Verna Harrison: Good morning. Thank you for coming here. This is Verna Harrison, 7/27/1952, and looking forward to chatting.

Eve Austin: Tell us a bit about you and your background and what's that.

Verna Harrison: Well, I grew up in Bethesda, did a lot of boating as a child. My father owned a marina and I ran the gas dock, so I spent a lot of time on the water on the Pawtuxet River and just as I grew and went to school, I majored in political science and then had the wonderful fortune to work as an intern for Joe Kernan who became our lieutenant governor and our attorney general and then went on to work as a lobbyist for Harry Hughes who became the governor that really launched the Bay Program.

I was working for him as a lobbyist for the Department of Transportation. Of course, he went from being the secretary and resigned over corruption, so he then became our governor, a surprise. He brought me with him as, well, his legislative staff, so I have had an wonderful opportunity to work in the political arena with people of high caliber and integrity, and I think amongst the many lessons that I would suggest is having folks at least some familiarity with the political process is so, so important so they're not scared by it and they know how to work in it and they're comfortable in it.

Anyhow, so after four years working with Governor Hughes, I was part of the team that launched the Bay Program, so that was in 1983. We brought the governors together and I was able to, in Maryland, convene the cabinet secretaries of agriculture, planning, environment, all of the various cabinet secretaries and the university in a meeting every other week at Wye Island where we sat on a picnic table in a beautiful setting and started to think about what would we want to do and what could be done and what we thought was not going to be a big deal.

We've got the governors. They were [inaudible 00:07:43] interested. We got some money. How do we want to spend it? On we go. This program started, I'm sure you know, with a massive five-year study about the problems in the bay, so we had a pretty good sense of where we needed to work, so that process resulted in legislation to do the Critical Areas Law, to do fish licenses, to multiple different kinds of laws to set this effort up for success.

A couple of years later, I had a baby and can't work those hours anymore, so I went over to be the assistant secretary in natural resources responsible for fisheries, forests, parks, wildlife, and police, and why I thought that was going to be less work.

Eve Austin: That's what I just was wondering. Wait a minute. That sounds like a-

Verna Harrison: No idea.

Eve Austin: ... full-time job with a baby.

Verna Harrison: It gave me the opportunity to continue pretty deeply in the Chesapeake, so what I did there was coordinate amongst the state agencies, and we set up something we called the Bay Cabinet, so that to me is another lesson and that is the importance of bringing people together as you're developing things. Speaking a little while ago about going over to Wye Island, we had the cabinet secretaries together, then we brought in watermen and farmers and you name it, and we had them come and say what did they want.

In the overall development, we did that. Then fast forward, when we began to implement, we tried to stay tight because always there's rivalries between agencies, so to try to minimize that, Governor Hughes was a very consensus-oriented open person, so we began to build that and then extrapolating from that within Maryland, we went to set up what became annual meetings to this day of what they call the Executive Council. Well, the Executive Council of the Bay Program are the governors of Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, the mayor of the district, the Chesapeake Bay Commission representing the legislative branch, and the administrator of EPA representing all the federal agencies.

They get together every year, and what they do is set policies and guidelines, and back then, we were able to use that structure to what I call peer pressure politics. At that point, they didn't want to be seen as not doing as well as the other guy, so take something like the phosphorus ban. If Maryland put it through, then we wondered try to manipulate the system so the other states would put it through, but this group met once a year, so what I then did was convene the cabinet level officials, so all the five cabinets guys from Pennsylvania and from Virginia and from Maryland and smush them together and say, "Okay, gang."

We had fun. What do we want our governors to shine about and where do we want to challenge them? We then developed some really wonderful programs starting with a very small agreement in '83 that just said we're going to work together. Then we had an agreement in '87 that had all kinds of commitments. It had living resources and water quality and education and the [inaudible 00:11:40] so if anybody's actually doing this history and looking at it, they should look up the 1987 Bay Agreement. Then-

Eve Austin: Can I pause you?

Verna Harrison: Sure.

Eve Austin: Or do you want to go through the whole-

Verna Harrison: No, no, no. That's fine. That's fine.

Eve Austin: ... because you said a couple things I just wanted to ask you about. Well, two things. One, you said you had fun, so I was going to ask you if you could think about a story, a memory. Just explain that. Explain that a little more about an example of what was fun, and then also you said, "Hey, guys," which of course we use the word guys to mean everybody, but it made me wonder was it all men? Were you the only woman in the room?

Verna Harrison: No, no. It's funny, but the hey, guys is my age, you know?

Eve Austin: Yeah, I do it, too. Yeah.

Verna Harrison: No, so I'll answer the two questions. I'll start with the guys. It was white for sure, but it wasn't all men. I'd say pretty almost ... Well, yeah, maybe three-quarters men.

Eve Austin: Okay.

Verna Harrison: It's funny how your perspective changes. You work in an almost all-man environment for so long, so when there's two other women in the room, it's like, "Yeah, we're cool." I rarely felt that as a problem.

Eve Austin: Yeah, okay. Yeah, fun. You said we had fun. We got together. Tell me more. What do you mean?

Verna Harrison: We'd have a meeting and then we'd have a happy hour afterwards. We would very occasionally have an overnight retreat with a happy hour, so fun often involved alcohol, but it definitely, within the Maryland folks, we would go to Donaldson Brown, which was a retreat center up in the Susquehanna area, and there'd be shuffleboard and pool and people would just ... You're working most of the time. You're chatting about something they didn't get a chance to understand, but it was getting to know someone as a person, which I think is probably one of the most important lessons that I see lacking now in some ways because we don't either have the time to do that or we don't have the funding to do that or whatever. I sit right now, and I'll fast forward for a second. Forgive me-

Eve Austin: No, that's fine.

Verna Harrison: ... because I'm now going from today up until 1987 [crosstalk 00:14:18] until 2000 ... I guess I started in 2000. Anyway, whenever. Been on a board of an organization called the Harry R. Hughes Agro-Ecology Center, ironically. It was an initiative that came out of those early years and lasted, and it was to bring farmers and environmentalists together, and they meet three or four times a year. They're staffed. They're actually housed in the University of Maryland.

They have funding to give for research projects to further issues that we're not sure about. Right now, we're working on what can be done with salt-dredged water, I mean salt-infused water on the eastern shore because of the sea level rise, but point being, I sat next to Bobby Hutchinson who was one of the largest soybean growers on the eastern shore and got to know him. I went to his farm. I went to at Fry's dairy farm. I got to know these people as people and not as this monolithic, oh, they're bad guys or, oh, they're whatever and vice versa.

Figuring out how to continue to maintain those relationships became a challenge when you didn't have a structure that was set up for that. Another fun, I had a pool party at my house when I was at DNR and brought all the Chesapeake Bay staff people from all the agencies down, and it was fun.

Eve Austin: I wonder. I'm just thinking about this now. When you weren't in the middle of these fun things that you were doing getting to know people and having a happy hour, but you were back to having disagreements about legislation or politics, how do you think that knowing each other affected your negotiations or your-

Verna Harrison: It was immeasurably helpful. Absolutely immeasurably helpful because instead of putting the other person in this ... It's easier, I believe in my personal beliefs, to attack someone or something you don't know personally, so if you get a sense, you can get maybe learn why they think what they think because you have some respect for them, or even if you don't have respect for them, you normally figure, "Okay, well, we're coming from this angle and I'm never going to agree with them, but is there a way to move the ball forward without going to the lowest common denominator in this comprise stuff?" Because that's a big challenge for these groups and movements.

That's bounded by the opposite which is perfect is the enemy of the good, so both of those things are critically important in trying to figure out how to improve public policy.

Eve Austin: Yeah, yeah. That's good.

Verna Harrison: Well, I'll scoot back quickly from '87 because-

Eve Austin: Yes, thank you.

Verna Harrison: Then we had many different voices at the table because the people who work in education are very different than the ones that work on water quality, and they often resonate more with the public, so what we're trying to do is bring the public into why they should care about protecting this river as opposed to just why the scientists knows CSAV or whatever is at a certain level and it's going to crash.

The broadening of the Bay Agreement was good from that. It was difficult because it became much more difficult to manage. We have commitments in these agreements and each state had to do a specific numeric plan for each one of these commitments and it just became, over time, too much. Then they ratcheted it back, and then in 2000, there was a new agreement that was more focused on water quality. They added West Virginia, New York, and Delaware because they're all in the watershed.

In theory, that sounds good. In reality, it made things almost exponentially more difficult because those states ... It's hard enough to get Pennsylvania to understand the connect. In Pennsylvania, you have to talk about their rivers and that's why they care about it. In these other states, it was just a theory gone wrong about watershed planning. Yes, they should've been involved, and yes, they should be given money, but right now they have the same seat at the table as everybody else.

If you're talking about a tricky issue and you've got three states to convince to change your water quality standards or something, you have a shot at it. If you bring two more that don't give a back end about it ... I think the program has suffered because of that and the camaraderie that we had with the governors, even when there was Republics and Democrats, governor of New York's never come. Governor of Pennsylvania doesn't show up anymore. It's hit and miss with Delaware, so it's really changed the dynamics of their relationships.

Of course, when they're not playing as a team, their people are less likely to play as a team, so then it becomes more important to have the cabinet secretly level leaders be strong and committed, so that's gone up and down over the times. That was 2000. I think it was 2007. What the program has done well is go back and check with its commitments. It's reevaluated commitments. It has continued to bring new science in, so those are some of the strengths of the program.

One of our challenges was verification. The whole premise is you're going to do certain things that are going to make the bay better, and since you can't monitor in the real world the immediate impact of those things, you have to model it, so you say, "Okay, I think this buffer is going to reduce two pounds of nitrogen," so

what you have to do is go forward and say, one, in the verification world, is the buffer ... Was it ever put in and is it still alive? Did the deer eat it?

It's a whole set of issues on verification and making sure that your model assumptions are right, that they're put in place, and that they're honestly reported. I sit on a committee that Rob was on for a while-

Verna Harrison: Yeah, the Citizens Advisory Committee, and it's appointed by the governors and it has some at-large appointments. I ended up at DNR for 20 years and was a governor's appointee for the end of that. Then as you want when you're in these positions, we had a Republican governor come in and I was asked to leave, which I expected, and I had to get ... The group that holds the cards for this particular committee and said, well, would I switch and become an at-large member.

This is a fine-grained piece of history, but having the ability to have at-large members to organizations is helpful so you don't end up with total political-driven whatever. Anyhow, that committee has taken on as one of its primary issues verification, and we just bang it. Every year, we bring the government people in. We bring the experts in, so this particular group, the chairman speaks at this annual meeting of the executive council and they know they're going to hear from us.

Yesterday, I had to dump a meeting because there was a proposal by the cabinet secretary level group to change the reporting of numeric targets, and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation person and I for the Citizens Advisory Committee, that's the call that I couldn't hear myself on. Just got on it and went through why we had these two-year numeric targets and the damage to the public trust if they removed them. Yes, it was a little bit of work for the agencies, and maybe instead of reporting on 100% of them, they could report on 75% of the most important, but you're not going to eliminate it, so I guess maybe another lesson is a structure to make sure that the citizen's voice and the agency's voice, I mean the environmental group voice has got a place to be heard. Trying to think now. Come up for air.

Eve Austin: As a layperson, which this archive I think is more designed not necessarily for a layperson. It's really designed for environmentalists who can learn from your experience, but as a layperson myself, I wonder what's so hard about verification? I don't understand. Yeah, unless you're saying that it's people are just being sneaky and trying to get away with stuff, what is so hard about verifying?

Verna Harrison: You take five people in a room and you say, "Fill out your tax forms." One person isn't going to fill his tax form out.

Verna Harrison: Another person is going to fill it out and lie. Another person is going to be meticulous and do it right, and it's government job because this is public money to see and make sure the form gets filled out, to make sure it's right, and to evaluate, okay, the water is getting better in this river. Let's look at those practices that are reported in that form. Oh, those are wastewater treatment plants and the water's getting better. Oh, those are ag practices, and they're not reported accurately.

The water's not getting better. Oh, what do we do about it? It's critical in as most simplistic way I can say, and government, they don't like to call each other out, okay, because if I'm from Virginia and I call you out for something because I know you're misreporting it, and they think they have a sense of these things at the gross level, you might call me out on something, and I don't want that.

It's been EPA's job, up until recently, to be the primary caller outer, and often one state will call up EPA and say, "Hey, guess what? They didn't. They're not ..." EPA takes the big boy pants and puts them on and holds them accountable. To the extent of what they can do, EPA can withhold funding. They've actually done that with Pennsylvania.

They can come in and use their EPA level authorities on things other than ag and require, and they can do their own enforcement, and that's happen in places. Where we still have the hardest time is with agriculture. Because we started when we did the way we did with the ag people at the table, we are in this region light-years ahead of other groups across the country in having a structure in place, and they call it the TMDL, total maximum daily load. It's a provision of the Clean Water Act that says numeric targets and has ... Supposedly, EPA hold the states accountable for the numeric targets.

If they don't meet them, then EPA has certain consequences that it can impose, so depending on who's running EPA, the consequences are either real or not real, and that has let us be able to tell the public how many acres of forest needs to be put in a certain river for that river to return if it's driven by that particular practice.

Ohio, they just signed this, I don't know, four or five, six years ago, this massive inter-jurisdictional agreement that is toothless. It has no numbers. It's not quantifiable. It's like, "Yeah, they're all following it." Well, prove it.

Eve Austin: Yeah. That makes sense. What you're saying makes sense. I'm thinking. I was going to ask you to think about future folks, but before I do that, I know you've done so much work over ... You've been doing this for how many years? More than 20.

Verna Harrison: 40.

Eve Austin: 40? Can you think about what do you think you're the most proud of of all the work you've done?

Verna Harrison: Oh, the bay and rockfish.

Eve Austin: Say more about that.

Verna Harrison: The state fish, striped bass, was in desperate trouble and it was being caught just way over abundant, and there's an index that's taken, and they call it the Young-of-the-Year. It's where go out in nets, and they've been doing it for years, and they catch the little baby fish and they can predict based on that what the population's going to be, and they call that the Young-of-the-Year Index and that index had gone just into the dumpers, but the watermen had such political sway with our legislators particular who were at that point in leadership in the appropriations committee in the House in Maryland and even worse in Virginia.

We got together and did a massive outreach effort and got the public on the legislators. I lobbed one of my very first comments about being comfortable in working with the legislator, because by then, I'm an assistant secretary, and if I were afraid of the legislator, I couldn't have helped navigate this process, but anyway. There's where the Chesapeake Bay Program comes in.

I had been sharing the Living Resources Subcommittee of that program, which is fish don't know where the boundary line is between Maryland and Virginia. Let's just use that as an example, so I had been working with colleagues in Virginia and in Maryland, the fishery staff. How do we manage these species cohesively? Again, you've got to know the people.

We had a major battle, but we finally won it in the legislator. We had to take it to the Atlanta States Spring and Fisheries Commission, go to regional people in Maine and get the Maine people to vote against the Virginia people because the Virginia people wouldn't go along with this, and we couldn't do a ban if the Virginia wouldn't do a ban, so we finally ended up going to Congress and forcing it through Congress. Four years later, the head of the Watermen's Association came up to me and said, "Thank you." It was just one of these times that they would've caught the last fish, because the discipline or the culture was just if I don't catch it, he's going to. Anyway.

Eve Austin: That's right. Because I don't know anything about this, the ban on rockfish is ... What is the ban now?

Verna Harrison: Oh, there was no fishing, and what we did is had a waterman's compensation program. We didn't just push them off the ledge. We put them in their boats doing work, all kinds of water work that helped the state. Four years later, we started opening the fishing up, and now it's back open, and it's a big part of the fishery economy because fisherman don't do just one thing. They rockfish this time of year. They often oyster or crab another time of year, so they needed multiple little pieces, so it was-

Eve Austin: Wow. It took four years?

Verna Harrison: Took fours years, which was amazing.

Eve Austin: That's not much time, right?

Verna Harrison: It's not much time, and now we're watching it start to go down, problem with crabs going down again, problem with oysters going down, problem with the state House. Really bad problem with the state House. Fired the fisheries director, put in a political hack in the fisheries, so that's outside the Bay Program because that's Maryland-specific, but there is one thing about this issue that is a Bay Program issue.

When I was talking about the Living Resources Subcommittee and working with Maryland and Virginia, we had Pennsylvania representatives on the subcommittee because we're dealing with fish passage and we need to remove a fish passage, and that's a big problem in Pennsylvania, too.

Eve Austin: You need to remove fish passage?

Verna Harrison: Excuse me, remove dams.

Eve Austin: So they can pass through?

Verna Harrison: Yes, yeah. Yeah, sorry. We had a vote that we were taking about moving ahead with an element of this striped bass problem, and a guy name Keith Gansler from Pennsylvania, pretty quiet guy, stood up and just passionately spoke about the importance, so all the other groups around the table were like, "Well, yeah, it doesn't affect me, but of course." I mean there were other groups like other agencies and things around this particular table, so ... Well, most of the dialogue was Maryland versus Virginia, and everybody tired. They knew what everybody was going to say from those two camps.

It was this guy from Pennsylvania that came in with like, "Oh. Well, I guess we should do the right thing" without going into a myriad of boring details. The idea was even the relationships in that case made a difference.

Eve Austin: Right. Wow. Now thinking about that and where things are in 2019, October 18th, 2019, what are your thoughts about what younger or just new environmentalists, enviromental activists, and enviromental leaders, what they'll be facing and what skills ... You already mentioned you think it's really important to know how to work the political system.

Verna Harrison: Yeah. I think that connecting to the people in the system, whether they're government people, if you're an advocate, or if you're a government person knowing the advocates ... When I asked you earlier about who you interviewed, you threw out names and I knew all of them. You could throw out names in Virginia and in Pennsylvania and I would know, even at this point because now I'm about five ... Well, I went from DNR, which is where I left this discussion with [Erhlick 00:35:48] when he came in, and I spent 10 years at the Campbell Foundation as the executive director, and now I've been a consultant for three, some 13 years out of direct day-to-day management of this process, but I have continued to be involved in it because of the Citizens Advisory Committee, so that's spanned whatever.

Obviously, I don't know all the young professionals and I don't know some of the young activists, but point being is that it is really important for these guys to know each other. There is something we set up when I was at Campbell called the Choose Clean Water Coalition. It's watershed groups, large and small, all around the five-state region in this case that work together, and it's foundation-funded. It's not a membership organization, and it puts them in a position where they have to talk, and the relationships are exponentially better than they would have been.

I just came back from a conference yesterday in Delaware where they, eight years ago, started something similar, so those kinds of involvements are important and they're important whether you're a foundation person, whether you're a government person, or whether you're an advocate, because those structures give you a place to meet and get out of your comfort zone, get out of your circle of people who look like you.

One of the things that these groups are doing now is placing a huge emphasis on equity and justice, and that is moving the needle partly driven by foundations, but partly just driven by we got to do it.

Eve Austin: Could you just say a little bit more about that? What does that mean to you, what you just said there working more toward equity and justice and that it has to ... Say more. Yeah.

Verna Harrison: Okay, well, whether it's the face of the people making the decisions, the face of the people impacted by the decisions from a foundation world or an NGO world, who's on your board? Who's your staff? Who do you give money to? Who do you talk with before you decide where to spend your money and how to spend your money? Are you top-down saying, "You need this"? Or you go to the community and say, "Gee, you've got a whole lot of flooding."

Here's an example. I can be up here as an environmental and whether it's NGO or a government person and I could say, "You need green infrastructure." Green infrastructure is grasses and green barrels and green roofs that absorb rain so it doesn't flash across pavement and take the crud on the pavement and put it into the water. It holds it. It recharges the aquifer. If I'm in Canton or, I don't know, whichever community, green infrastructure means nothing to me.

However, if you say, "Your basement floods every other time there's a big rain because the rain goes into a CSO, combined sewer, a pipe that is combining your wastewater and your stormwater, and it goes into the water and then it goes into your basement. Oh, maybe you do care about green infrastructure," and maybe it's a win/win because those voices now go to policymakers and say, "We want money." The other reason is you can show them.

Lancaster City, for example. They took a major area, put green infrastructure all around it, made it into a huge set of basketball courts and planted a bunch of trees. There's a picnic area. Major community improvement, but it's being able to get the connection because the NGOs won because they got the green infrastructure. The communities won because they reduced flooding, and community involvement, but if you're not talking to each other, it doesn't happen.

Eve Austin: Yeah, that's good.

Verna Harrison: That's an example.

Eve Austin: Thank you. That's great. Is there any, before we finish up, anything else that you want to mention or any last thoughts?

Verna Harrison: It's Rich Batiuk, who was the science policy director for the Bay Program for 25 years is putting together a lessons learned document, and he's got about 15 of us going through this process about what were the most important things and whatever, and it's interesting because he's got a wide mix of scientists and various different groups that he's talking with mostly in the government areas. He's not talking with NGOs, but he's talking about those of us who were in government.

I probably should've gone back and refreshed my memory by looking at that list, because he started clumping them on a power axis. One of mine was totally alone, and that was civic engagement. I feel passionately that if we don't have our groups understand that part of their job is to get involved in the voting that we're never going to make progress as things get more and more polarized and more and more partisan. When I started with all this, Republicans in Maryland worked hand in glove. We had a Republican, Jack Cade, who was the leading member of the budget committee. That would never happen today.

Getting people who are open, moderate, I don't care if it's R or D, elected is essential to our future, essential. There's way to do that in totally legally appropriate fashion, so maybe that didn't resonate on Rich's list because Rich was talking to government people. I could argue how he could've, but anyway. For people who are looking at a broader component to this, keeping politicians involved and feeling good about what happens ... Let me twist this into way that maybe makes some sense in terms of a lessons learned.

If you've just done a rain garden, get your politician out there and get his little face or her face cutting a ribbon. That reinforces that, oh, this was cool. Let me see if it could be done around the corner. I know from my experience that when I started at DNR, I was not focused that, and a friend of mine, Charlie Stoeck, who worked then for Senator Sarbanes, just beat the heck out of us one day. Where do you think this money comes from and do you think it grows on trees, etc. I was like, "Oh, light bulb," so that's a lesson that may not be often talked about. It's a little outside of the ...

Eve Austin: When I think from talking to, I think it was Rob Atkin. I think he's the one who talked about this, but I could be wrong. Maybe a lot of the people who gravitate towards this work, initially they're intuitively interested in conservation and working with the land and they're not necessarily thinking about these other things, politics and policy, because that's a lot of work too and a different skillset.

Verna Harrison: Yeah, yeah. At this meeting I was at yesterday, I'm sitting in a session at the end trying to learn more social media stuff. I was like ... Anyhow, I hear the woman is trying to get people to do a SMART goal, so she says, "Okay, everybody spend three minutes and write your SMART goal for your organization," and someone was trying to talk about voting, and the guy behind me said ...

His companion says, "Well, do we do that in our watershed organization?" He said, "Watershed organizations don't do that. We're not supposed to get involved in politics."

Eve Austin: Well, for anyone listening, can't see what you just did, you're biting your own arm.

Verna Harrison: Oh, God. It was [inaudible 00:45:00] to the end of the second day, or I just would've had to intervene.

Eve Austin: Yeah, I was going to say what'd you say? Okay. Yeah.

Verna Harrison: Anyway, so trying to think of things that may not be as intuitively obvious because ... When you're reflecting on this, obviously you reflect from where you sit, and Rob is right. A lot of people came into this with a conservation background. I didn't. I came into it as a "political hack," so my ways of moving the needle involved a whole lot of learning about how to say anadromous fish, which is what a rockfish is, but it was some of the background of knowing you had to work with people. That was such an important component that I'm not sure we do a good enough job with today, and I was fortunate, again, because of Harry Hughes that people he put over DNR, Department of Natural Resources, where I was ... Team building. We did team building up the yang. We climbed ropes. We did trust falls. We did all the way down the organization, so those things are just getting comfortable with that.

Eve Austin: No, that's good. That's really good, so thank you.

Verna Harrison: Thank you.

Eve Austin: Thanks for all your hard work. Thank you for being willing to take the time to share your thoughts and your history with the Town Creek Oral History Project. I appreciate it. Just to sign out, again, it's October 18th, 2019. This is Eve Austin during the interview, and I'm interviewing Verna Harrison at her home office in Arnold, Maryland. Overlooking the . . .

Verna Harrison: Magothy.

Eve Austin: Magothy River.