



The Oral History of Donna Marie Stanek

October 18, 2017

Interview conducted by Deborah Holle
National Conservation Training Center
Shepherdstown, WV



Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Donna Marie Stanek

Date of Interview: October 18, 2017

Location of Interview: Shepherdstown, WV

Interviewer: Deborah Holle

Approximate years in Conservation: 33 years, 1978-2011

Offices and Field Stations Worked; Positions Held:

J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR, FL, ORP/Visitor Services; Felsenthal NWR, AR 1983, stayed 2 ½ years in Visitor Services; San Francisco Bay NWR, CA 1986, supervised staff that worked in the visitor center & Environmental Education Center, stayed 2 ½ years; Lompoc Federal Prison Camp, Santa Barbara, CA, 1988, Education and Recreation program, stayed until 1990; US Army Corps of Engineers, Sacramento, CA, 1990, Outdoor Recreation Planner, stayed until 1992; Regional Office, Division of Refuges, Atlanta, GA 1992 – 1997, Regional Interpretive Specialist; Felsenthal NWR, Lower Mississippi River Valley, Outdoor Recreation Planner for the Lower Mississippi River Valley in Crossett, AR, 1997–2001; R3–Minneapolis Regional Office, Chief of Visitor Services, 2001– 2008; R2, Albuquerque Regional Office, Deputy Regional Chief, 2008–2011.

Most Important Projects: Developed a career path and Standardized Position for Visitor Services, for GS4–13. Part of the Promises Program. Helped with construction on numerous Visitor Centers and remodeling of more visitor centers and public use facilities. Worked with the Refuges and the US Army Corps of Engineers at Lower Mississippi near Crossett, AR to develop public use facilities.

Colleagues and Mentors: Frank Podriznik, Geoff Haskett, Steve Thompson, Pete Jerome, Tom Worthington, Nita Fuller, Chris Pease, Teddy Roosevelt IV

Brief Summary of Interview: Donna describes her childhood, education and how she began to work with the US Fish & Wildlife Service in September 1978 at the age of 22 years old. She describes the agencies she worked for, her duty stations and her responsibilities. Her first duty station was J.N. "Ding Darling NWR in Sanibel, FL. Donna worked in the Visitor Services program for 4 years. She went back to Southern Illinois University and got her Masters in Recreation and Resource Management and did her thesis at Crab Orchard NWR setting up surveys and getting a visitor analysis for proposed changes. Donna returned to the Service and was assigned to Felsenthal NWR in Arkansas in Visitor Services in 1983. The Corps of Engineers was building several access sites and recreational facilities with the Refuge, which was a mitigation refuge on the Ouachita River. In 1986, Donna moved to San Francisco Bay NWR which had a large Interpretive and Environmental program as a supervisor of the staff. Donna then transferred to Lompoc Federal Prison Camp in California where she developed an Education & Outdoor Recreation Program for about 350 "inmates". After a couple of years, she transferred to the Army Corps of Engineers in Sacramento as an Outdoor Recreation Planner in natural resources working on Environmental Impact Statements. Donna talks about being offered a job as a Regional Interpretive Specialist in the Region 4 Regional Office. However, after the Regional Director abolished the Visitor Services Branch and merged the staff with External Affairs, Donna transferred to the Lower Mississippi

River Valley in Crossett, Arkansas. Donna worked on the refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). She later became the Branch Chief in the Region 3 Regional Office in Minneapolis and retired as the Deputy Refuge Chief in Region 2, Albuquerque, NM. She ended her interview with some good advice for women working with Refuges.

THE INTERVIEW:

DEBORAH HOLLE: Okay. We may stop later to double check, but [now please tell us] your name, where you are from, when you were born, vital statistics like that, your upbringing and a little what got you interested [in a conservation career.]

DONNA STANEK: My full name is Donna Marie Stanek. I was born in Muncie, Indiana in April 1956. I moved around a lot as a child. My dad worked in retail. He worked for a company that transferred him quite a bit, so we lived all over the United States.

One of the things I got from my father primarily was a love of the outdoors. As a child, we would do the Sunday drive thing in the '60s especially where we would just all pile in the car and go out in the country and drive around to just look at what was happening whether it was birds or wildlife. He wasn't really big on identifying things, but just the appreciation of being outdoors. But he did love to fish. When we were kids, after he got off work, we would go fishing in places where we lived, if there was a place to go fishing. That wasn't always the case. When I was like eight-nine-ten, I remember quite a bit in the spring and summer going fishing with him. It was through him and his need to be outside 'cause he did grow up on a farm that I grew to appreciate wildlife and the outdoors. Not so much wildlife in particular but just to be outside and roaming around the countryside. That's probably where I got my love of wildlife or love of the outdoors - in my early childhood, which is the case I'm sure for most people.

After living around all over the Midwest and in the South, we lived in - as I said, I was born in Indiana. We moved to Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Tennessee. West Virginia was the last place my dad was transferred to. He stayed there until he retired.

We did move around quite a bit. We would go to state parks, national parks, the Smokies, anywhere we could be outside. I remember many times we'd be on vacation, and he'd see a sign for a fish hatchery. We had to veer off the road to go see the fish hatchery and walk along the raceways because he was really into fish. I went to high school in West Virginia. We moved to Huntington, West Virginia when I was 12. I stayed there until after I graduated college. I went to Marshall University, which is in Huntington. My bachelor's was in park and recreation administration with an emphasis in outdoor recreation. I graduated from college in 1977. In 1978, I started working for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

DEBORAH: How long did it take you from when you graduated to get your first job?

DONNA: About a year. Yeah, I graduated in May of '77 and started working for the Service in September of '78.

DEBORAH: Was that a difficult process?

DONNA: Well, I came under the old PACE exam. I can't even remember what PACE stands for anymore. [Professional and Administrative Career Exam]. But you had to take a test to get on the Register at the time. That's when they still had registers. I took the PACE twice because I wasn't happy with my first score. I took it again and then after the second time, got high enough on the register to get interviewed and hired. I was hired under the BLHP program – the Bicentennial Land Heritage Program.

At the time, the Service had started to recognize that they needed to do more outreach with the public and were hiring outdoor recreation planners. That was the first type of visitor services job that the Fish and Wildlife Service started hiring. I came on with a fairly large contingent of folks at that time. It was funding through the Bicentennial Land Heritage Program that my first job was funded.

My first duty station was "Ding" Darling Refuge down in Sanibel, Florida. I got there in September of '78 not knowing a darn thing about what I was getting myself into, but excited about it just the same.

When I was at "Ding" Darling, it was before the visitor centers were there. Sanibel was still a quiet island or relatively quiet island. Our offices were in the old light housekeepers' quarters at the tip of the island right next to the lighthouse. We had a very small staff. When I got there, I ended up being - let's see - there was a manager, assistant manager, a secretary [Clerk] who they called secretaries at the time and a biotech and a maintenance person. Then, I got hired. So, I was number six, I guess.

I stayed there for four years. It was an interesting experience to say the least. When I was hired as many women who were hired in the mid to late '70s, we were usually the only woman on a field station that wasn't a secretary. I remember my first manager saying to me, "I don't know what to do with you." I'm like, "What do you mean?" "Well, I don't know what to do with the position and I don't know what to do with a woman in the field."

I kind of looked at him because it was the first time I'd ever heard anything really like that. My dad was *you can do anything*. So then, I'm confronted with this. He wasn't mean or nasty about it. He was just perplexed as to what to do. So, we worked it out though. I was like *well you just treat me like any other employee, and I think we'll be okay*. He had a daughter about my age and I said, "You have a daughter my age. How would you want her to be treated?" He kind of sat back and said, "Oh okay."

It was pretty good from then on. I mean, but he was just perplexed. Like I said, I don't think he was sexist or misogynist or anything like that. He just didn't know what, he honestly did not know what to do. It was a learning experience for him. It was a learning experience for me.

After being at "Ding" for four years, I left just as the first visitor center was being built and the program was building. We were doing quite a few things with the public, with visitors, that had not been done there before. We would give tours and do programs, environmental ed. These were in the early days of all this that the Fish and Wildlife Service was exploring. Of course, we had like a million visitors a year. We had plenty of people to test our methods out on without them knowing. We essentially would do a lot of hands-on tours, especially during the season when it was quite busy there.

But after about four years, I had always wanted to go to graduate school. So, in 1982, I applied to go to Southern Illinois University (SIU) and was given a graduate assistantship. I was able to essentially do my graduate work for free and plus get paid for it because that's how their program worked there. I applied for a years' leave of absence. At that time, people read the administrative manuals and the refuge

manuals. They would be on the shelf. Of course, we were happy to have an electric typewriter and a copier. That was about it.

I had always wanted to go to graduate school. After being there for four years, I was ready to move on. You have to remember - I was used to moving every couple of years as a child. I applied, got accepted into SIU. [I] got a graduate assistantship in their master's program for recreation and resource management, which was a degree designed to learn about managing natural resources, but also with the public on the land - which is essentially what folks in Visitor Services for the Fish and Wildlife Service do.

It was really a good fit. I applied to take an educational leave 'cause I found in the manual where you could and applied. Initially, my manager denied it because he was like, *I need to have someone here*. He was overruled by his supervisor who said, "No, we need to let this "girl" go." That was his word - "girl." You let this "girl" go and get her graduate degree so she can be an even better employee. They worked it out where he got to fill in behind me. The Region just had to have a position for me when I finished school after a year. So I went, did all my coursework, and started my thesis at Crab Orchard. I'll talk about that in a little bit. Then came back to work a year later and was assigned to Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge in Crossett. I did my thesis though at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge which is really near Carbondale where SIU is located.

They were looking at moving some visitor sites and repurposing some sites and wanted to get an analysis of how the public felt about closing some beaches and opening up some new beaches. I did essentially a visitor analysis survey for them on what the public felt about their proposals. This was before the days we did CCPs [Comprehensive Conservation Plan] and master plans. Actually, they were kind of cutting edge when you think about it - that they wanted to reach out to the public in a way that we really didn't reach out to the public very much to get their opinion. That's what I did and provided it to the refuge.

Like I said, after school, after my year of leave without pay and the Region had to provide me with a position, there was a little discussion actually in the process. While I was away from school, I had to file a grievance because there was a question as to where my position would be and what it would be. They had advertised for my old position at "Ding" Darling. I found out they had preselected the person that was going to follow me in and they had upgraded the position. It was the same job.

There was a whole bunch of weird circumstances that I still, to this day, don't quite understand. I was advised to file a grievance against the manager for what he was doing.

DEBORAH: Who advised?

DONNA: I was advised by Personnel in the Regional Office. They said, *well, the only way you can resolve this is if you file a grievance*. Actually, it was the EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] officer. There was an EEO officer at Crab Orchard that was actually the individual that counseled me and looked at the case and said, "The only way you're going to resolve this is to file a grievance. That way you'll be protected for sure." It wasn't that I wanted to go back to "Ding" Darling, but I had asked for a desk audit and was denied that because I knew the job had increased in responsibilities. I was told, *no, it's going to be a GS-7*. Then it was advertised as a GS-9. Essentially it was the same job. It's one of those weird circumstances that only people who work for the Fish and Wildlife Service would understand.

It all got resolved. In the end, when I got done with school, with my coursework, I was asked to take a position at Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge in southeast Arkansas. They had never had a visitor services person there. They were in the middle of a huge project with the Corps of Engineers. Felsenthal is a mitigation refuge for a Corps of Engineers project on the Ouachita River.

I was transferred to Felsenthal. That was in the fall of 1983. Southeast Arkansas is nothing like Sanibel Island to say the least. I hate to say, but my experience there was not the best. I actually did have a manager who told me to my face that he did not think women had any business working in field positions in the Fish and Wildlife Service, and if you didn't hunt and fish, you absolutely had no business working for the Fish and Wildlife Service. I was really astounded to be honest. I was still in my '20s. I was still I guess relatively naïve about this whole thing. I hate to say, but this gentleman actually put me in positions that were dangerous. That I could have been seriously injured or even died because he just felt that strongly about it. But the reason I was sent there was because this refuge was a mitigation refuge for the Corps of Engineers, a dam project on the Ouachita River. As part of the process, the Corps was building a number of access sites and recreational facilities and they needed someone who knew how those things should be designed and built and where they should go and that kind of thing. I was asked by the Regional Director and the Assistant Regional Director if I would take that position. I said, "Yeah, I will. I'll go there." I don't think they knew either the hostility - that's really the word - that I would encounter there as far as this particular manager who just was adamant; [he] would not let me go out in the field unless I had somebody with me.

I had operated boats in the waters in the Gulf off Sanibel down towards Everglades City. So, it wasn't like I hadn't been out in the field in weird places alone. It really bothered me, and it bothered me for a long time. I would try to fight back a little bit. He was like, "Well, no. I'm your boss and this is the way it is." Well, fortunately we got a new assistant manager who was younger and understood. He basically told the manager, *if you don't stop this, I'm going to help her file a grievance and she will win*. That put an end to it. He really became my champion in that respect. After that, things got a little easier. I still knew that the project leader felt this way. So, as a result, I only stayed there for a couple of years; two and a half years, because it's like, *I don't have to deal with this*. I got to that point. *I don't have to put up with this*.

In 1985, I think it was, '86, I'd have to look it up, but I moved to San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge which again was a whole 'nother approach to visitor services. There was a big visitor center, a big environmental education program and I had a staff. It was the first time I actually was a supervisor. I was a GS-11 at that time.

We had a whole program in place. It was quite a bit different. [It was a] big metropolitan area, which I had not worked in before. So that was different. Not only in my personal life trying to negotiate living in a big city on my own but having this kind of really cool area to work in, in a program already established and managing a staff that had not had a supervisor in a long time. So that presented its own challenges. But at least I was at a place that had a diverse staff, had a manager who didn't care what your gender was, just as long as you did your job and a program that was growing. It was established but yet growing. There were a lot of opportunities. We had a visitor center and an environmental education center, so we had two facilities. Had a staff of about eight that I supervised. It was a big staff. It was very different than anything I'd had before. All in all, it was a good experience.

Unfortunately, though, being a first-time supervisor was quite a challenge. As anybody who's been a supervisor knows, the first time you have a staff, it can be interesting to say the least - especially a staff who had not had any supervision in quite a while. They were used to doing their own thing when they wanted to do it. Nobody was really paying attention to some of the rules. We got it all worked out.

It was like...my thing was anytime I was a supervisor, I was always telling my staff *as long as you do your job and you do it well, you won't have any problems from me*. My job is to help you do your job, but not to do it for you. Once we got all that worked out, actually things smoothed out quite a bit. But it was at a time in the Fish and Wildlife Service when things were not moving. Everything was stagnant. Budgets were stagnant or dropping. There wasn't any resources to really do anything new. Moves, everything, was frozen. You couldn't move anywhere really.

After being at the San Francisco Bay for about three years, I was ready to do something different. That's a personality fault of mine I suppose. I think it's because when I was growing up, we moved every two or three years. So, I would be someplace and after about three years I'm like, *okay, I'm ready to go. Go do something different*. I felt I had also done everything I could do there. It was just really managing a program, managing the volunteers, making some tweaks because it was an established program.

So, there wasn't a lot of challenge necessarily for me. I'm one of these [people]. I need to have a challenge. I need to have something that I have to work through or figure out and everything had been all figured out there. I didn't have that kind of that motivation. I tried going to some different places and like I said, everything was just so frozen up at the time. I took a really - what people who know me think is a really bizarre turn in my career - but it ended up being really very interesting. I had a friend whose husband was a warden with the Bureau of Prisons in the Department of Justice. He had just been reassigned to a camp situation which was very low security. There's not even a fence at a camp.

He was restaffing. He had gone in; they'd had some corruption issues and he'd gone in and gotten rid of people. So, he's restaffing. He knew I had an education/recreation background, and he needed a person to run that program for the inmates. He asked me. He goes, "I can't offer you a promotion, but I could offer you a lateral if you want to do something different." They're good friends and he knew I was frustrated that I wasn't going anywhere. I wasn't really doing anything new or going anywhere. He goes *even if you come for a couple of years in that you'll maybe things will loosen up*. So, I did.

I went to work at Lompoc Federal Prison Camp near Santa Barbara on the coast of California. I was in charge of the recreation and education program for the camp for a couple of years. It was a very interesting experience in that studying a microcosm of society. That's how I kind of came away with it. It's like you have all these people - I should say it was a male prison camp. It was not a female camp. It had all these people from all these walks of life, many who were lawyers, accountants, stockbrokers. For those that are old enough, Ivan Boesky was one of our inmates. So it was that caliber of inmate. They're all nonviolent criminals that had done something stupid along their lines. They would tell you, *oh, I did something stupid*.

We had this community of these really well-educated men for the most part, well educated, that were in this place that they never thought they would ever be. It was very, very interesting just to study the social dynamics of a group like that. 350 people from these interesting backgrounds. I found it to be very fascinating. I learned a lot about human behavior that I was able to use the rest of my career. I did that for a couple of years until 1990.

In 1990, I went to work for the Corps of Engineers in Sacramento as an outdoor recreation planner. They had openings in their natural resources office. I was again back in natural resources. Our job was kind of like to fight the engineers almost. Like, *no you can't concrete the world. You have to mitigate, you have to do some environmental work, you have to provide for the public.*

I worked on EIS's [Environmental Impact Statements] for a number of projects in California, in the West. Actually, Utah and California were the two states that I worked in. It was fascinating too 'cause I got to learn a little bit different aspect to approaching outdoor recreation just really from facilities management aspect. I had worked with the Corps when I was at Felsenthal. We were partners, so I understood a little about their mission.

Again, it was just taking another aspect of outdoor recreation in the public-on-public lands. I mean it was still managing people on public lands. It was just different public lands. I was there a couple of years because, again, there still wasn't much happening in the Fish and Wildlife Service. This was like the last part of the '80s and I don't know why to be honest, but then [by the] early '90s, things started to break loose.

In '92, I was contacted by a guy named Frank Podriznik in the Regional Office in Atlanta whether or not I would be interested – he had an opening for a Regional Interpretive Specialist. He and I had worked together when I was at "Ding" Darling on the visitor center there and at Felsenthal in visitor center there. He knew my work and asked me if I would be interested in moving to Atlanta and if I would apply for the Regional Interpretive Specialist job. I did and I was selected.

So, in '92, I packed my bags in California and moved back east to Atlanta and was in that position. I was the Regional Interpretive Specialist from '92 to '97. It was very interesting because I wasn't only the Regional Interpretive Specialist, but I was also responsible for Friends groups and all the interpretive programs.

Then we got into the rec fee aspects. I had responsibilities with that. Basically, I had all the parts of the Fish and Wildlife Service Visitor Services Program except volunteers and signs. We had a Landscape Architect that did volunteers and did signs and some of the facility planning. But I was responsible for any new visitor centers, the exhibits and any trail signs. All that was primarily the aspect of my work.

Again, I was kind of naïve and didn't really recognize Regional Office politics. After being there about, I must have been three years, the individual that was in charge of External Affairs somehow convinced the Regional Director that visitor services or public use at the time should be dissolved and wrapped up into External Affairs, which was a move I fought tooth and nail because I knew it was wrong. I knew enough about how the field felt about what the work we did and how the field felt about the work External Affairs did. I thought if they make me move over there, my work is going to dry up because I'm not going to get called because of where I'm located, not because of me, I don't think. They did dissolve the Branch of Visitor Services or Public Use at the time.

I and a couple other people - publication folks - were transferred to External affairs. It was at the time they started doing outreach coordinators and two of the other people were made outreach coordinators. One person, the Landscape Architect got to stay in Refuges [and Wildlife], in Facilities.

As I was saying, when I was in the Atlanta Regional Office, the first three years were really great. I was doing a lot of work, keeping busy, traveling throughout the Region, trying to provide good assistance to

the field. That was one of the things - when I went to the Regional Office - I had benefited from Service, from the Regional Office when I was in the field, and I wanted to return that favor. I wanted to be a resource that field offices, whether they're a refuge or a hatchery, I didn't care. If they asked me for something, I would do it and do it as best as I could. I wanted to be a really good resource. I think I was while I was there. The first three years we were building visitor centers and we were providing program and services and building the program in the region. It was a big region. It had a lot of refuges at the time, not as many as they have now, but there still was a lot. I really enjoyed that job. I enjoyed it immensely.

But then, the Regional Director was convinced to abolish the visitor services or public use branch. Some of us were absorbed into External Affairs including me. Some were not. For me personally and I think for the visitor services program in the region, it ended up being really a disastrous move. External Affairs was not what I wanted to do. I believed in outreach and communicating with the public, but when you do it on a refuge through your interpretive programs or your environmental education programs, it's different. It's not PR. External Affairs to me at the time was public relations. It was more press than other organizations, whereas I really liked doing on the ground fieldwork, working with the local communities, schools, reaching out to people that came to the refuges. So, it was not a good fit.

There are a few people and we've all run into them who are supervisors and never should be supervisors. This person was one of those who just really did not understand how to let the staff work and do their jobs. Because of the reputation of External Affairs at the time, folks in the field quit calling me. I really had little work to do. I would go into work trying to figure out, *okay, how am I going to fill my day?* Whereas in the past, I didn't have anywhere near enough hours in the day.

It was really a difficult situation for me to be in professionally and personally. It did get to a point where I was there for two years. I tried and tried for two years to make it work, but it just never was going to work. It really was a very dark period in my career and that's the only way I can describe it. It was very dark. I got to a point where I was like, *I can't do this anymore*. This is not working and not working for me professionally and was not working for me personally.

Again, it was during a time where there weren't really that many options open as to go someplace else, especially because I was at that Regional Office level. There weren't really any options available or very few and far between.

I made the decision to resign from the Service and actually had my letter written. Fortunately for me, the ARD (Assistant Regional Director) of Refuges, Geoff Haskett had been keeping track of me for the last two years. He would always ask how I was and how I was doing. Before I submitted my letter, I told him what I was going to do, because I felt he deserved to know, that he should not be kept [in the] cold. He had really tried hard to keep me in refuges and lost the battle.

I remember very distinctly I went up to his office. I was in tears. The only time I ever cried at work. I was one of those women that you don't cry at work. You can cry at home and cry in your car, but you can't cry at your desk. I went to his office, and he was in there. I asked him if he had a minute. He goes, "Yeah." I closed the door and I just lost it. It was so embarrassing now, but he was very kind to me that day.

He goes, "What's going on?" I told him. I said, "I'm quitting, I'm done. I can't do it anymore. I can't work in that office anymore. I just can't do it." I said, "I'm mentally spent." I said, "I'm going to resign. I've got

my letter written.” He talked me out of it. He said “No, don’t resign. Give me a few days. I will figure out something for you.”

Bless his heart, he did. He figured out a way to keep me. It was at a time we were transitioning two Regional Directors. What he did, he sent out, and I found this out later, he sent out a note to the Refuge Supervisors saying *okay*. They all knew my situation because as you all know, if you work for the Fish and Wildlife Service, everybody knows your business and knows what’s going on, which is kind of the family thing that we always talk about. That’s one of the aspects of it. He sent out a note to Refuge Supervisors, told them about our conversation. Basically, [he] said *we have to find a job for her. We can’t lose her. We have to find something for her*. Two of them came up with ideas of places I could go in the region.

This is also at the time we were transitioning to the GARD/PARD [Geographic Area Regional Director/Program Area Regional Director] of ecosystem management. The GARD/PARD things were being established. I was given an opportunity to go between two places. I could work on the Carolina coast with all those refuges. Or I could go back to the Lower Mississippi River Valley, back to Felsenthal, but not as a staff employee, but as a Regional Office employee and work in the Lower Miss. I knew the Lower Miss had more opportunities for program development and visitor services.

I told him I would go to the Lower Miss. I would go back to Crossett. One of the reasons I went was because I had friends there and I needed support. I’m going to be very honest. I needed that mental support for a while. He established that position for me. I was the Outdoor Rec Planner for the Lower Mississippi River Valley. I moved. It was kind of interesting. Our careers always take different forks in the road.

I possibly would have had an opportunity to stay in the Regional Office and go back to Refuges. I don’t think you can ever really go back. Actually, it was an interesting challenge to go to the Lower Miss. I took the challenge and went to the Lower Miss, went back to Crossett, and ended up working at the time [when] all these GARD/PARD mechanisms are going on. I did not really know who I was going to be working for because they hadn’t assigned [someone.] Geoff was on his way to Albuquerque, I believe. He was leaving so I didn’t know who the new ARD was going to be. I didn’t know who my supervisor was going to be. Tell you the truth I thought it couldn’t get any worse.

I kind of took a gamble and really lucked out because the ARD and the GARD for the Lower Miss was a guy named Steve Thompson who is pretty famous himself in the Fish and Wildlife Service. I ended up working for Steve Thompson and a guy named Pete Jerome, whose wife is a good friend of mine. I’d known Pete. I never worked with Pete, but I knew him. I landed in a really safe place. Actually, working in the Lower Miss, I was there for four years until 2001, from ’97 to 2001. I moved back to Crossett and worked remotely for Steve and Pete. It was like the best job I ever had in the Fish and Wildlife Service. They both gave me a lot of freedom. They knew I could do the work. I’ve always been self-motivated. They knew I was motivated. I would go out, work with the managers and help them with their CCP’s, because we were getting into the CCP business at the time. They needed a visitor services person to help with that aspect of the CCPs (Comprehensive Conservation Plans.) There weren’t really many visitor services folks in the Lower Miss. There were very few. I ended up working on a lot of refuges in the four states of Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee and Alabama? Heck, I can’t even remember. Louisiana! Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee. I was traveling all the time. They bought me a vehicle. I was independent and probably did some of my best work, fieldwork, especially when I was in that job

for four years. They were really good to me. They knew what had happened. One of the first words out Steve Thompson's mouth to me was *I know what happened to you. You'll be fine.*

I was, and he was very good to me. Pete was very good to me, and they took good care of me. Let me do my work. We did a lot of good work during those four years and did a lot of CCP work. But when I left, the project leaders were hiring visitor services folks. They saw the value, which was one of my goals - for them to see the value of reaching out to the public and working with the public and doing education programs. That was my ulterior motive so to speak - was to have managers understand the value of having folks like myself on a field station.

I did that. I had a grand time. It got to a point where there weren't any new challenges. They were all challenges, but there weren't any new challenges. Some of the great things we did [when] I was working for those two. I got to meet Ted Roosevelt, IV, the great-grandson of Teddy who in himself is a pretty amazing individual. He helped us do some outreach in the Lower Mississippi River Valley. One of the things we did is we recreated the journey his great grandfather went on to do the famous Teddy Bear hunt. We took Ted to all these places. We retraced the route, spent a week with him. He would do press events for us and did special events for us and was really supportive. We had a really enjoyable time. That's probably one of the highlights of my career that I got to meet him.

Another highlight if I can go back. When I was at "Ding" Darling, I got to meet Jimmy Buffett, which is another highlight of my career. It's kind of fun how we get to meet these famous people along with Congressmen and Senators of course. These are two really outstanding individuals. We did a lot of really good work in the Lower Miss. As time goes, it was four years and again, I was like getting itchy feet.

I got a call from folks in Minneapolis. They had an opening for a Chief of Visitor Services for the Region. I got a call from a guy named Tom Worthington. My boss actually at the time - I had a different supervisor, [the] Chief of Visitor Services in Region 4. They had reestablished that branch and I was put under that. [He] had told me about this opening. Then I got a call from Tom Worthington and saw him subsequently at a meeting. He encouraged me to apply for the job. He says, "You've got really good experience. We know you. We'd really like to have you apply and see if it works out." I applied for the job. First time around, Personnel didn't think they had enough applicants, so they had to readvertise. I had to apply again. I did. It's easy to reapply electronically these days and ended up being selected for the Chief of Visitor Services in Minneapolis.

Even though I don't like cold weather, and those people who know me, know I hate cold weather, I moved to Minneapolis from southeast Arkansas in 2001 and stayed there until 2008. Being Chief of Visitor Services in Region 3 was again a very good job. Tom Worthington and Nita Fuller were excellent supervisors. They gave me lots of support. Nita, as an ARD was very supportive of the visitor services, felt that it was a very important part of managing a refuge. She recognized the need to reach out to our publics to engage them and was extremely supportive.

During the time while I was there, because that was a branch chief's job, I got to be involved in a lot of things nationally and working with other Visitor Services Chiefs in the Washington Office. One of the things we did, the Washington Office wanted to have standard PDs (Position Descriptions) for visitor services, a career path. I was asked to head up the committee that developed the career path for visitor services and standard PD's starting out at GS-4 to 13s. Those are still in use today. It was kind of a

project I undertook with the representatives from each of the other regions – didn't really know how to do it.

DEBORAH: Was that part of the Promises?

DONNA: Part of the Promises, yes, it was part of the Promises program. Didn't really know how to do it but we figured it out. Actually, I would go to the ARD meetings and have to present my updates. I got to travel to a lot of really cool places and got to travel with them and present what our findings were. We did a lot of surveys. We did a lot of analysis of what went into the positions, what educational requirements were needed, what the job actually entailed, what were the things a person did, a GS-7 versus a 9, how you progressed, how the jobs got more complex. It was really quite the process. In the end, I think we had a really good product that we were really proud of. We also had in there not just the PDs, but steps individuals could take to progress up the career ladder, classes to take, training to do, tips on how to manage your career, [that] kind of thing.

It was signed off in the Washington office. It's part of policy or part of the handbook. Like I said, those PDs are still in use today as standard PDs for visitor services. That was something that we worked really hard on, but it's something I'm really quite proud of that we did. Because it was something that was needed. There weren't any standard PDs, and they were all over the map. We got those all finalized and finished that up just before 2008. I think we finished those in 2007 as part of the Promises. It was a very interesting experience.

Also, while I was in region 3, we built a few visitor centers. We remodeled a lot of visitor centers. Because Nita was so supportive, I always had a fairly healthy budget. We would use deferred maintenance monies, or we would use different pots of money that we could use for them. She chose to use it towards that. You could use them for a lot of different things. She chose to use some of the monies to upgrade the visitor services program.

I think at one time I counted...I was there 7 years, and we did 4 visitor centers and over 30 remodels, which is a lot of work in that amount of time. Plus, everything else 'because I was responsible for the whole program. We did some really innovative things at Fergus Falls [in Minnesota]. We helped support the program where they have the fourth and fifth graders from the local school district now go to Fergus Falls Wetland Management District half a day, every day, as part of their school. They do science in the field. I can't remember what core classes they do there and then they go to their regular school for other classes. They switch, half come in the morning, half go in the afternoon, but they go every day. They're outside every day, learning. I think that is one of the neatest environmental educational programs the Fish and Wildlife Service probably has. We were able to do it because we had the partnership of the local school district and the state helped. The state gave money to help build the classroom 'cause we had only two classrooms. [They] weren't enough. We started out with 50 kids and now there's like 200, I think. At least when I left, there was 200, parents heard about this program. They wanted their kids to go. There were only so many spaces. It's a model program for doing environmental ed. Of course, it wouldn't work everywhere but it does work there.

Then in 2008, I was asked to apply for the deputy refuge chief's position in Region 2 in Albuquerque. Again, I applied for the job and was lucky to be selected and moved out there.

I had never lived in the southwest. It was really a very interesting experience as far as habitat and just living in a totally different environment. Like I said, I moved out there. It was very interesting. The

Deputy Chief's job, depending upon where you are, is what you do. I got again to still work on a lot of national issues, national programs and be involved. Worked on border issues. We have the border in that region and worked with Border Patrol. I was responsible for all the programs in Refuges, supervising all the branch chiefs or division chiefs in all those programs. That included law enforcement, fire and planning and visitor services and facilities. It was the whole [spectrum] - biology, water resources - because in the West, water is quite an issue to be managed.

I learned a lot because there were a lot of things I wasn't as familiar with because of just my background, but also the places I worked. I learned a lot and it was really a diverse culture. It's a very interesting place to be, learned more about managing budgets. Fortunately, I had a really good budget person. All the staff there was really good, but again it was kind of an interesting position.

I was new, the ARD was relatively new and there had been lapse in management. The previous ARD had retired, but the last year or so evidently wasn't paying a lot of attention. We had some personnel issues to clean up. I spent a lot of my first couple of years doing that. I had some experience with it when I was in Region 3 - performance issues, but not a ton. It was very interesting some of the issues that crossed my desk as personnel issues, whether it was having to suspend people or counsel people or reprimand folks. Or just basically tell them *don't do that, just don't do it and you'll be fine*. Saw a different side of personnel management that I just hadn't seen before. Like in most organizations, the Deputies do most of that kind of work. I spent more time on personnel issues than I did on resource issues, but that's just kind of the way it is.

Also, while I was there, is when the BP oil spill happened. My chief, Chris Pease, has a background in oil and gas. He was pulled off to help be one of the Fish and Wildlife Service reps for the BP oil spill. He was gone quite a bit, that's just the way things happened. I think there was 1 of 3 and he was 1 of 2. He would be there a month and gone a month back to the oil spill. So, the last year and a half or so I was acting ARD as much as I was not acting ARD. Again, it was like I got a whole 'nother experience with a different level of management and working directly with the RD and the Deputy RD. It was really a growth experience. Eventually Chris was permanently reassigned to the oil spill.

By then it was 2011, I'd had 33 years in, I was 55. I was like *there's other things I want to do with my life*. As much as I really enjoyed working for the Fish and Wildlife Service, it was, *no I think I'm kind of done*. Congress had recently passed sequestration, which meant reduced budgets and more. I mean, we never had enough money to begin with, which means we even had less money and less resources and "trying to do more with less" kind of thing.

I really sat down and thought about it. *Do I really want to spend the rest of my career, the next 3-4 years doing this kind of stuff and really be involved less with the resource? Or do I want to retire and still be involved with conservation as much as I want to be, but not with all the headaches?* I chose the option of less headaches and decided to retire. I retired in August of 2011. That's kind of all of it in a nutshell.

DEBORAH: Do you have any advice for young women in the Fish and Wildlife Service?

DONNA: I think for young women today in the Fish and Wildlife Service, I hope that it is a lot easier than it was when I started at 22 in 1978. I think it is because I've just seen the changes in the demographics of the employees of the Fish and Wildlife Service. It is no longer "the good old boy network," I know, to the chagrin of some. It really is now more diverse. It's more diverse, not only in gender and ethnicity, but it also is more diverse in education background. We hire folks with different backgrounds and really

specialist degrees that you just don't come into the Fish and Wildlife Service with a degree in wildlife management and can do anything. I think we've become a more professional organization because of the across-the-board diversity that we've had.

As far as advice to young women, there's a few things I would say. *Don't ever put anything on Facebook or in an email that you don't want to be on the 6 o'clock news or on 60 Minutes. Always be professional and remember that when you're at work, it's not like when you're at play.* I've seen this in young women, and I hate to say this, but sometimes I see young women try to use their femininity to get what they want. I can tell you with your female bosses, it doesn't work. It should not work with your male bosses because then you could go down a path that you don't need to go. I would say *always be professional, always be prepared, know what you're talking about.*

When you go into a supervisor with a problem or a complaint, always come in with a solution or a suggestion. As part of my management style if somebody came in to complain about something. I would say, *well what do you think we should do about it?* If they didn't have an answer, I would be like, *well you can't come to me for all the answers. You need to figure out some of the answers yourself and then we'll talk about it.* I mean yes, I could have answered the question and solved the problem, but it's part of that critical thinking. *Develop your critical thinking skills and your problem-solving skills because you're then more valuable to your supervisor if you have a problem and you can figure out a solution. Then you may just want to run it by your supervisor. Say, this is the problem, this is what I think I should do. Then you're a much more valuable employee because you're not making your supervisor do all the work.*

Like I said, *always be polite and courteous. All those things that you learn as a child or as a girl scout or whatever. Remember that you're at work when you're at work. Be honest.* I used to tell employees *the only thing you really have is your reputation. You don't really own anything else.* If you're in a small agency, it doesn't take much for your reputation to tank quickly. *Always remember - how is this going to reflect on me or reflect on my reputation? Always be honest. If there's an issue or a problem, present it but present it in a calm manner.* There's nothing worse than hysterics as far as I'm concerned.

Use your energy to solve the problem, not be the problem. Above all, just treat everybody like you want to be treated. It's the old golden rule. I'm sorry, but it really is. If you treat people well, you will be treated well. If you have something happen, I did not talk about it, but like probably 99% of women my age that worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service, we probably experienced some type of sexual harassment.

I did, late in my career. It was kind of weird. I probably experienced early on, but it wasn't as overt as later in my career, where actually I did file a grievance against somebody for a physical sexual assault. *If you do have something like that happen, don't be afraid to report it because you're probably talking to somebody who's experienced it already.* I think the Service has come a long way in zero tolerance of a lot of things including sexual harassment.

If you do experience that ugly side of life, don't hide. It's more common than you think it is. It really is. I have all sorts of horror stories of things that happened to coworkers of mine when women in my cohort of workers when we would get together, that's a lot of times what we talked about is how the managers are treating us or how the biologists are treating us. It was pretty amazing, the stories that are out there.

I think above board, *if you're always professional, you'll be treated as a professional. Just be direct, to the point, courteous, concise and you'll do well.*

DEBORAH: Anything else?

DONNA: I have to say though in retirement I've taken my conservation work and expanded it to other places. I would encourage people, *don't think of it as just as a job that's a career. It can be a lifestyle and you can do other things with what you spend your life earning a paycheck for after you quit earning a paycheck. Kind of keep that in mind as you look around. Look for diverse experiences in the Fish and Wildlife Service. If you're offered an opportunity to do something, do it. If they're looking for volunteers for a committee. If you can do it, do it, even if it's outside your comfort zone.* I think it's important to do that and that just allows you to grow.

I think one final thing, *don't be afraid to make a mistake.* We all make mistakes. Good lord, I know I made my share. I had a boss, Steve Thompson, one time ask me what my percentage of, how well something had to be done when I thought I was a success. I'm like, "I think like 95%. I know nothing is ever perfect, but like 95%." He goes, "Oh my goodness. I'm like at 82."

Don't be afraid of failure. Don't be afraid of trying something and it doesn't work. At least you tried. Those are things I learned. *Have a vision. Try to go for the vision. Don't be afraid if some aspect of that doesn't work out-- something else will. If you don't try, you'll never know.*

DEBORAH: Thank you.

Key words: buildings, facilities and structures, connecting people with nature, environmental education, exhibits, oil spill, performance, personnel, public access, visitor services, wildlife refuges