Carrie Jones

Apalachicola, Florida

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Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Today is Tuesday, December 14th. I am in Apalachicola, Florida, at the FDACS, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences--

Carrie Jones: Services.

Annemarie Anderson: Services.

Carrie Jones: [Laughter] I know. It's a mouthful. Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Division of Aquaculture.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. There we go. [Laughter] And there are a lot of acronyms in this business.

Carrie Jones: Yes. Yes.

Annemarie Anderson: This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance, also another acronym, and I am with Carrie Jones. Carrie, would you go ahead and introduce yourself, tell us your name, and tell us what you do?

Carrie Jones: Sure. My name is Carrie Jones and I'm an environmental supervisor with FDACS Division of Aquaculture, and I manage all of the Submerged Lands Program for leasing.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Thank you. And I was wondering if you could give us your date of birth for the record?

Carrie Jones: Sure. It's July 24th, 1985.

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Annemarie Anderson: Perfect. And if you will, could you tell us a little bit about maybe your growing up years. Where'd you grow up?

Carrie Jones: Sure. Yeah. I grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. It's a small town called Easton. It's surrounded by the Chesapeake Bay. It's a big agriculture community, so lots of corn, soybeans, pigs, chickens, but of course seafood. My family on my mom's side has a boat rental and seafood business, small family business and boat rental on the Wye River in Wye Mills, Maryland since the 1940s, so about four generations of watermen on my mom's side of the family. My grandfather hand built 16-foot wooden rowboats, and we would rent those out for the day. We had a little bait shop where we'd sell traps and bait and line.

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So yeah, a lot of people would come down from the Western Shore. We used to affectionately call them "chicken neckers." They could come down and actually hand line. They would rent the boats for the day and tie a chicken neck to the end of the line and pull it up very slowly once it soaked for a little bit and the crabs start biting on, and then they'd just scoop it up with a net. And then we would also have a steam room so we would be able to steam your catch that you would cook being out there all day on the water. So it was pretty cool. Grew up just crabbing, boating, fishing, and being out on the water a lot.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great! What was your grandfather's name?

Carrie Jones: His name was Charles Schnaitman. And it's still in operation today, it's called Schnaitman's Boat Rental. And both of my uncles still run the business down there, and also go crabbing commercially. And you can charter him to go take you out crabbing if you don't want to

try to catch your own. And then, my other uncle also helps run the bait shop and also does boat mechanic work, so you can bring your personal boat over there to get worked on.

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So it's kind of just a whole compound of being a watermen's kind of shanty with dock space and lots of people that come down from other areas to come crab and fish, 'cause the Wye River is especially known for their big crabs.

Annemarie Anderson: Nice! And what are your uncles' names?

Carrie Jones: Chuck and Billy Schnaitman.

Annemarie Anderson: Great. Could you spell Schnaitman for the record, too? Sorry.

Carrie Jones: Sure. It's s-c-h-n-a-i-t-m-a-n.

Annemarie Anderson: Thank you. If I spelled anything out of my head, I would have spelled it wrong.

Carrie Jones: [Laugh] Yeah. It's German so it's a tough one.

Annemarie Anderson: No, no, no. That's great. And I was wondering if maybe you could-- I think you've already touched on this, but kind of talk a little bit about your relationship with the outdoors growing up.

Carrie Jones: Yeah. So growing up, like I said, just spent all my summers down there helpin' work the bait shop in the summers since I could count change.

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And then, I also spent a lot of time at Pickering Creek Audubon Center, which was just down the river from my grandparents' boat rental and seafood business, and they had a really great eco camp in the summer. So I camped there in the summers and then, once I was old enough, became a counselor and so on and so forth. Other campers would be jealous because I would get to be picked up by boat versus everybody else had to get picked up by car. So that was really fun and really sparked my interest into something ecological and being outdoors and being on the water. I also co-wrote a grant with Pickering Creek Audubon Center. In my high school years I was also part of the FFA and did an oyster project with Pickering Creek Audubon Center. And so I just actively stayed involved with them doing some volunteer work.

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I interned at the cooperative NOAA labs in my hometown in my senior year in high school for my senior project just working on oyster disease research. Basically, I saw all the restrictions on the seafood industry firsthand, read about how the oysters were gone back then, and wanted to know more about how and why. That's kind of really how I got interested. A lot of my family-- Maryland, obviously, it's a big crabbing industry but it's also the summertime kind of season, so you would crab in the summer and then you would oyster in the winter. But growing up I didn't really have a lot of oysters around because they were in such decline up there due to disease and lots of other things, eutrophication and stuff like that. So my uncle would actually dive for oysters way back when, when they were still plentiful oysters out there, but yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: Wow! That sounds really interesting.

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Carrie Jones: He has lots of fun stories to tell.

Annemarie Anderson: Oh, I bet. Yeah, one of my favorite things about this work is speaking to watermen, people who've been on the water for a long time, people like Larry Bowen over in Panacea. So I'm wondering if maybe you could talk about how you took that interest in the environment, in oysters, in the waters in Maryland and made the leap in college to pursue that in your education and your early career?

Carrie Jones: Yeah. So obviously, from a very long time I knew I wanted to do something with the water, something with the environment, but particularly the water. So like I said, those oyster projects I did through high school kind of what steered me to-- I definitely wanted to do some type of marine biology, marine science. So I went to Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina, and it was known for being a really good marine science driven program.

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It was on the East Coast, so I was familiar-- ironically, there was no universities in Maryland at that time that offered marine biology or marine science, so I was able to get a scholarship that I could go to any other state college, and I would get in-state tuition for some type of marine science program. So Coastal was an up-and-coming small state school and, like I said, known for their marine science program. So it seemed to be a good fit for me. And then I worked a summer at North Inlet-Winyah Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, or known as the NERR, another acronym. [Laugh]. And Baruch Institute in Georgetown is actually one of the headquarters for all the NERRs. There's a bunch of NERRs all around the United States.

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And so I stated working there one summer and really just got honed into some different research skills and really figured out I wanted to kinda steer my career towards water quality and

potentially shellfish or something of that entity. And worked on a nutrient cycling project with them. And once I completed my bachelor's degree in marine science, they had actually just started a graduate program not too long after that, and so it was a fairly new program. And like I said, I had already kind of gotten started with this nutrient cycling project my senior year, so I decided to continue it on there and to get my graduate degree from there. And their graduate program had an emphasis on coastal marine and wetland studies, so it seemed like a really good fit for what I wanted to do.

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And then I received a NSF GK-12 fellowship where it was like inquiry-based learning where I went into a twelfth-grade marine science classroom and was able to basically work my thesis into the classroom, and just learned a lot of communication skills and the hows and the whys, and how to communicate science and stuff like that. And I was still kinda torn on whether I wanted to do education versus research, so that experience really kind of like honed me in that I kind of wanted to steer myself more towards the research side, not that it was a bad experience, but it was just a lot more to it than I expected. So from there is kinda where I just-- when I got my graduate degree from Coastal, as well, and had that experience under my belt is when I applied for everything and anything within the degree.

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And that was at the time, I think, where there was supposed to be where a lot of people were supposed to retire, and they weren't due to the economy and stuff like that. So I applied, I think, to over a hundred jobs and one of them just happened to be the Apalachicola NERR, National Estuarine Research Reserve. And because of my experience that I had such a great experience

with the NERR up there in South Carolina, I just applied to anything that they had open for any of the NERRs around the US. And I was able to get an interview and got the job at the Apalachicola NERR, and that's what brought me down here. But the NERR is great because it has such a wide array of different projects that they do. And so it really got me in the door to really get me going to hone in on what I wanted to do, whether it was water quality or shellfish or so forth.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, that's great. And I'm wondering what interested you specifically in watery quality, why choose that as a means to . . . ?

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Carrie Jones: I guess 'cause it's kinda like the building grounds of what is happening in the water and what could potentially happen and affect a lot of other different things, so it's kind of like the building blocks of an estuary or a system. So that's what I guess really intrigued me. And like I said, from at a young age to trying to figure out, why are the oysters not prevalent anymore and why is this happening? And why are the crabs here one year and not here another year? So some of that is water quality driven, and so that was kind of where I directed some of my questions, too.

Annemarie Anderson: Nice. Well, let's talk a little bit about arriving in Apalachicola. What was your first . . . why can't I think of words? Sorry.

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Carrie Jones: [Laughter]

Annemarie Anderson: I guess, what'd you think about it? What was your feelings about this place?

Carrie Jones: So I had never heard of Apalachicola before, before I got the job, but obviously once I received that I was gonna be potentially moving here, I did some research and found out that it's considered "the last great bay." I believe Bickel coined that term. And it's known for its oyster industry, so just based on that I knew that it would probably be a good fit for me since that was something that I wanted to direct my career path to. The gulf was a new territory for me as I spent most of my time on the Atlantic. But I was also excited about just keeping moving south where it's a little bit warmer to be honest. [Laughter]

Annemarie Anderson: I feel that.

Carrie Jones: But once I got to Apalach, it reminded me so much of my Eastern Shore home.

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The environment's very similar, shallow estuary, big agriculture community. And the culture even had some similarities to the Chesapeake. So my goal when I was in high school was to find a job that I could be out in the water in something I love, so this seemed like the perfect place for that.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

Carrie Jones: It's a great community and it's just such a beautiful place to live and work on the water.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, I bet. I'm wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about the work that you first did when you got here?

Carrie Jones: Sure. So I started out just, like I said, general water quality position at ANERR, and then when I-- I also went to work over for FWC, Fish and Wildlife Commission, with the FWRI, which is their research entity, doing fisheries dependent monitoring. Then when finally an FDACS Division of Aquaculture position became available, and then, I've been here ever since.

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So I started out as the environmental specialist with our shellfish harvesting area classification program. We collect water samples and manage all the shellfish harvesting areas in order to protect public health. So we monitor for fecal coliforms, which is an indicator bacteria. As oyster are filter feeders, whatever's in the water column can potentially be in the oysters. So that program opens and closes those areas for wild and farmed shellfish based on those bacterial levels. I worked in that program for six years, and then was given the opportunity to move over to the Submerged Land Leasing Program, and I've been with the division for almost ten years now.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And when you made that decision to move from a more water quality, water testing to submerged land leases, why make that leap? What was your interest?

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Carrie Jones: You know, it's just the daily grind of just going out and collecting samples is so important, and it's why that we can sell oysters into different states and why people are able to go out and eat raw oysters and hopefully not get sick, because we're out there monitoring for all that. So it was so important of a job. But it's just the daily grind of going out, taking water samples, coming back in, kind of thing. So, yeah, when this opportunity became available, it's

something I get to go dive and snorkel on leases and do a lot of different facets of the industry as opposed to just the water quality aspects. So that's what really appealed to me of just wanting to do a little bit more.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. What year was that that you began working with the Submerged Lease Program?

Carrie Jones: So it was four years ago, so 2017, maybe, 2018. Yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Cool. And what territory do you cover in the state?

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Carrie Jones: So I do the entire state. So it's me and my other co-worker, Katie Davis. She and I go around to all of the other areas that need inspections or assessments, so we cover the entire state.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Yeah. And maybe we can talk a little bit about that. Well first, this is something that I've learned talking to a lot of oyster aquaculturists, the term "sovereign submerged lease."

Carrie Jones: Um-hm.

Annemarie Anderson: And I've done some research about it, so I'm familiar with it, but I'm wondering if, for the record, you could explain what a sovereign submerged land is?

Carrie Jones: Yes. So it is just state-owned waters below the mean high-water line, so the state holds titles to those lands. So if someone wants to lease a portion of that land, it must go through

an approval process through us to ensure that these resources are healthy and abundant for present and future generations.

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Annemarie Anderson: Great. And maybe we can talk a little bit, too, about, like, a typical day.

Carrie Jones: Sure.

Annemarie Anderson: And maybe you don't have a typical day.

Carrie Jones: Yeah. [Laughter]

Annemarie Anderson: It seems like you do a lot of things, wear a lot of different hats.

Carrie Jones: Yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: But if you could maybe walk us through some of the things that you do in this job.

Carrie Jones: [Narrator's additional note: The Division of Aquaculture administers the program for the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund.] So the Division of Aquaculture oversees the application, execution, and compliance of sovereign submerged land leases for aquaculture use. So my responsibilities include assessing proposed sites and identifying new areas for culture, and conducting inspections on current leases to ensure that they have the proper marking requirements which are issued by the US Coast Guard and regulated via our general programmatic permit with the US Army Corps of Engineers. So currently we have a little over seven-hundred-and-eighty active leases covering over twenty-seven-hundred acres around the state.

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Someone can go look on our interactive map on our website to see if there's a vacant parcel in the area. And then, we also have established aquaculture use zones, or known as AUZs, another acronym, which are areas with multiple predetermined lease parcels grouped into a single area. They often contain dozens of parcels or leases. But if someone is looking for a new area, it must be bare-bottom substrate, so it can't have any existing oyster reefs or seagrass or hard-bottom habitat, and it should be away from any navigational channels and minimal conflict uses with other commercial industries. So I will have to go down and snorkel or dive that area to assess the site to make sure that it would be suitable and it doesn't have any of those critical resources present. All AUZ or individual parcel corners must be designated with a corner marker, so they must have the corner direction and lease identification number.

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We also conduct lease audits annually to ensure effective cultivation. And so one of the things that I love about my job is my day-to-day is always different. One day I'm out inspecting a lease, next day I'm out snorkeling a proposed parcel to ensure the site is suitable, and then the next day I may be helping process water samples in the lab.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I'm wondering-- this is just a question of ignorance-- why does it have to be bare substrate?

Carrie Jones: So we don't want to-- just again for the sovereign submerged land definition-- we don't want to inhibit or be detrimental to anything that is existing there. And all the requirements are set forth in that programmatic general permit by the Army Corps to say which critical

habitats that they are really concerned with, and certain buffer zones that may have to be applicable to those certain areas.

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Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. And I'm wondering, too, so to go back to the work that you were doing as a master's student kind of learning those communication skills in school, it seems like maybe you've probably used that a lot in your job here working with these folks who are either in the water already with a lease farming oysters or maybe you're working with somebody who's wanting to do that. I'm wondering if you could maybe talk about that relationship that you have with some the farmers or trying to do this work, you have the same goal, to create a product that's safe and good, and to bring oysters back to this environment. If you would, could you talk a little bit about that?

Carrie Jones: Yeah. Obviously, the relationships are a very important part of my job.

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I got to know some of these leaseholders and stakeholders from before when I was in the harvesting classification program, thankfully, and have just strived to continue to grow those relationships, especially now in this position, as well as when I worked at DEP and FWC, just getting some knowledge of those other variables that are regulated by those agencies. But our leaseholders are essentially coastal stewards, and we really value our relationships with them. They're an integral part in educating the general public, following those BMPs, best management practices, and benefitting the environment. Aquaculture is an economic and environmental win-win. It's utilizing our natural environment to grow shellfish, which in turn helps improve water

quality, extracts nitrogen and phosphorus, improves water clarity so more seagrass can grow, habitat provision, helps support fish populations.

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Oyster reefs are often a nursery grounds, can provide refuge. Even oyster leases can help provide refuge for lots of other organisms. And it can help reduce local climate change impacts. So just so many positives. And so really getting that message across and growing those relationships with these guys to help them understand and to help us understand, 'cause they're out there a lot more than we are, too. They know that environment so much more than a lot of experts do. And so it's part of the process. And we go to them for things as well as they come to us. So having that relationship is a big part of it.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I think this is a pretty nascent industry.

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I'm wondering if you could maybe say a little bit about what you hope to see for the future of aquaculture, whether it's shellfish or otherwise, for Apalachicola, for The Forgotten Coast, maybe for the Gulf of Mexico and Florida?

Carrie Jones: Technology is completely going crazy right now, which is great. Shellfish farms are like living water treatment plants. A two-and-a-half-acre oyster farm can help mitigate the nitrogen pollution of fifty coastal inhabitants. Aquaculture is rapidly growing to meet increasing-- the global seafood demand right now is through the roof-- conserve wild resources, and it can help to feed a growing population. So it's definitely gonna be here for years to come, and I think

is the wave of the future just in order to help fulfill those gaps that the historic wild resource is not able to fulfill.

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And what I try to explain to a lot of people, too, is it's not to take away from the wild resource. They're two separate kind of entities, and you have to have separate markets and different things that there's room for both. But right now, aquaculture is filling those gaps for that growing food demand and growing population. Oysters are packed with vitamins and minerals. And over 85 percent of our natural oyster population is in decline worldwide. It's not just an Apalachicola problem, it's happening all over the place. So I definitely think aquaculture is really going to help the gulf survive, keep the Apalachicola seafood industry going, and is going to be the only thing that we have in order to keep fulfilling that gap over the next few years until hopefully we can get the wild resource back up and going again.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I don't have any more questions for you. Do you have anything that we haven't talked about that you think is important?

Carrie Jones: Let's see. I know I talked a lot, so I think I covered everything.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter] No, it's great. Well, thank you very much.

Carrie Jones: Yeah, of course.

Annemarie Anderson: I appreciate it.

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[End]