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Kay Ellis
June 13, 2018

Interview conducted by Perri Meldon
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

KAY ELLIS

By Perri Meldon

June 13, 2018

Washington, D.C.

Transcribed by Technitype Transcripts

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Perri Meldon: Today is June 13, 2018. My name is Perri Meldon, and I am interviewing Kay Ellis, who served various positions in the National Park Service Accessibility Program. We are conducting this oral history today in Bethesda, Maryland, and we will be discussing Kay's contributions to the National Park Service Accessibility Program. This oral history recording is part of my master's thesis in the history department at University of Massachusetts Amherst and will be stored at the National Park Service Harpers Ferry Center. Welcome, Kay.

[0:00:39.7]

Kay Ellis: Thank you, Perri. Nice to be here.

Perri Meldon: So, we'll start with when and where were you born.

[0:00:47.4]

Kay Ellis: A long time ago now. [laughs] I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, actually, in 1945, on Father's Day.

Perri Meldon: Which is coming up.

[0:00:59.4]

Kay Ellis: Yes, it is.

Perri Meldon: Where did you receive your education?

[0:01:03.4]

Kay Ellis: Well, actually, I was born in Maryland, and we moved back to North Carolina when I was in high school, where I went to high school. Then I went to college at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and I got my B.A. degree. It was a dual major in sociology and recreation. Then several years later, I went back to graduate school at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and got my master's in therapeutic recreation.

Perri Meldon: If you don't mind sharing, you said there was a several-year time block between your B.A. and then your master's. What work were you doing between then?

[0:01:49.5]

Kay Ellis: Actually, my very first job was with the American Red Cross, which is where I first got into, quote, “recreation” for people with disabilities, because I worked at the Naval Hospital there at Camp LeJeune, North Carolina. So, my responsibility was providing recreation opportunities and programs for the patients there.

Kay Ellis: Then I decided to go wild and move to Hawaii with another friend, and we kicked it up in Hawaii for three years and worked at various different places. Then I decided to come back to the real world [laughs] and came back to Washington, D.C., and was doing various jobs with consulting firms dealing with recreation and leisure activities, and that’s when I went into graduate school at George Washington University.

Perri Meldon: Thank you. So, you’re at George Washington University. What were the circumstances then that eventually brought you to the National Park Service?

[0:03:04.4]

Kay Ellis: Well, quite frankly, it was David Park. I worked with David with my job at Leisure Information Service, and he was at the university. We talked about I wanted to go back to grad school, and then he left there and went to Park Service. Then just in talking with him, I thought, well, that would be my dream job to work for the National Park Service in accessibility and disability issues. So, he was hired as the first director of the accessibility program, and he kept saying, “Need to get you over here.” One of his staff decided to work half-time for a [unclear]. I applied for the half-time position and was selected, because nobody wants a half-time job. [laughs] So that’s kind of how I got in, through David.

Perri Meldon: Who was the part-time position, the other?

[0:04:05.6]

Kay Ellis: Wendy Ross, and she was one of the first people, when the program first was established, she wrote the original workings of it and guidance, she and the deputy director, Ira Hutchison. She was actually a sculptor. She’s an artist. She had been involved with working with children and working with disabilities for a long time, and she decided to see if she could make it as a full-time artist, and that’s when she wanted to go half-time. So, it worked out perfectly. We job-shared, basically. Then after a year, she decided she wanted to go full-time as an artist, so I became full-time. So, I slid in there. I mean, I applied, and it was all fair and square and legit, but there just wasn’t anybody that wanted a twenty-hour-a-week job in Washington, D.C.

Perri Meldon: And approximately when was this that you joined the Park Service?

[0:05:10.6]

Kay Ellis: It was in August of '82, I believe, yeah.

Perri Meldon: And then in '83, you stepped in around full capacity?

[0:05:24.0]

Kay Ellis: Right, yeah, full capacity meaning forty hours a week, but we were full-time, basically, in what we were doing.

Perri Meldon: When did you retire from the National Park Service?

[0:05:48.8]

Kay Ellis: Well, finally I retired from the federal government, which I happened to be at the National Park Service at the time, in January of 2013. I was with the Park Service for fourteen years, thirteen or fourteen years. I moved from the Park Service as I was a recreational specialist, was our official title, but then I went to the Bureau of Land Management, which is a sister agency in the Department of Interior, to direct their program. They decided they wanted to set up a full-time position in accessibility, and I applied. Of course, that's what I was already doing, so it was pretty simple. So, then I was with them from '95 until 2010. Then I went back to the National Park Service, went back home, I like to say [laughs], after Dave Park retired. I was selected to follow him and be the director of the program.

Perri Meldon: So just to get that straight, you started the program or developed the Bureau of Land Management program of accessibility?

[0:07:04.8]

Kay Ellis: Yes. They had a committee that was really pushing and laid the groundwork for it, of people that were in the bureau, different parts of the country, and they were real advocates for accessibility, so they laid the groundwork for putting it together, and then I was the first full-time program manager for BLM. It was the same issues that we had in the Park Service, a little bit different management in terms of agencies. All the agencies have their own specific management mandates, and there was a little bit of difference, but, by and large, as far as

accessibility and visitors are concerned, it's all the same game. That's why we all cooperated very closely. So, I continued to work with Dave Park just as close as I ever did. [laughs] So that was great. He was my mentor. He was my mentor.

Perri Meldon: And you worked together for a *really* long time.

[0:08:07.5]

Kay Ellis: Yes, we did. Well, technically over thirty years.

Perri Meldon: So, besides Dave Park and now Wendy Ross, who else were your colleagues, particularly in that first block of time?

[0:08:23.2]

Kay Ellis: Tom Coleman. I think the first employees were, of course, Wendy and then Dave Park and Tom Coleman were brought on about the same time, and there was one other employee that was there for just a short time, and myself, and we had a secretary support thing. But as far as the actual staff didn't change that much for several years. George Covington was there for a couple of years, and he was actually from the Department of Interior. And then our support staff changed, but we were the core people the whole time, basically, and Ray Bloomer was associated with that because he was not at the time a member of the Washington office, but he was one of the coordinators, regional coordinators, and worked very closely with us. Then later he became part of the Washington office, but duty stationed elsewhere.

Perri Meldon: Besides Ray, there were accessibility coordinators in the other regions.

[0:09:36.6]

Kay Ellis: Yes, yes. We set up coordinators in each of the regions. The regional directors appointed them. Unfortunately, it was an additional hat that they had to wear along with whatever hats they wore in their, quote, "real job." [laughs] Some were in facility management, some were in interpretation, but they would all have, in regional office, a lot of them did many, many different jobs. But we coordinated things regionally because it was difficult. We had the entire country, and it was difficult to work directly with parks individually, so we relied on the coordinators to keep us apprised of what was going on, any complaints and things like that. So, they were invaluable.

Perri Meldon: We'll get back to maybe more site-specific or region-specific in a bit, but I was wondering what do you believe compelled the National Park Service to even begin an accessibility program? What were maybe the factors?

[0:10:53.5]

Kay Ellis: That's an interesting question, because at the time, late sixties, seventies, late seventies, there was a movement that began in the United States, a disability movement brought about by a lot of different factors. The Vietnam War, a lot of soldiers came back wounded and suddenly were put into an environment that they couldn't access. The different types of disabilities and people that had these disabilities had different reasons to start saying, "Well, wait a minute now. Shouldn't we have rights to this too?" And then certain legislation was passed, the Architectural Barriers Act, that dealt with buildings and making those accessible. So, there was a movement that was moving forward. I think the atmosphere in the country was beginning slowly to change, but not fast enough, actually.

Kay Ellis: Then it took individual people, advocates, to say, "We need this." Ira Hutchison happened to be the person at the National Park Service, and he was deputy director, I believe, at the time—again, David probably knows more of this—but he worked and talked with other people and talked with David, you know, about the need to have a separate branch, and it was a branch, which is pretty high up at the time in management, in the structure. So, they wanted to have a full-time devoted program to deal with that, so I think it was just a combination of individual people pushing it, certainly.

Perri Meldon: The program began in 1978-'79 with these accessibility trainings and then these workshops. You came on then in '82, '83. What were your primary responsibilities in those early years?

[0:13:11.2]

Kay Ellis: My specific responsibilities really focused, actually, on a broad range of things we did, but focusing especially on technical assistance whenever some of the parks needed guidance on how to make something accessible or an interpretation of some of the regulations or some of the guidelines on how to make things accessible. So, a lot of technical assistance types of questions. So, worked at that. But technical assistance and training, education, continuing education, was very, very important because we realized that we had to start developing a cadre of employees who not only picked up the regulations and tried to figure them out, but became advocates for providing accessibility to the visitors who happened to be disabled, and to get that message across, not so much that it's the law that you have to do this, but that it makes sense to do it. As an agency, it was more cost-effective. It just made more sense to make things accessible as you're building

them, and there were also laws for it, but it just made more sense. And trying to change the attitude to inclusion. “These are visitors. Oh, and they happen to have a disability.”

Perri Meldon: How as this received then by the people who attended the workshops?

[0:14:51.5]

Kay Ellis: Well, across the board, they would come to class with a mindset of, “Yeah, okay, I got to go to this class.” Usually, they were appointed to do that. And they’d leave with, “Oh, my goodness, we have so much to do.”

Kay Ellis: And this is digressing a little bit, maybe jumping ahead, but the coolest things was those GS-5 rangers that we trained in the early eighties then continued ten, twelve, fifteen years later became superintendents.

Kay Ellis: In fact, it was Dan Wenk, and Dan Wenk went on from GS-5 ranger to now he was acting director and he’s been very, very high up in the Park Service and he’s currently the superintendent of Yellowstone. I think he’s getting ready to retire. He was at Mount Rushmore, and he called us and said, “You know, when I was a GS-5 and I went back to my park and told my manager, my boss, that we needed to do these things, they laughed at me, and there was not much I could do. Now I’m the superintendent. Now I can do these things.” And it was like, yeah, it’s beginning finally to work! And I think of all things—probably I might change that later, but I know that is one thing that made me the most proud, is when I left the Park Service, I knew that there were people that we left behind, Ray and Dave and I had trained, that were going to carry on and really do the right thing for the right reason, and that made it all worthwhile, you know. So, I was very lucky to have that kind of a job.

Kay Ellis: One thing I started to say, too, I was talking about technical assistance and training, but also policy development, because we were at that time trying again to organize the branch and get that going and deliver policy to the field on what we should be doing and why, things like that. In the early eighties, ’83, we got the policy written. I was responsible for having it reviewed by various disability organizations like American Council for the Blind and National Association for the Deaf, just a whole range of disabilities. We send it out to them and asked them to review and comment, and we got a lot of interest back and a lot of comments. By and large, the majority of them were very, very positive and they were so glad to see that this was beginning to happen. So, we were real happy about that, but that was important for us to not just write a policy and put it out, but we needed to have it vetted, if you will, by the disability community.

Perri Meldon: And that was Special Directive 83-3?

[0:18:06.6]

Kay Ellis: Yes. Yes, it was.

Perri Meldon: What were the other policies, regulations, laws that impacted the office in the eighties, prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act?

[0:18:25.2]

Kay Ellis: Yeah, which was '90. Well, a lot of it had to do—different issues related—well, the regulations for programmatic access, which was Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, was *finally* released by the department, and so with those guidelines and the guidance we had from the U.S. Access Board on how to implement the Architectural Barriers Act, that gave us the tools we needed to start looking at things programmatically as well as facility-wise. I've lost my train of thought.

Perri Meldon: Could you define the differences between programmatic and physical accessibility?

[0:19:19.3]

Kay Ellis: Well, my view of it, in a simple way, is to say, well, the physical access is being able to get to a facility, however you come, but if you drive a car, you have to be able to park that car, and then after you park that car, you have to be able to get to the building, so that all has to be accessible. Then the building itself has to be accessible to get into the building, and then you have to be able to use the building. These are physical things, use the restroom, use the water fountain, access to physically get through the building.

Kay Ellis: The other side is what's in the building in terms of programmatically. Is it a Visitor Center? Is there a film there? Is there printed material? So physical access is being able to get into and get around the building, and actually programmatic access, to me, very simplistically, is being able to participate in everything that happens in that building. So, you can't have one without the other. You can have a great, great program that's accessible, but if it's on the second floor and you have no way to get there—which we had a lot of that. A lot of historic houses would have programs on the second floor and no way to get there. So, we'd have to figure out, okay, how do we do that? How do we bring that program down to the average person? So, it works hand-in-hand. You can't have one without the other.

Kay Ellis: Perri Meldon: My follow-up question to that is about the National Park Service, and the Park Service protects cultural and natural resources, and that will often

come into conflict with access. So, let's first talk about wilderness and access.

[0:21:22.0]

Kay Ellis: [laughs] Yes.

Perri Meldon: How did the Accessibility Office, the program, work around or work with parks dealing with wilderness and access issues?

[0:21:33.1]

Kay Ellis: Well, first issue was identifying what's wilderness. A lot of people use the word "wilderness", and they don't really mean the wilderness. They mean what seems to be wilderness. The Park Service has—well, a lot of agencies have WS designated areas. I mean, they are designated as wilderness, with the big "W." And those have specific rules and regulations at a national level for their use. You can't take a motorized vehicle, or anything motorized into the wilderness area because there are certain WS values that are valued by people. That's why they go to the wilderness. They have the solitude and just everything that goes—it's a different experience. So, the Wilderness Preservation System protects all those areas very specifically.

Kay Ellis: The other part of that are areas that the Park Service manages as wilderness, but they're not wilderness with the big "W." And there's where there's a lot of issue, because if someone wants to go hunting and they want to take an ATV or something into it, it's like, well, you can't really do that because we're managing it as a wilderness area. But in some cases, they may be able to make an exception if that user is a person with a disability.

Kay Ellis: So there were a lot of questions oftentimes about the use, so we backed up in terms of trying to look at things, those questions, to say, okay, how can we provide the highest level of access—and, again, this became a phrase—how do we provide the highest level of access with the least amount of damage, whether it's a historic area, cultural resource area, a wilderness area? So, there would be questions on how to balance that, so it's always a balancing act. It's not without issue on many occasions.

Kay Ellis: The "big W" wilderness, it's cut and dried. It's black and white. You may not do—regardless, except when the ADA was passed, and they had this section in it about electronic personal mobility devices. Some issues like the Segway, which is not motorized, but it's close to it. Now, an electric wheelchair is allowed to go into the wilderness, doesn't matter, but the Segway may or may not be. Some people with disabilities use Segways like a wheelchair. They may be someone who has multiple sclerosis, so they have mobility issues, but they're not as mobility restricted as someone who has spinal cord injuries, say. So, they can

stand up on a Segway. They prefer to use a Segway as opposed to a wheelchair. So, there's all these questions there, but, again, it was a constant balancing act.

Kay Ellis: When I was at BLM, it wasn't preservation and protection; it was multiple use of the lands. But again, I stressed in the program, how can we allow these ATVs in, but with limited destruction? Again, it was a balancing act which I tried to do.

Kay Ellis: That brings up another issue that was interesting. We had C&O Canal came to our office or contacted us and had an issue because someone wanted to use—I think it was a bicycle on the C&O Canal trail. That's not wilderness, but they don't allow—it had to do with some areas. I can't remember exactly what it was. But we sat down with a group of people from the park and our staff and some other people and started talking about the issue of what types of devices should be allowed for someone with a disability in certain areas. We literally came up with a definition. What is a wheelchair? What is a mobility device? So, the definition was that it was a mobility device that was designated for use by a person with a disability would be allowed to be used anywhere that that person went. We had some research that was done about a wheelchair actually comes down to a wheelchair is considered to be part of the person. Now, a bicycle would not be part of the person and it's not the primary—we use the phrase “primary means of locomotion” in part of that definition.

Kay Ellis: We sat around the table and wrote that definition about what is a wheelchair and what is not a wheelchair. Then that definition was picked up when the ADA was passed, and there's a section on wilderness access, and that definition ended up in that part of the legislation, so we were pretty proud of that, because we had input on that and managed to affect that in a very positive way.

Perri Meldon: That's really neat.

[0:27:17.0]

Kay Ellis: Dave was the major person, but we sat around a table and came up with that definition. We had the legislative aide call us when the ADA was being written, and said, “We need to have that definition. Don't you have a definition of what's a wheelchair?” [laughs]

Perri Meldon: That was about wilderness. You did talk about historic houses as well, but could you also provide some examples about access and historic preservation?

[0:27:50.0]

Kay Ellis: Yeah. The Secretary of Interior has very specific guidelines on preservation and protection of historic entities, buildings and things, historic fabric, or it could even

be the landscape, historic landscape. So, when you talk about going in and providing access, it's like you don't necessarily want to run in and put a ramp everywhere. So, we tried to come up with guidance. We worked with the Historic Preservation Division and actually produced some videos, training videos, dealing with physical access and dealing with historic site access and dealing with programmatic access. We worked with, like I said, the Cultural Resources Division, historic preservation section, to come up with some guidance on how to provide access, what are the best ways to provide access to historic sites. It's case by case, and it's not real easy, but it's not impossible if you start off with the idea that you can do pretty much what you want to do, because, basically, you can, but we want to be able to do that without destroying fabric. There's nothing that says we can't go in and tear something apart, but as a preservation agency, we don't want to do that, so we will find a way that we can find the highest level of access with the least amount of damage.

Kay Ellis: Many times, there will be a historic house or something and it's not really significant historic fabric. The legislation is written with that phrase. You can't damage significant historic fabric. So, it may be historic, but is it significant? What is the significance to the building? So, it's a whole process to go through case by case, and we try to come up with some guidance, working with the division, and the Historic Preservation Division wrote several briefs on that. So that was a good partnership with the other offices, and I think a lot of that has been followed. All of this has been adopted by other agencies all along the way, so, again, it's another balancing act, how do you do that?

Perri Meldon: It seems like you're suggesting that the National Park Service has influenced other agencies. Have you worked more broadly with the Department of the Interior in developing accessibility strategies?

[0:30:46.8]

Kay Ellis: Yes. [laughs] I can probably say we did, and, again, when I say "we," I mean David mainly. We were very heavily involved with the department. We would have—how do I frame this? The things that we would like to do, we wanted to get the parks to respond and do certain things, and our job was not to tell someone what to do. We didn't have the authority to tell anyone to do something. Our position was we advised. We advised the parks, we advised management, "Okay, this is the way it should be. This is the law, and this is what's going to happen if we don't do certain things, and here's how we want to do them." But it's advice.

Kay Ellis: We also found out that other bureaus in the Department of Interior were beginning to kind of realize that they needed to address these issues, too, so a couple of them, Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Reclamation, appointed accessibility coordinators for those bureaus. So, we would talk to them a lot and share

information, because why should we all develop individual stuff? “Here. Here’s our policy. Copy it. Do the same thing. Tweak it to your agency.”

Kay Ellis: There used to be a meeting at the departmental level by one of the employees, and I’m blanking on his name, Andy—I’ll think of it later. He was a wheelchair user. He was in the Office of Equal Opportunity, I believe, and he would have monthly meetings of different bureaus, but they would look at employment as well as the range of things dealing with disability. And then he passed away, and that meeting kind of phased out, quit doing it, and so David was the primary person who decided we needed to have a committee.

Kay Ellis: So, jump to the final thing was the—hmm. I’ve forgotten now. Department of Interior Coordinating Committee on Disability or something like that. It had different names along the way. We found out that, number one, that was very valuable to share information with other agencies. We were acting as an advisor to the Department of Interior, that committee, for what they should be looking at in terms of the range of accessibility from employment on down to programs. So, we found out that we were able to effect change at the departmental level, which, in turn, came down to the bureaus and effected change. So, we found out that that was one of the best ways to be able to effect change overall, is we worked closely with the Department of Interior and they would come down with a directive to our management, saying we needed to do certain things. Maybe that wasn’t the way to do it. Maybe somebody would say, “Well, you shouldn’t do that.” But on the other hand, it was for the interest of all the agencies that we did that, and it was the best way to get things done.

Kay Ellis: The committee put on a major national summit on disability and accessibility and civil rights, and it was highly successful, and we came up with major recommendations for the department to effect change throughout the bureaus, and then that filtered down to the bureaus again. So, it worked very well, and most of that was Dave Parks’ job. He was the leader for most of that, and I just supported him. [laughs]

Perri Meldon: So, I’m going to change gears slightly and think a little bit outside the National Park Service. During the time that you were working with Dave and others before 1990, there is this rise of disability protests, some of them before your arrival in ’83. There’s the 1977 504 protests. Then in 1988, at Gallaudet, there’s the “Deaf President Now.” Then there’s also the “Capital Crawl,” and these are all steps that lead to eventually, and other factors, the Americans with Disabilities Act. How did these protests, if at all, affect your thinking of others’ thinking at the National Park Service?

[0:35:45.3]

Kay Ellis: On a personal level at the time, not being a person with a disability, but having my whole life and career basically working within that arena, I was personally very affected by a lot of these demonstrations and events, because that was the only way something was going to change. A lot of people, I'd heard at different times—I hate to use the phrase “a lot of people,” because how many is that? [laughs] But anyway, people would equate a person with disability who protested with, again, that mentality of, you know, “You should be seen and not heard. Don't be so demanding.” Well, this was just people who were sick and tired of having their rights trampled on and not having access to employment, not having access to housing, the range of opportunities that we as citizens have every day, and that includes physical activity and recreation and leisure pursuits. So, again, my viewpoint was, yes, employment and transportation and housing are major, major, critical things that just did not exist for people with disabilities, and it was just blatant discrimination. But I was also looking at, wait a minute, there is another part of that. So, I've always tried to put physical and programmatic access issues related to it or access to leisure activities and being able to go to the movies and being able to do other things.

Kay Ellis: So, I viewed it as very, very positive, because I was very much an advocate, and I didn't mind—I hated seeing people crawling up the steps, but I knew that was the only way to get the attention. Some wheelchair users at one time chained themselves to Metro buses in downtown D.C., and some people just went wild about that, like, “Oh, that's awful, those people.” And I always laugh when I hear someone say, “those people.” It's like, no, no, no, those people really are us, you know. It's not separate but equal. It's not equal if it's separate. And if you're not allowing access to the range of opportunities, then that's wrong. It was those groups and those events that started drawing attention to the fact that we're not talking about somebody who wants a handout, or, as George Covington said, “We're not charities. We have these rights. What's wrong? What's wrong with you? Don't you understand this?” [laughs] But they did have an impact on people we worked with, so a lot of times Dave and I would find ourselves trying to explain how that fits in and why that's important and being an advocate for it. So, a learning curve. [laughs]

Perri Meldon: Then how did the Americans with Disabilities Act affect the National Park Service?

[0:39:19.0]

Kay Ellis: Well [chuckles], I thought you were going to say how did it affect the public or the whole national scene.

Perri Meldon: You can answer that, too, if you want.

[0:39:31.7]

- Kay Ellis: Again, we sort of smile, because as soon as the ADA was passed, Title III of ADA deals with places of public accommodation, and in the definition of what's a place of public accommodation was all the areas and things, and it says parks. So, right away, people thought, oh, national parks. So, everybody would say, "Oh, now we have to be accessible." And I'm like, "What have I been saying for the past eighteen years?" you know. [laughs] So we would just kind of laugh at first, and I say "we" because, again, it's like the Three Musketeers, you know, and then we add in Michele Hartley. It was Dave Park and Ray Bloomer and I; we would laugh. It's like, "You know, you just don't get it." Because everybody would say, "Oh, now you have to do that."
- Kay Ellis: We'd just smile, and at first, we would say, "No, no, no, the ADA doesn't apply to us." And people would look at us with real shock on their face, you know. "What do you mean?"
- Kay Ellis: I used to say that in training, "Oh, the ADA doesn't apply to the federal government. We don't have to do that, because we've already been doing it for the past twenty years." [laughs] And people were shocked, because "Wait a minute. Really?" So, it was funny.
- Kay Ellis: But, to me, I explain it by saying the ADA doesn't apply to us specifically, but it took the two laws that did apply to us specifically, the Architectural Barriers Act and Section 504 of the Rehab Act, and combined them and said, okay, now Joe's Pizzeria has to do this, because up until the ADA was passed, the federal government, local government, those kinds of entities all had to provide access because of these other two laws, but the local movie theater, Joe's Pizzeria, they didn't have to do that. So, Congress said, "You know, there's a piece missing here, so let's apply this now."
- Kay Ellis: Then later, we just quit trying to correct people. It was like, "Yeah, whatever. You want to think that that's fine. It's the same thing." It was the guidance to develop the ADA, and then the ADA guidance for buildings and things like that, they, again, took from what was already in existence and applied to us in the federal government, revised it, revamped it, and put it out as standards for everybody. So, people said, "Well, we don't have to follow these ABAAS," Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards.
- Kay Ellis: And I'd say, "Well, no, but they're the same things." They did a final rule from the Department of Justice. They did separate it to federal and non-federal. When I say federal, I mean federal and federally assisted, so entities that get money from the federal government, like state and local governments, can get money from the federal government, they have to comply with the federal government laws.

Perri Meldon: Versus federally conducted.

[0:42:55.0]

Perri Meldon: Yes. It's federally conducted and federally assisted. When Title IV was first passed, it didn't apply to the federal government. [laughs] It was a mistake, yeah, in '73, and it passed. It was places that receive federal financial assistance and the post office. And someone said, "Oh, wait a minute. But this doesn't apply to the government itself?" So, they had to go back and revise it. So, it's Section 504 as revised to be federally assisted and federally conducted. That's more than you want to know. [laughs]

Perri Meldon: No, still helpful, and perhaps to someone who listens to this in the future, whomever that is.

[0:43:48.9]

Kay Ellis: Well, again, a lot of what I'm saying, I'm making it very simplistic, because that's the way I try to boil things down so that the average person can understand it when I'm doing training, or it's my perception, basically.

Perri Meldon: You returned to the National Park Service after Dave Parks' retirement in '09, and you stayed until your own retirement in '13. Things had changed significantly since you left the Park Service, presumably. How did that change? How did your responsibilities change?

[0:44:25.6]

Kay Ellis: How did my responsibilities change? Well, I was head of the program [laughs], the biggest change, but I was head of the program at BLM. It wasn't the content of what we were doing didn't change a whole lot in terms of BLM's program paralleled the Park Service's program a lot and I worked closely with David. I wanted to come back to the Park Service because I wanted to end my career at the Park Service because that was kind of my home, and the Park Service also had a much broader mission in terms of accessibility, had to switch from being undeveloped areas back to developed areas.

Kay Ellis: I think the biggest change when I came back was the fact that it was no longer a branch, had kind of been folded into the Park Facility Management Division quite some time before I came back and was even further eroded in terms of visibility. When the program first started, we reported directly to the associate director, so we were like two people away from the director. Then we got buried a few times and ended up being part of the Park Improvement Branch, which is a great

branch, but the branch manager also dealt with housing and repair/rehab and various different—fees program, and distant to accessibility. So, we were kind of a little kid on the lot, you know.

Kay Ellis: Funding-wise, the program was never funded directly as an office. I think our first budget was like \$20,000 a year, excluding salary, and that was 20,000 to travel anywhere to do anything we wanted to do, \$20,000. So, take away the salary, that's what we had. And it didn't change much. I never really had a budget that I prepared, other than I set aside money to work with the National Center on Accessibility and had a cooperative agreement with them, so there was funding for that, and I had to fight the idea that we got a lot of money in our program. It's like, "No, no, no. We don't get the money. It goes to the National Center on Accessibility." So that was the biggest frustration all along, is not having that financial support, so I had to look—and Dave did too—other ways to get things funded in the parks. So, a lot of what I was doing was working with trying to figure out ways to do it. We got money through some budget initiatives, finally, the repair/rehab program, we tried to get some stuff through there. So, trying to get some projects, little by little, funded.

Kay Ellis: But most of my efforts, too, were spent working with the National Center on Accessibility in doing the assessments, because if we don't figure out what needs to be fixed, how can we tell people that they have to fix it? So, a major push was to do accessibility assessments in all the parks, so that was a major part of what I was doing, is trying to work with them to coordinate that.

Kay Ellis: I think one of the biggest changes I saw was the sense of awareness after twenty-seven years in the parks. Again, like I said, our GS-5 rangers that we trained are now managers when I came back, and so they were very supportive. So, there was much more support at the park level, but, again, parks have all these other demands on their money. They have a little bit of money, and they have all these other demands, and they're equal. I'd say accessibility is not the most important thing, but it's not the least important thing. If you've got x amount of money and you need a new roof on your Visitor Center, you're going to fix the new roof first. I understand that.

Kay Ellis: But the staff were much more inventive on what they did. In the Park Service we had an annual Accessibility Awards program, and by the time I left, David had really gotten it going, and by the time I left, there was all kinds of competition.

Perri Meldon: Who was receiving the awards?

[0:49:28.1]

Kay Ellis: Parks. We had different categories of accessibility, programmatic accessibility, physical accessibility, historic site. We had several different categories of award,

and then the parks would nominate themselves based on a project that they did or an initiative that they did or something. I had a committee of people inside and outside the Park Service, and people with disabilities, who read these, and we rated them, and we chose winners. It got to be so competitive, I mean, people were sending me audiovisuals, CDs, and all kinds of productions on how to present their project because they wanted to have that recognition that they won an award. They didn't get anything for it, but they got the recognition. We had some wonderful projects. Then we showcased those projects and had a big award program in Washington, tried to get the director there to give these out. So that was really good.

Perri Meldon: On the other side of this, there's also the complaint process.

[0:50:51.8]

Kay Ellis: Yes.

Perri Meldon: In 2008, there was the lawsuit *Gray v. Golden Gate National Recreation Area*.

[0:50:59.9]

Kay Ellis: GGNRA. [laughs]

Perri Meldon: I know 2008 preceded your return, but were you involved in the years following?

[0:51:08.0]

Kay Ellis: Yes. David ran out on me. [laughs] No, I'm just kidding. Yeah, that lawsuit started and then it kind of grew and it grew, and it grew. They were handling it at the park level, but then, of course, it got bigger and bigger. Then I got involved with it. I got dragged into—I shouldn't say that. I was involved with it because I had to be deposed about the Park Service program and what we actually were trying to do and how that related to GGNRA and what was happening out there. Part of this I didn't know prior, and I had to do a lot of work with the park staff to get caught up. Ray Boomer was very much involved with that, too, fortunately. But I remember having to spend a week digging in documents because they did these FOIA requests and anything and everything that had GGNRA on it had to be collected and copied. It was just thousands and thousands of papers. I think it turned out okay. It certainly wasn't finished when I left. I can't remember if it's been resolved yet. It may be.

Perri Meldon: I know there were goals, and I think it took about six years, so maybe, yeah, it did just [unclear].

[0:52:35.3]

Kay Ellis: Long time. But that's the legal process. Putting that one aside, in general, I was not averse to complaints, because we—and again I say “we”—we always looked at complaints as, you know, that's ammunition. If I can go to my manager and say, “Okay, we've got all these complaints. We've got to divert some more money. We've got to get some funding to get these things fixed. Otherwise, it's going to become a lawsuit and we don't have a choice.” So, it drew attention to what the deficits were.

Kay Ellis: Unfortunately—I say unfortunately because we are requiring people to go to a national park, to enjoy it and then to complain about it. I had many people with disabilities say, “You know, I just am tired of filing complaints. I want to go to the park to enjoy it. I don't want to go to the park to try to figure out how accessible it is. Yes, it's a pain in the butt sometimes, but once in a while I'd like to just be a visitor and not have to do that.” So that kind of changed my thinking about how we perceive complaints. We expect people with disabilities to go and complain about something. It's like, well, why don't we just fix it, so they don't have to complain?

Kay Ellis: But GGRNA was certainly a little bit different, and challenges of GGNRA were just horrendous, because it's beach and it's historic sites and it's just—oh, there's just so much areas in GGRNA that run the gamut of accessibility issues and challenges, but the staff had a full-time accessibility coordinator, the only park that did, and that was his full-time job, was to address those issues and try to make them work out.

Perri Meldon: Since you've left in 2013, what do you see as the ongoing challenges in the National Park Service with regard to accessibility?

[0:55:02.1]

Kay Ellis: By far, again, the same challenge is lack of funding, lack of funding and lack of commitment that is sustained. There would be pockets of commitment and there were when I left, and then that wanes because something else gets their attention. And accessibility is an ongoing thing. That's the fact. That's the reality of accessibility. We change things, we change facilities, we need to be paying more attention to what we're doing when we change them, and accessibility changes and evolves, and programmatic accessibility. There are new things, new, innovative ideas every day on how to make different programs and different

things that the Park Service does uniquely available to people with disabilities. So, it's ever-changing. People just expect accessibility to be once-and-done, and it's not. I think that's a major challenge.

Kay Ellis: Again, complacency. I'm assuming—I don't know for sure—but people in society, in my personal opinion, tend to think in terms of, "Well, accessibility is a thing of the past. We've already done it." Again, it never goes away. It's always going to be a challenge. There's always going to be another issue. I think people get too complacent. "Well, we've always had curb cuts, haven't we? Well, we've always had these films captioned, haven't we?" It's like, no, that was a big fight to get captions. It was a major thing we worked on, was how to get things captioned. So those are some of the issues that I see continue.

Perri Meldon: You've also just listed some major achievements by having those curb cuts or having that captioning. What do you personally see as your greatest accomplishments during your time with the Park Service?

[0:57:17.6]

Kay Ellis: I have to go back to the number of people that were—and this sounds self-serving. I don't mean it to be that way. But I think that I and Ray and David, we all had a significant impact on people. And if you don't have that, if you don't develop that commitment, then you're just going to have people who think they can open up a book and figure out how to do it, and don't really know *why* they're doing it, don't understand why. "Oh, I know why. We have people with disabilities." Yeah, but it's people with disabilities who have the *right* to do this. It's not just because—you know.

Kay Ellis: So, to this day, I've had people say to me, "You don't remember me, but I was in your class and that changed the way I thought." And it brings me to tears. That happened to be not too long ago. So, I think, again, it's the people that we had an impact on, as opposed to I didn't physically change things, I didn't caption something, I helped people find the resources to get those things done, and part of that is training.

Perri Meldon: That about does it for my questions. You made it. [laughs]

[0:58:50.0]

Kay Ellis: I appreciate it. As most of my friends know in the Park Service and out, you get me talking about the Park Service and accessibility, and it's pretty hard to shut me up.

Perri Meldon: With that, is there anything that you'd like to add that I didn't ask explicitly?

[0:59:10.4]

Kay Ellis: At this point, I'm sure there's plenty of things, but none that I can specifically say. I don't have any major words of wisdom right at the moment. [laughs]

Perri Meldon: As we said, if our in-person conversation was not enough, we can always record another session by phone.

[0:59:31.2]

Kay Ellis: Okay. Well, that sounds good. Thank you for the opportunity. I'm real excited about your project.

Perri Meldon: Thank you.

[0:59:39.0]

Kay Ellis: It's good to know that people care about how this happened to begin with. Again, it's part of that complacency. "We've always had this." I say, "No, you haven't." [laughs]

Perri Meldon: It's been such a treat to talk with you and to talk with Dave and meet with Michelle and Jeremy and formally with Ray.

Perri Meldon: But I'm just going to wrap this up formally right now. Again, today is June 13th, 2018. My name is Perri Meldon. I've been speaking with Kay Ellis about the accessibility program in the National Park Service. This is the first and possibly only recording. We shall see.

[End of interview]