Atlanta. The historic site, not that we're a backseat, but what are the stories that we can tell that will increase the Park Service, also tell a broader story of civil rights and Dr. King. So, we moved to the changing exhibitions.

Melissa English-Rias: And that's the next superintendent. That superintendent taught me about how to work with the community, to engage the community, find out what they want. But also, that this is just money. Now we do have the public trust. But if everybody works together in the park and the divisions support each other, you can do anything. That's how we got [exhibits like] "Without Sanctuary," that's how we

got “The Color of Money,” that’s how we got “Speak Truth to Power.” We start working with the community to tell these broader stories of the civil rights movement and Dr. King. And that really expounded me to learn more.

Melissa English-Rias: Then I learned more about Black Atlanta, elite Atlanta, the institutions that made up Atlanta. So, it was a whole thing you learned about. That’s where I also learned about Tulsa. I didn’t know about all that stuff until I started working at MLK. Rosewood. None of those stories really meant anything. And then a little bit of Reconstruction and stuff like that. All that stuff happened at Martin Luther King. Birmingham. And learning more about the people. Because at MLK, Martin Luther King, I met those people. I did training with Dr. Lafayette on nonviolence. Then that helped me in the next level, when you’re dealing with somebody, and how you get people on your, you know, so it was just a total learning experience.

25:20

Lu Ann Jones: From your first interview, lots of questions I have. From your first interview, you talked about how you had taken, I think a sociology course about kind of organizational dynamics that had helped you learn how to read people.

Melissa English-Rias: Yes. In graduate school. Is it Dr. Capanelli? That might be his name. Again, he was another person, he talked about women in the workplace. I was like, wow. He took us to union plants, to non-union plants, to the Japanese Saturn plant and just learned different businesses. He was the social theory of organizations, and he showed you how organizations work and how people work. And that’s what we were doing. Also, we wrote a paper for him about women in the workplace, and that was so good to understand. So, I do if I’m going to meet a group, like I’ll use Reconstruction. So, we were dealing with four entities. They were all male. So, I had to figure out what were the dynamics of the group? How did it work in the community? Do you hear from some of the outside community? But you learn the organization, you learn your group. And it’s even [unclear] region. I go okay, so this person works a little bit different. So that really broadened and helped me so much to learn how organizations work. So, when you go in there, you don’t go in there with [unclear]. You go in there, you’ve got to figure out what’s the nuances, how it works and the people that are in it. That was opening again for this person coming from, even though I was born in New York, coming from little Lander College to a big western—I didn’t get the experience that I had in Western because all my classes were at night, and I took classes at Fort Knox. So, I spent more of my time with the military than I did there. So that was it, I think it’s Capanelli, I’m not sure. But it was a really good class and I think really eye opening for all of us in the class. Especially for us coming from some of these small, rural places and learning how organizations worked. I think that kind of worked in tandem with Dave, too. Learning some of that from Dave, and then also learning that from that professor.

27:33

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. So, when you moved into the chief position and a supervisory position, what kind of training were you taking with the Park Service? Or kind of what was that move like?

Melissa English-Rias: Well, that's the one problem with the Park Service. I went from a GS-9 to a GS-11. And I didn't have any really training. Luckily again, I had Frank Catroppa and Art Frederick. What they did was, which people don't do, they invested in training. Because they thought that I could do the job. So, I came from a worker bee. Well, let me be [unclear] so when I left--I did a detail. I did an acting. I got a promotion and then I did the detail. And I guess they saw something. So, they said, "Would you be interested in a position?" And so, I did apply for it. But then they had to train me. Because remember, at a GS-9, they weren't going to let me do PMIS. So, I had to learn how to do that. They were getting ready to do Ebenezer. So luckily, I sat down with the facility manager and said, "Show me the best way to read these plans so I can go in there and know what I'm talking about." I'm a woman, I'm going to start talking about construction on a major building.

Melissa English-Rias: So, they were willing to train me, and they always gave me lessons. Like if I wanted to hire a person, okay, I had to go and get it to AFS, show them how much it was going to cost, show them the benefits. So that is why I think that I excelled, because they were willing to do the investment in the position. I was able to, I mean, I knew the program and I could work with the people. So, the interpretive part was okay. But it was the business acumen that a lot of us don't have when you first, when you interpreters. But they were willing to invest. So, I went to classes. I went to, back then the training at Mather on you a chief and stuff and everything. And that's what it was. It was a day-to-day learning stuff. As I learned, you got better, and learned cultural resources. Because I hadn't did cultural resources since Mammoth Cave. I didn't want cultural resources. But he said, "If you want this GS-12 position, you got to be more critical." I went and started back in, took up cultural resources. So, I really have to say, it was because the superintendent and the deputy was willing to invest in me as a person and saw that I did have the potential and gave me the proper tools and the training and the leadership and guidance to get there. So that's it.

30:18

Lu Ann Jones: What are the challenges of being a supervisor? Everybody talks about it's great to move up, but there's always challenges built into that.

Melissa English-Rias: It is challenges. Because remember, you're responsible for those people. So, it's a seven-day a week job. Even though I was off. I had young kids at that time, too. Me and the chief ranger, we had a good working relationship. We would switch like six months out, I'll be off Friday/Saturday, or I'll be off Sunday/Monday. But even on that Saturday, I got a call about what was happening. Plus, I'm working

at the King Center, which is, you know, even though it's a small, medium park, it's very complex with the King family, the church, you know, and being in metro Atlanta. You got budget. When you come in the morning, like for instance now when I'm at region, when I walk in, I see that light on my phone, I can still unpack, get myself together and answer the phone. But then I got to get on the phone. Okay, schedule change, something coming up. You've got to hear the fighting amongst the people. Then of course you have, for me the hardest part was I had a wonderful goal that I wanted to do as far as getting the interpretive program up. Even though we [moved?], but we [moved?] but the superintendent was on changing exhibitions and bringing another group to the park, which was fine. So as a chief, you have what your staff want to do, you have your ideas, and you have what the management team is. So that's the hard part about supervision. And you have all these people that you have to invest in. It's a lot. You want to invest in them. But you know, it's just that it's hard. And thinking about me and the facility manager, he's now in the Rec Fee Program. And I really got burnt out. It was the day to day. It was the day to day of the staffing. When I left Martin Luther King, I had twenty-five staff members. Yeah, I had twenty-five. That was twenty-five people, plus the management team. And I had good working relationships with Mrs. King and Mrs. Farris. But I did know, to me it felt like Mrs. King, when she passed away, I kind of knew that my job there was done. For a certain extent. It was time for a new era. So, when I left, it was okay to leave. It was kind of like how Dave taught me, he said, "How many more cave tours can you do?" So then when I got to Martin Luther King, the question was, because I still did, when dignitaries came, my staff did them, but I still had to do them. So, I still did tours every now and then. How many more tours? How many more schedule changes? How many more phones? Then you move to the next level.

Melissa English-Rias: So, the next level was, what can I bring to—and Don Wollenhaupt had been asking me since he had left me, "Don't you want to come to region?" No, I don't want to come to region. But I realized that region I can effect change even better and I can help people to help interpreters. So, I'm still doing the same work, but I'm doing it a little bit different. So, yeah.

Melissa English-Rias: At Martin Luther King, I'm real still close to the staff because I was young when I came back. So, I was twenty, almost twenty-six when I came back. We were all young. We got married, we had children, we had deaths. So, we all grew up. So, we have a really still strong relationship. Then there was the Olympics, and it was changing, and the park was growing. So, the park never stayed the same. Now I probably could have stayed, because now it's a whole new level. Now we're going to interpret SCLC and the King family home. So, people say, why do people stay at MLK? The park has never stayed the same. So, you always either advance or you start interpreting a whole new different story. So, when I got there, we started interpreting the King Center with Mrs. King. So that's why people don't have to leave because you're embarking on different things. The staff doesn't have to leave. The chiefs can leave and bring in a new era. But it was time.

34:14

- Lu Ann Jones: Well, one of the things is the “Without Sanctuary” exhibit. My husband was working on the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project at that time. So, I was teaching in North Carolina, but I would come to Atlanta in the summers. We went to that exhibit. Of course, I didn’t know you then. And I think that there’s quite a story behind that exhibit. Isn’t there, in Atlanta?
- Melissa English-Rias: Yes. It had been proposed to three different places. It was housed at the Carlos Museum at Emory. And it was Emory University, Atlanta History Center and then the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American History and Culture. So, they were trying to find where to do it. And this is just, again, me. I guess those three organizations they were kind of scared. Which is understandable. Understandable. Who’s going to tell it, or whatever.
- Melissa English-Rias: So, our superintendent, Frank Catroppa, well he saw it and he heard about John Littlefield and his partner, who actually who did it. And so, he had a meeting and [unclear] where they want to do it. And he said, okay. And they had the postcard. So, he said he was going to do it. So, I looked at him. He said, “What do you think?”
- Melissa English-Rias: I said, “No, it’s a true story, I’m with you.” I said, “But talk to your staff.” I was going to wait for two weeks for a training at Mammoth. For some type of, it was chiefs. So, I said, “You need to talk to your staff next week. Talk with the regional director and get your proof that this is going to do it.” And he did. And from there, started.
- Melissa English-Rias: Every day I walk into, as he was planning it, I walk into the staff and tell them, “As interpreters, we don’t get to choose what we interpret.” And that also was happening with the Enola Gay. So then, and it was getting a new director, Fran Mainella. So, we was going through a lot. So, it was the idea, he wanted it, it was a good exhibit, and Emory was willing to work with us as well as, so that’s where I say okay, so here’s the test if I can be a good chief. And it was. I came in every day with the staff. I supported the staff and the management team. Again, I was younger than most of the people in the management team. That was the AO, the chief and the facilities. I said, “Okay, so you all go to support me.” So, they would. When we could come down, they would come down with me. But the interpreters were good, you know, the staff. For the African American men there, it’s a hard story. You know, because if you can’t see yourself in that position, you don’t get it. But it brought me and my staff together. But it was good for Atlanta. It was the right place to have it because it was Martin Luther King. So, as I said, the world felt comfortable coming there. As where I probably wouldn’t have gone to the Atlanta History Center to see it. I probably would have gone to Auburn Avenue Research Library. And I probably would have gone to Emory. But it was really good. There was hype, you know. First time it was shown in the South. I

thought no, it's not the first time it was shown in the South. It happened here! But I think because it happened at Martin Luther King and people felt comfortable coming, that it worked. And the staff, and I let the staff choose. And that was again where I learned how to be a better chief. Because Frank was like, I said whoa, whoa, whoa, you've got to give me something to work with here. They going to work it, but you've got to—so we did the sensitivity training, and they didn't feel that they were ready. So, we went to Emory. So, Emory trained the people who did the sensitivity training. And then my staff trained to work with the students. They felt more comfortable doing the facilitation with the students. So that's the kind of stuff that I did.

Melissa English-Rias: That whole summer, I sent my kids away and I worked the whole summer. I was there every day. I smiled and I, when they opened the exhibit, I staffed the desk first. And then some of the older African American men, they did not have to work the exhibit. We gave them the opportunity. So, it was a whole [unclear] working with that. But it was really good to bring it to Atlanta. And I think, like I said, for those reasons, that's why I feel that MLK was the right place to work it, because of Dr. King and the movement he had. It was very good. It really put the Park Service, I think, it put the Park Service as well as Martin Luther King, it kind of got us away from the King Center for a little bit. Even when people ask me, I say the King Historic District, that's what I say. Because if you say Martin Luther King, they're not going to know. You've got to say the King Center. I think it also changed the Park Service in saying you can interpret; you can interpret these sensitive issues without making them controversial.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. I mean, was there a level, when people came there, was there a level of emotion that you were dealing with?

39:18

Melissa English-Rias: There certainly was. Some people, like the young people, couldn't believe it. I'm saying young African Americans and young whites. Some of the young whites were like, "I'm going to go back and talk to my grandparents and my parents. I didn't know that." So, it was somber. And that's why, okay, it was supposed to end, I can't remember when it was supposed to end. But we kept it on. And then my staff came to me and said, "It's like we at a funeral every day."

Melissa English-Rias: So, it was getting close to the King holiday. So, I went to the superintendent and said, "My staff is tired. They're at a funeral every day. So, after the King holiday, 'Without Sanctuary' has to go." He agreed. They were trying to fight it and let it keep going. I said, "We can't go through spring with this. They're tired and they've done their job." And they had. So that was the fight. So, you've got a whole range of motion. The listening sessions, I guess what we call them now, they were great. I mean, they would be packed. So that's what I say. It just worked because it was at Martin Luther King. I always tell people that it was the park itself and the spirit of Dr. King that people came. I think that for the staff, it

was a learning. Now I will say, what happened was, either it was the day before, a couple of days before, we had a big meeting and Emory was trying to work with us. The interpreters heard how the staff felt. And they got scared. I told them, "I got you. We're going to do this." I think that's what happened. Whereas some of the whole staff wasn't with it. The interp staff was good. Because they knew that this is the truth. Especially the younger ones. They were like, "This is the truth. Let's do it." I remember one of the young people said, "Well, if the staff is upset about it, this is not going to work." But then we went on, we opened the exhibit-- and when we saw how the public came and wait in lines. The only complaints we got was that at that time it was closed at six o'clock. And it went. But it was, I will say, it was long enough for the staff.

Lu Ann Jones: Was the staff that was concerned about it, did they think it was too controversial? Did they fear it was going to bring—

41:37

Melissa English-Rias: Controversial. Maybe the wrong element would come, or a group of people. Should we be telling this story? But, you know, then we went to the law enforcement guy. But he came out of interp. And he was like, "No, we should tell this story. No." And they was like, oh, okay. So, it wasn't the best. Even our oldest employee who actually, well, he retired, but he passed last year, he was ninety-four. He said we should tell it. He just didn't want to see it because it was real. I will tell you this. And only people who knew at this time were Corky Mayo, who was chief, and then Frank. In my hometown in South Carolina, we had a lynching. And it was of a friend's father. And so, for me it was, that's why, to me it was very personal. So, I covet that. That's why I covet that, I protected that, I made sure we told that story. And the storyline was because, you know, of course they say it was suicide. They say he was dating a white woman and whatever. But think about moving from the North down to the South. And this is the '70s. And somebody gets lynched. So., I don't think my grandparents, they didn't know whether to move back to the North, move back to a different [start?] or whatever. So, they knew about this. So that's why I think for my staff it was much easier for them. Because I knew. And I even told my friend, I said, I'm not going to go into, but I covet that exhibit. I want to protect it. Because I knew that this is true and this happens, and it's happened. And his father's death has never been--you know, they say, "No, it was a suicide." But we know. We know now that it's not true. So that's also a reason why it worked. Because I was determined that it was going to stay neutral, we were going to work it, and we was going to make it work, and we was going to make this partnership with Emory and the rest of people work out. And it did good. So, it had some personal to it.

Lu Ann Jones: I remember just being around a few Park Service people that summer. I think many people were very proud of the Park Service that the site had stepped forward and said, "Yeah, we'll do this."

Melissa English-Rias: Frank took it. I told him, I said, “You know what you’re getting yourself into.” But he was like, “But we have pictures.” That was his whole thing. He said, “And they’re going to post stamp.” So, we did that. We showed were out in California they hung Italian Americans. You know the one about the woman and her son, the one where they cut up. So, he was saying, that was his thing, they were true stories. So, we weren’t telling things that were not true. So, it was.

Melissa English-Rias: I did win the Freeman Tilden Award. Me and the park and my staff. When they called first and said, “You have to write a speech.” The superintendent, he starting to write a speech. So, he gave me something. So, I went to one of the employees. She was the housing person; she was next to me. And I said, “Miss Nell,” I said, “Frank wrote a speech.” I said, “But that ain’t what I want to say.” She said, “Well, you know what you want to say. So, what you going to say?”

Melissa English-Rias: I said, “I don’t know what to say. This is something different.” So, one morning I told the staff, I said, “Don’t come in till ten.” I got up and I went in the room, and I sat in the room and looked at every picture. And then I wrote the speech, and I gave it to Frank. I let him see it because he wanted to see it. And nobody else saw it. Then when I read it, he said he looked around and he saw that all the interpreters got it. I said it’s not about, it’s about showing, especially when you see that little white girl looking up at that lynching photo and looking at that picture with a smile on her face. That’s what it’s about, is about telling those stories. And I named unnamed people. You know, the four unnamed boys. The person from so and so. It was to give the people, and to say that regardless of what, these are stories we have to tell. I know for a lot of people; they don’t want to tell it. I know a lot of the older African Americans; they don’t want to tell it. But we need to know these stories because it happens in a different way, even today. But then he liked it. And people said they got it, even from the speech. We don’t get to choose what we interpret. But as long as we tell it truthfully and accurately and pay honor to those people who were in that room. And the money that I won; I gave to my staff. We had the biggest party. I thanked them. We did; oh, no, this is going to the interpreters. I’m not saying anything bad, but I did, I did. We came and we sat at the house, at my house, we did it at my house. And we sat and we talked about the exhibit, and talked about funny things to talk about, different things. Because they did it. I wouldn’t have wanted, those twenty-five people, regardless of whether they worked or not, they came to work and they supported me. And vice versa because I supported them. And if they got tired, when they got tired, I said, “Frank, can we close the exhibit early today? They just need a—.” You know, yeah. But I think it was good. Again, that I learned how to deal with an issue and how to support the superintendent while supporting my staff. And not listening to, again, not assimilating. Because as an interpreter, I could have felt with the other people going, “Oh, we shouldn’t do it, we shouldn’t do it.” Now, MLK does an exhibit, everybody comes because they know it’s going to be a high-quality exhibit.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Yeah. We still talk about dealing with difficult histories. But maybe we've forgotten how difficult that was. And that's years ago now. Just to hold up examples like that where parks did take the challenge.

47:32

Melissa English-Rias: They did take the challenge. And then to tell you something you may not even know, with that, and working with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that's still going on today, they still do the tours of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. But "Without Sanctuary" of lynching, that's in the curriculum. It was put in the curriculum for Georgia State from the "Without Sanctuary" exhibit. You know? So that's how the park changed the story. So, we didn't realize the impact. Our job was just to tell the story. And like I said, former Jerry Belson as well as Pat Hooks, they did support it. The new director, she was. But when she saw it and saw how it was done. It was in my office when she wrote the letter, she said, you know, that she looked forward to working. And I've seen her before, she always remembered me. She said, "That was a powerful exhibit." I was like, yeah, it was, it was very powerful. But it also changed us as interpreters. Again, we were able to go back and talk about things we did.

Melissa English-Rias: But if you're in Martin Luther King and you're in interpretation, you're going to talk about different events. Now, just talking with the staff, you'd be a little bit careful about all the other stuff and everything. But if you know Dr. King, you can talk about it. Because Dr. King, he believed in consensus. But you had to disagree to agree. And it's always good to do that. And some of us our ideas, some people come from different places. And Martin Luther King, there's all different types of religions. We had all different type of religion, and how do you work those in, and in different stories. That's when I started learning about Islam from different staff people. As well as we had, you know, Nazarene. We had Pentecostal. So, we're going wow, all these different people in groups, you know? Jewish. So, you know, you had all these different faiths. But the people want to be there. And I think that's also a difference, too, that a lot of the people who came there, they want to be there. So, they was willing to listen to what's going on. So.

Melissa English-Rias: It was a great time. We never knew what the next exhibit was going to come. Another one, even though that one is really good, we did *Speak Truth to Power* with Rory Kennedy. And so, part of the play that this is, I can't think of the writer. But then he brought in, so you had, let me get it right, Pearl Cleage, Martin Sheen, Alfre Woodard, Woody Harrelson, oh goodness gracious. Robin--at the time, she was Robin Penn. Sean Penn. I'm trying to look at the whole stage. And they read portions. We got to meet them. And when I saw Martin Sheen, I'm just thinking *West Wing*. He just looked so presidential. (laughs) Woody Harrelson, he was so concerned when he first went to practice in the church. He went out shopping. He went out to Macy's or wherever and he got him a suit. He's like, "Is this, okay?" I said, "It is fine." He said, "Because I want to be very respectful going to church."

Melissa English-Rias: Robin Penn. I mean, just to see them, and they're reading different things. Then they met the students, because we worked with North Atlanta High School, which has the baccalaureate in art. The students had done it for us, for the public. Those students got to meet the actor or actress who read. It was just fantastic. So those are the things that just brought people together. That's why I always, all of the parks are special because I did something special. At Mammoth Cave, I learned how to be an interpreter. Because you had to get to the cave with your large number of people, being in certain spots at different times. So, I really learned, how can I say, the better craft? Because I'm more of a storyteller. I'm not the best interpreter. But I can weave a story. To move through Mammoth Cave helped me learn the mechanics of a tour, the programs and stuff like that.

Melissa English-Rias: Martin Luther King, I learned how to work with communities and people and tell stories. To sit there and ask people, what are the stories? That's what Frank taught us. He said, "Okay, you go to this meeting. You listen to what they say." Frank was smart enough to know that he was a white American. So, you always couldn't go, he could go in there, but they wouldn't talk to him. So, he empowered all of us to go into those meetings, again, to speak and then come back and let him know. And sometimes he was sitting there. Because you're dealing with the civil rights community and Black elite, he realized that they weren't always going to listen. When they realized that he could tell the story just as well, then it came in. But he was able to see that and not take it personally. That allowed us to grow because we had to make decisions on the spot. When they said, "Well, we want the Park Service to do this." Okay, what can we do? That was, I think, for me, I was younger, and I learned a lot. Again, like I said, I was being trained to be not necessarily a chief, but to be a leader and to learn how to do that.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. Interesting. Yeah.

52:43

Melissa English-Rias: So, Martin Luther King, so yeah. I go, "Hey, family." Because I learned a lot. I learned a lot. That's where I learned the business skills, the working with the public. Because I'm telling you, I'm scared. Mammoth Cave, okay, I'm going to talk a little bit, and we talk about water and a little bit. But there I had to say okay, I'm going to sit now with Atlanta's Black elite and tell them what the Park Service going to do. (laughter) But it worked out. All those different things we did, working with the March Committee, the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. When I did the fiftieth anniversary of Selma, it was easy for me to call them and say, "Hey, can you come participate?" It was like, yeah. And learned the other stories. I think that's what Selma's trying to do now is tell some of the other stories of the foot soldiers. Not take away from Dr. King but tell the people who were working behind the scenes, too.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Well, you've done so many. So, did you go to region after MALU?

Melissa English-Rias: Okay, I went to region. And then, yes. And then I started doing details. That was what I did. I went to Selma [to Montgomery National Historic Trail] in 2015 to— Let me go back. The couple of parks I'm working at was the couple of parks that again, Frank believed in spreading the civil rights story. So let me go back. When we were at Martin Luther King, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was opening up. We were working at that time the director in some of the stories and everything. So, when Birmingham opened up and stuff, again Frank, you know, for all of us, even for him, not knowing a lot about African American history, we would travel. So we went to Montgomery, toured Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the King place. We went to Birmingham. So, we went to those different places so we could learn to see the connection between Dr. King and the places where he worked. All staff people would go, which I thought was very good. So, we worked with Dr. Lawrence Pijeaux at that time and some of the people who now I'm working with either with the Gullah-Geechee or with the Mitchellville when I was in Reconstruction. And then we start again, at that time was working with Tuskegee Airmen [National Historic Site] and then was working with Selma. I was helping them again; I was helping them with, like when we did exhibits, we would give it to Selma to help them with. So, we were helping Selma. We helped them with their grand openings and different things like that.

Melissa English-Rias: So then when I got into region, I started again working with Selma. So, then that's how I started meeting some of the people, even before I got to—I always say that whenever I leave a park, I think it prepares you for the next step. So then when I got there, I had met enough of the people from Selma to know who was going to be easy to work with, who was not going to be to work with. And then I was able to move from Lowndes County upward to Montgomery. So, we started working with Selma, and we did this. So, I did the fiftieth anniversary for them event. Then what did I do since then? I got Reconstruction. Got that park started. But I thought it was good to go home. I'm from Aiken, South Carolina. So that's the county. So, Redcliffe Plantation [State Historic Site], which is Senator or Governor Henry Hammond. I don't know how I missed that. Now my brother and my cousin said they toured it, but we didn't tour it when we was young. But they wanted to do a long-range interpretive plan. But they knew they had a lot of controversy with him and everything. At that time, they called David Vela [then director of the Southeast Region of the NPS] and can you have somebody? So, I did the long-range interpretive plan for that. Which again, I'm talking about, that's probably about fifteen minutes from where I lived in Aiken. So that was an opening up story. So, then I said okay, so I learned a little bit about him pre-Civil War. Now I'm going to do Reconstruction. Only thing I learned about that was the carpetbaggers and the scalawags. Didn't learn anything else about it. So again, I did that and then that was wonderful to get that park started. And I still kind of worked with them on that. So, then what I did--so I came back to region, and I—

Lu Ann Jones: Can I just say, Melissa, I subscribe to the Facebook page from Reconstruction era. I've been following, they've been doing these ranger chats for months now. I sent [Ranger] Chris Barr a fan letter just a few months ago saying this is fantastic work. I think part of it, too, is he's showing that what they're doing there is grounded in the scholarship, you know?

Melissa English-Rias: Yes. Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: We know what we're talking about. I think that that is really important. I mean, they've just done some great stuff.

Melissa English-Rias: Yeah, I told Scott [Teodorski, Superintendent of Reconstruction Era National Historical Park] --they have so many wonderful scholars and stuff like that. And they just hired the young lady who worked at the Penn Center. She used to work there. But during Covid, she got cut down from this. Also, her father attended Penn school. Her mother, who's German, white, married him. She talks about this story. So, she started yesterday. That's so good. That's so great to have someone from that.

Melissa English-Rias: Okay. Reconstruction is so different because, okay, when I got there, and I tell people, I remember again, working with Selma, this was the thirty-fifth anniversary—yeah, had to be—where Bruce Babbitt and President Clinton came. I remember they had us down in Brown Chapel where they start talking about what was going on. Babbitt told about how he came to turnaround Tuesday. He came, they had a march, he came and participated. Then he talked about this site. And I was like, what are you talking about? You're talking about the Penn place in South Carolina. What that got to do with civil, I was thinking, not paying attention. Again, like I say, I'm always someplace when I hear that, then I get there, I say well this is what place he was talking about. So, it took them twenty years. So, I told them, I said, "The stories have to align." That means that both sides have to be ready to tell the story. This is not an easy story, one, for a white American to tell. And then for African Americans who participated. Because they figure okay, we worked hard, we now educating our kids, we got to leave the past behind. But we as humans—don't matter who you are—we repeat the past.

Melissa English-Rias: So anyway, so when I went there, I went there saying, okay. First, I got to let them know that this is not going to move as quick as they are. But they were willing. And so, the town is willing, and you got all these scholars now who Chris is bringing in. And Chris did a wonderful job at Chickamauga & Chattanooga. Excuse me, my sinuses, I'm going to get a napkin.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay.

Melissa English-Rias: There we go. Chris has a, so he did a great job there. Because I did a talk on Reconstruction with their Friends group when I was up there. Me and Edward did a talk. He's been doing some wonderful stories. And I watch him and he's

bringing great people in, people who I've met. They have so many different groups who want to tell the story. And that's why it's going so good. It's a story that should be told that hasn't been told. And I was trying to work with Bob Boboson, "Well, we got to tell the big story." I said, "Well, Bob," I said—

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Melissa English-Rias: First of all, we got to let America know why REER was so important. Because this happened in 1861. It was the prelude to Reconstruction. You've got to understand what happened in a small town. Why it was right, why it was right, and then how it spreads out. I'm not saying the other ones are not important, don't get me wrong. But that's the national thing that it happened. It was the preparation for the Freedmen's Bureau. Whereas the government said, okay. They start sending down their missionaries and how we going to do it. So, I think that's what's so unique about it. When I went there, we did some of the public meetings, I had whites and Blacks say, "Well, I don't trust the Park Service." I said, "Well, you can trust me." I said, "If you can't trust the Park Service, you can trust me to do my job to tell this story."

Melissa English-Rias: When I was in Selma, I told Stan [Austin, another director of the NPS Southeast Regional Office] and them. I said, "This is not going to be about the Park Service for this fiftieth anniversary. It's about telling the stories of the foot soldiers." I think now, that's why I was working with Selma, because that's how I went in there, and that's how I planned it. Because when the park first went in there, we had the Martin Luther King and the Malcolm X stuff. I said, "Let's flip it." The first program we did was the martyrs of the movement. And then we did children of the movement, that led to the march. And then a little further on we did, we brought in Malcolm X's daughter, which was right. So, you've got to, again, you've got to understand the organization, the community that you're in, and do it. Because it's not anything bad or anything. But these people were going through this before Dr. King came in. But we all know Dr. King, by having him there, did elevate the program. So, I try to do that and understand that. But not take away from Dr. King. Because I work there so I know what he did, and I know his sacrifices. But you are correct. These people were working way before he came. As he grew in prominence, then Dr. King came in. So, I try to figure out what's the local story, and then tie it in to those national stories. And that's how I know the work Dr. King did. "Dr. King didn't help us." (laughter) But now I know what they mean. They mean they were working for their rights long before. So, yeah. So that's kind of how all these projects have kind of bled together. And from REER and working with Selma, I moved on to Freedom Riders [National

Monument] as well as Birmingham Civil Rights [National Monument]. So, they're unique stories. They're stories that really tell the whole fabric of people working then and everything. And the idea of Ocmulgee.

Melissa English-Rias: A lot of that was, do I want to be a superintendent? I don't want to be a superintendent. I kind of told them that. But I don't mind going and working with parks that are in transition or getting a park started to help them. But it's a lot. When you're that, and then when you're superintendent, you're responsible for everything and everybody. I'll be honest. I think I got a little comfortable in my regional job. I think I can do more and reach more people than a superintendent. Because I had times where I had superintendents and chiefs who were on all these national things and they never were in the park, you know? I still like working in all those different things and I don't think that would be fair to a park.

03:13

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. That's a good point. You know, one of the things when we talked a couple of weeks ago, you were saying I guess once you were in the regional position that sometimes you felt uncomfortable traveling to parks. Or all parks did not welcome you the same way? Since we're kind of interviewing under this rubric of civil rights in the Park Service, can you talk about that some?

Melissa English-Rias: Well, I'll go with the first park I actually did a detail in 2005. There were some issues with the superintendent there. The superintendent's no longer with the Park Service. He did have to leave from some of those different issues. So, when I got to region and I was supposed to go, Corky [Mayo, program manager for Interpretation and Education] made a suggestion for me to go help them with a project, whatever they're supposed to do, I guess at that time the superintendent told Corky he didn't want me to come. So Corky was like, huh? So, when the regional office heard it, they were kind of like, "No, she's going." And then Art Frederick who at that time knew I did the detail at the park at that time, but he was still at MALU at that time, he told them, "No, don't let her go. Because she wouldn't be nice this time." But that's one where I know a superintendent did not want me to even come back to a park that I act at.

Melissa English-Rias: I've gone to some parks where we're working on long-range interpretive plans and we're talking about the cause and effect of the Civil War. (laughter) You're sitting there and you're hearing them say, well, which is true, the causes of the war are because of the economic and political and social climate of the United States at that time. That is so correct! But what was it? You know, I was walking and there was this tree that had some metal in it, you know, some bullets. I'm like, "Oh, is that a memory tree?" "No, that's not important."

Melissa English-Rias: "Well, who stayed here?" Everybody didn't leave, and you know it. You're sitting there and you're looking at the superintendent. And you know. You're uncomfortable because you're hearing people say that, not saying, you know, the

park was established by the veteran of the North and South to honor those who fought in the Civil War. Well, what are they fighting for? What were they fighting for? You know, states' rights? States' rights to what? So, you're sitting there. And you're sitting there first of all, forget that you're sitting there as a human being knowing this is who you are. This is your history. And you want to make it sound good. They sugar-coat it so you don't hurt anybody. So, that's that.

Melissa English-Rias: You know, sometimes you go into a park and the staff is looking at you. You're not sure are they looking at you because you're a woman, because you're African American, or you're from the regional office. So, you feel it, but you're not sure. Again. And that's what they taught me. How to bring your presence in. How to lighten a room. He told me, he said, "Use them dimples. And use that beautiful smile." He says he knows that's protective. That when you get that look like, that serious look, it does put people off. And even my supervisor at Mammoth Cave. At Mammoth Cave I was not only dealing with staff; I was dealing with public, too. Okay, I had some really good friends. This is what we used to do. When you go do a tour, first the lead go up and announce the tour. So, I say, "Good afternoon, this is the two o'clock, two-hour historic tour." Blah, blah, blah, "Please meet out." Then as the lead, I would leave. So, I would go down, get the torch [unclear] and whatever. Then I would go in the guide lounge get my hat. And then your trail guide would come up and make an announcement and go out. So those friends, they knew that. So here it is, I'm African American. So, they would go out and they would stay and mind the group. So here I'm coming up. I go, "Hi. I'm Melissa." You could see the faces. For me it was like, I've got you for two hours. (laughter) And then you have some people, you know, they're being rude. But then again, it's the same thing I taught, again, as a next step. When I got to Martin Luther King, and you have the white Americans who was interpreting Dr. King history. People thinking that white people can't tell the story of a twelve-year-old boy in the house. I was able to help those say, you can tell the story, because this is the script, and you tell it as the family told it. So that prepared me, even though at Mammoth Cave, I'm telling the story, again, of my ancestors who worked in the saltpeter mine. The ancestors who gave tours of the cave, who was bought and sold with the cave. So, I don't think, again, those were all the different things I had to put on. Girl, you getting a paycheck, you getting this degree. So just go ahead and give this tour. So, yeah. The same when I got to Martin Luther King, I was able to do that same thing.

Melissa English-Rias: So, you know sometime even as an African American you're giving a tour and the majority of your group is white. You know people, they first thinking, okay, why she telling you this, blah, blah, blah, is this affirmative action? All these thoughts are going through. But I'm going to show you that I can tell this story just as good as the next person. Then by the end, (clapping) "Great job, great job, great job." Not that I wanted that, but you can feel it. You can feel it when you go, like I said, Mammoth Cave. I knew the people who had issues with my color. But also, Mammoth Cave is not that--it was the issue of you being female. That part of Kentucky has an issue with females. Not just, when a law enforcement ranger has

to go over on the other side, when the interpreters used to do the talks, a white female ranger had to go.

08:50

Lu Ann Jones: Why was that?

Melissa English-Rias: Just had to go. I mean, that's the mindset. I had friend, I had friends, I would listen to their stories as a young person in these relationships. You graduate at sixteen, get married, and it's an abusive marriage. I mean, all those different stories that I was sitting there going, oh my God. So again, a great learning on a personal level. But yeah, you know sometime when you go into some parks that really—I'm trying to think. Even today. So far, I haven't been to that many different ones lately because I haven't been traveling as much. Even now you can go, and you don't want to, I don't want to say anything bad about parks, because it may be more the people and not necessarily the parks. But you kind of know sometimes when--.

Melissa English-Rias: I remember one, this wasn't in this region, I remember I was going to, I think it was the Association of American Historians was up in Albuquerque. I was so excited that I got to go on Route 66. I was going to Bandelier and Pecos and stuff. And that was a terrible experience. When I went in there, it was like, first I went up and asked, "Do you have to pay?" I said, "I'm a Park Service employee."

Melissa English-Rias: "Yeah. Everybody has to pay." "Okay, I'm just asking." Then another employee came out and said (whispers), "You don't have to pay." Then I want the little booklet. "Well, this is a dollar."

Melissa English-Rias: It was a teacher with me. She came up to me and she said, "Just hang with me. We have the booklet." This is a time when you could take pictures of children, and it shows the kids going into the dwellings and stuff. I hung out with the teacher and had a wonderful time, and I didn't need the booklet. But was it, and again, I'm not saying, was it because I was African American? Or was it because I just asked? I didn't have no problem with paying. So that kind of stuff when you go to different parks. So not just parks in the region where you're working at, because they kind of know who you are. But also going to other parks as just a visitor.

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Oh, interesting.

10:40

Melissa English-Rias: But that's okay. I got on Route 66. I let the window down in the rental car. I had a great time. But I was so excited I was on Route 66. But I just go that's that person because the other ranger was real nice. So that's it. That is uncomfortable, feeling that even some of my family and friends. They're so excited. When they find a

national park, they'll send me a picture. Most of them have good experiences. But you hear sometimes where they say, oh, I don't know, they feel uncomfortable. It's not the African Americans don't go to different parks and stuff. But if you're uncomfortable. And for some people, which I didn't know till I got to Ocmulgee, and I don't know why I didn't think of that. I knew Shenandoah and all of them, but I forgot there was segregation-- only certain times you can go to national parks. See, I came after that, so I don't recognize that.

Melissa English-Rias: One of the employees told a story about his brother who died in Vietnam. And they had to go to Fort Benning, Georgia, to identify the body. The parents got emotional. So, they pulled over at Ocmulgee to go in. They couldn't go in because it wasn't the day for the Blacks. And he works there [now]. He said, so they wanted to go to a national park to decompress, the story of their son fighting for a country. They couldn't even go to a national park after they are driving back from Fort Benning from claiming his body. And he works for the Park Service now. All these different stories you hear, you're kind of like—so I have to grasp that there were certain parks—Smokies, Shenandoah, even little Ocmulgee that African Americans couldn't go into till after the civil rights movement. That's something.

Lu Ann Jones: Have you ever been worried about your safety as you went to parks?

12:30

Melissa English-Rias: The only, I haven't really been worried about my safety. I've probably been scared if I've been outside too long. (laughs) You know, like I was scared of Smokies with the bears, if a bear come and attack. I haven't really felt bad about my safety because I always try to be aware of the safety. So, like if I'm at a park and I'm really uncomfortable, okay, I'm going to have my snack and my food. When I'm heading back home from the park, whatever, I'm going to pick up my food and go back to the hotel room. So, I've always been kind of cognizant of where I am when I'm going to the parks. But I'm a history person. I want to learn about the park, and I want to hit as many parks as I can. So, I try to think about that. If I am driving and I'm uncomfortable, I have family members and friends. I'm like, "I see the interstate but I'm on this back road. Can you just talk to me until I can get to this interstate?" When I worked at Selma and I was on Highway 90, when I come back from the park at night—this is 2015, now—I would call people and say, "I'm on Highway 90." I would talk. And then once I got into—not saying that Montgomery might not be better—but by the time I turned into the hotel, I would get off the phone. So, it's something you do have to think about. Especially when you're in these rural areas and you're driving.

Melissa English-Rias: I will tell a story. It's funny. I went to Natchez to do a site visit, a review. On our way back—and this is Mississippi, and Mississippi is a very hard state, and you know how civil rights is. When I went there, the superintendent picked me up, so it was just me and her. She's white. On the way back, it was the chief of

interpretation. So, you had this white man, this Black woman, in this car. I'm going to tell you; I was a little scared. Driving, going back to Jackson from Natchez, two-hour drive. We were laughing and talking and everything. We joked about it. But it was some concerns because you don't know the area. But I tried not to let that stop me. But when you're going to some parks, and of course when you're interpreting history that's very sensitive, you sometime can tell, and you can sometime get pushback.

14:27

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Well, I know we've been talking a while, and I won't keep you a whole lot longer. But if you could wave a magic wand or whatever, and get the Park Service more diverse both in its workforce and in its visitorship, what do you think needs to happen? Do you have ideas about that?

Melissa English-Rias: One thing I tell people, you have to meet visitors first at their own level. Like for instance when we were at De Soto, and you wonder why the Latino, Asian, whatever community, Spanish community, doesn't come. Well, different ethnic groups use the parks for different reasons. My ethnic group is going to use it for a family reunion. Or for a picnic. Hang out. And if there's a little history there, we'll go in. During that time, that community used it, they would do Frisbee, play soccer, but they'd come afterwards. Because the story that you're telling, are you inviting them in? Then one of the employees start going out talking to them, and then they start coming. But you've got to, I don't want to say people of color don't go to museums, because it's not true. But you've got to feel comfortable that the story that you are hearing and seeing represents who you are. I'm sure that's one of the reasons why I was hired at Mammoth Cave. Well, one. I mean, I had the degree and everything, and I met the qualifications. But it probably was for diversity reasons. But you have to be willing to hire and put it forth. I think me and David Vela interviews when he was regional director in the Southeast Region. And I was like, "Just do it. Let's stop talking about it. We have all these hiring authorities, and we don't try to recruit people." When I was at Mammoth Cave, I would go to Kentucky State University, me and Mammoth Cave was trying to hire, bring people. The Smokies has tried to hire. But you're bringing people who have not been in rural communities, and to a community that don't have all the things you need.

Melissa English-Rias: I'll be honest with you. It took me, I was at Mammoth Cave what, two years or so? It took me the last maybe four months, I finally found a hairdresser. All the people at Mammoth Cave were trying to find people who did hair, or whatever. So, I'm getting ready to leave and I finally found somebody who could do my hair correctly.

16:51

Lu Ann Jones: Somebody else has said that, too. Yeah.

Melissa English-Rias: Right. Then I was coming back to Atlanta, and I had a whole plethora of people to find. So that's also it, too, that you're isolated. At Mammoth Cave, I had a goal, but I still was isolated. And there were some days I just didn't hang around because there were just some days that I just, not anything bad, just like okay, I just need to be by myself for a little while. So, if you're hiring buddies if you hire from the local community. And that's even when you're hiring, if you're in a rural place, you need to be hiring of your community. Whether it's Native Americans, American Indians, whether it's white. At Martin Luther King, I did that. We made a conscious decision. We had white people, I had young kids, I had from fifteen at that time to eighty. So that when somebody walked in, if you walked in, I had Rich Kilma or I had Diane, I had somebody who looked like you that you might talk to first before you go on a tour. So, I tried to represent the people who were coming so that they could feel comfortable talking to somebody. And through some of the young people, I hired great people. Because they said, "Oh, this person go to school with me. They're in this and they're in that." I understand Pathways. But the SCEP program [Student Career Experience Program] and the STEP program [Student Temporary Employment Program] were so good because you gave people their first job and training. And if it didn't work, okay. Because it's called a training program, but you were able to hire. Now maybe if we tried to hire, if we got an agreement to hire students from HBCUs, that might be good. Or from the Indian schools. I mean, we have the Bureau of Indian Schools. Why we don't have a pathway? We have to find the pathways. But we put them in these programs say oh, now I got this person, I can't hire them. And that was at Mammoth Cave. I was going to get ready to go work for a lawyer as a paralegal. I had a job. That's when the guy at Ninety-Six said, "Whoa, wait a minute. We done sent this girl to Kentucky. This girl bought a car, she paid for her own education. And we can't even get her a job?" I already had a job lined up because I was not going to do peregrine falcons. You just can't send me, you can send some, you just cannot send me in the woods. I learned that from the big woods in Mammoth Cave. That was, I remember that me and Henry Holman still laugh when he took me out there in them big woods. I was like oh, this is just not, this is for the birds. This is for the peregrine falcons. It's not for me. So (laughter) I've done some funny things at every park. I just tore up Mammoth Cave because that was just so, it was different, but I learned.

Melissa English-Rias: So, I think we have to make a conscious decision to hire. Like I said, it's not just African Americans. It's the ethnic population of the community that you're in. Because that also gets the community involved. I hired a young girl who was born in the Old Fourth Ward, in that community. She wrote in one of our books, "I never knew that people from all over the world come to my neighborhood to see it. And I'm honored to work here." She was a student, and she worked there. See, that's one of my biggest accomplishments. That's even bigger than the "Without Sanctuary." Because I started hiring young, I hired from the Georgia State. They had a language program. So, I hired French, some Spanish students. When people came, we had the prime minister of France. I'm on the tour, but they gave the talk.

If you could have saw that prime minister's face talking to an African American in French. We had a Japanese volunteer who did tours for the Japanese. They were over the moon because they didn't have to, I'm just being funny, they have to deal with African Americans giving that. But I mean, I just think that if we do that, first you'll capture the world. You make people feel comfortable. And then, you know, my theory is first always hire from within your community. Then you branch out and hire and bring people in. It can be done. Other agencies, are doing it, it's not affirmative action or people getting in. If you qualify and make the cert, you should be able to hire. I don't take anything away from veterans. But it's just that we're losing good people and there are good people out there. I was lucky and fortunate that someone saw my talent and was willing to invest. I don't think the Park Service does that anymore. It doesn't invest. And that's what companies do. We don't invest. We don't have good succession plans. We don't look for the future on what we want. Or saying, well this person is good. Maybe if I could train them or give them some more tools, they'll move up. So, you know, I want to retire soon. [I thought] I'll say that.

Lu Ann Jones: Is that part of your succession plan now? (laughs)

21:31

Melissa English-Rias: Retiring? Yeah. Yeah. I never thought it. Actually, Covid helped me. I didn't think I could come home. You know, you working with people, you enjoying people. I didn't think I could come home and do nothing. I mean, not do nothing, but involved. But yeah, I could be at home. Because when you traveling, you going places, you seeing and you doing things, you're like oh, no, this is a great gig. I mean, it has been.

Melissa English-Rias: I'll tell you a story. When I was working at Ninety-Six, they didn't have a large maintenance staff. They had one guy who worked more during the summer. But during the fall, they used the people, the community service people. I can't remember this guy. But his problem was that when he drank, he drove slow, so he always got caught. So, he used to come and clean the restrooms and clean the pond and everything. One day he was sitting there with me on his breaks, he came in, and he told me, he said, he worked for the mill. He said, "Young lady, I want to tell you something." He said, "I have a job. I got to do production five days a week." Blah, blah, blah. He said, "You have a career." He said, "And if you're smart enough, you'll stick with this. You'll never have to work at a job." I always remember that. Now sometimes it felt like a job, but I've had a career. I have family members say, "What do you really do?"

Melissa English-Rias: And I go, "Oh, I do a lot. I know it's hard to see." I remember, it took to heart what that guy said. From community service for DUI. You can learn from anybody who taught me. He said, "This is a career. I have a job." He said, "If you're smart enough to stick with this, you're going to have a wonderful career." I don't know where he is, God bless his soul or whatever, but I remember that. And

that was an Anglo-Saxon white man, an older white man, who told me that. And I always remembered that.

Melissa English-Rias: So that's what, regardless of what has happened to me in the Park Service, I've met some people who influenced my life in so many different ways, and learned so much from all different people, ethnic groups. I remember I was out, like I said, when I was out west, and I stood, and I read that's where the Apaches were. I mean, I was like wow, I read about this. And to know that this is where their land was. How powerful is that? I remember another time when I called my aunt. I was walking in Dallas, was going to the meeting, and I thought, this look familiar. What is this? And it was the place where JFK was shot. Now I wasn't born. And I called my aunts. I always call them. They said, "Where are you?" I said, "Where were you?" And I told them the date. They said, "That's when Kennedy was shot." I said, "I'm standing here." They was like, "Oh my God."

Melissa English-Rias: I was like, wow. I walked in, like I said, I'm going to the museum for a meeting. There I walked and saw the people standing there and said, this looks familiar. I mean, come on. I was like, wow. That's not Park Service, but I said, that's what people feel when they come to our parks. So that allowed me to get that same feeling. That's what keep me going when I say oh, I'm about sick of this organization. (laughter) You know that sense of wonder and learning about the history of the country. Regardless of what history it is, but the history that I learned growing up. It's just amazing. That's the powerful part of the Park Service that keeps me going. And working with the people in the field who still have that drive and want to tell the stories. A lot of them want to tell the accurate story and want to do it to be very inclusive. And that's good. We're getting a younger group of people who are really willing to, who are looking at diversity and inclusion. And that's great. But I think previous people that I work with, where I was, they did, too. I mean, I think that's one of the reasons why people did invest once I got into the Park Service was to have that diversity. But you have to be committed and say that we're going to do it. Every time I'm on an interp panel or something I hear that. I'm like, I've been hearing this for thirty-three years now. Where is the diversity? Well, it's included. No, it's not included. So, we were on a call, and I mentioned this to our peer-to-peer communication group. It was a call for a training. Of course, we were on Zoom or whatever. So, you know, you tag somebody. It took ten white men before one person at regional office worked with me introducing me to first woman. The women said, "Did you see that?" And I don't think they understand that. That they went from man to man, to a white male, white male, white male, white male, before they even introduce one woman. And it was a colleague. Not that we should, but it was like, wow. You know, here are our pictures, you can see our faces. (laughter) That was even the white women texting. They said, "Did you pick that up?" I was like, "Yeah, I saw it. Yeah, I felt it, too. Wow." So, I don't think we do that.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. There are overt and subtle ways of giving that message of I don't see you, or—

Melissa English-Rias: Right. Right. And there wasn't that many women on there, so it could have been easy to go from one to one to one. I'm talking from the top leader on down. So. That's what we always up against. But that's okay. We'll stay in the fight. But I think the younger generations are going to be pretty, I can see that some of the new younger chiefs, they are—so.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Well, this has been fascinating. Again, I appreciate it. Why don't we end? If we have other things to say for the interview, we can come back to it another time. But we'll end today. I really appreciate this.

Melissa English-Rias: Thank you.

Lu Ann Jones: It's so great to visit with you and also to get your story more in-depth. So, I'm going to cut the recorder off now, and we can—

27:20

[END OF TRACK 2]

[START OF TRACK 3]

Melissa English-Rias: --first came here, was working with a group. Peer Trust. The Peer Trust.

Lu Ann Jones: I just turned the recorder back on.

Melissa English-Rias: It was Kennesaw, Chattahoochee, and Martin Luther King. So, we were going to take some young kids from metro Atlanta, from an urban area to Kennesaw. And they called back to the superintendent and said, "Can you send a Black ranger?" I was so mad. I was so mad that I did call Dave Mihalic. I said, "I cannot believe that."

Melissa English-Rias: He said, "Melissa, calm down." He knew the superintendent. He said, "He didn't do that for the reason. I think he was doing that so that you could be there to be with the children. So just take it from there."

Melissa English-Rias: So, when I went there--but the issue was--I said, "Well, Dave, let me tell you something. I didn't grow up in the ghetto. Or I didn't grow up in the inner city. I came from Bedford Stuyvesant. But by the time we left New York and Brooklyn, it was making that change." I said, "I never lived in an apartment until I got to college. I lived in a house. So, you're making an assumption that it's easy for me to walk into an urban area. But I'm willing to do it because I'm not afraid of my people." When we got up there, those kids, when I got on the bus—and then I was glad I went—they said, "Where are we going?" I said, "We're going to Kennesaw." They said, "Where's that?" I said, "Oh, about thirty miles away." "We're leaving the state of Georgia?!"

Melissa English-Rias: So, then I realized that I'm comfortable. But I had this bus of 55 kids who never left the asphalt jungle of metro Atlanta. And they were petrified! Then so the role changed, and I wasn't as mad as I was. I was glad that I went. But I was mad because here it is this park is afraid of fifty-some African American kids. So, you know, it took us a while to get those kids off the bus. They slowly came off the bus. Their eyes are big. They're looking around. But they had a great time.

Melissa English-Rias: But then, one of the kids was standing by the law enforcement officer. And said, "How many rounds your mag hold? Nine or twelve?" (laughter) If you could have saw that law enforcement person's eyes. (laughs) It was sad that a young kid would know that, but I thought it was very funny that he could say that to a law enforcement. Like I say, I could pull up some stories. But like I said, again, my career was so much better. It was understanding that they were afraid. But the group I was with, we were bringing a group who never left, only place they knew was Piedmont Park. That's the only green space that they knew. So, again. But I was mad because here it is they asking this Black woman. And I was working on that grant, it was a three-part grant. But to know that they were scared, that's how I felt, they were scared of these young African American kids who had never left metro Atlanta, and they thought thirty miles was leaving the state of Georgia. But they did have a wonderful opportunity. But that was another story that working at Martin Luther King, that shocked me when I first got there. That happened in the early '90s.

Lu Ann Jones: Interesting. (laughs)

Melissa English-Rias: But he asked, "How many rounds do your Mag hold? Nine or twelve?" I was like, oh, my God. He was like—See? We can learn something from kids. So that was another story. That just popped up. That's probably the only one, that's when I first got to MLK. Again, that was the early '90s. So, we're still understanding stuff and different things like that. And we start working with the NPCA [National Parks Conservation Association] Mosaic. And that was a wonderful experience, too, of learning about different cultures. But yeah, that was another story.

Lu Ann Jones: That's okay. (laughs)

00:03:33

[END OF TRACK 3]

[END OF INTERVIEW]