



Will Baker: So my name is Will Baker. I was born December seven, Pearl Harbor Day, 1953, and I live in Baltimore and I work at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

Eve Austin: You're in the media a lot, you have been a lot, so if you have anything that you feel like you haven't gotten to say, this might be a good place to do it.

Will Baker: Good news is I can't remember what I've already shared, so I won't know.

Eve Austin: Yeah. So why don't you just share a little bit about your background leading up to now?

Will Baker: Well, the good... Let's see how to say it. The most obvious aspect of me is that I'm very boring. I've lived in the same house that I grew up in and I have had the same job, or worked for the same organization, for over 43 years, I think. 1976 I started at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation as an intern thinking I might be there for a couple of months, maybe a year, and then go on to graduate school. And I got sidetracked and have been there ever since.

I've been running the organization since 1981. I love it, obviously. Wouldn't have done it for so long. I like it because it's big enough to be important. We all have our egos, we all want to do things that are important, and yet it's small enough, both as an institution and in terms of an issue, that one can believe that you can actually make a difference in your lifetime. And, to me, that's a great sort of balance of importance and ability to actually get something done.

Eve Austin: Yeah. And so you're the president or the executive director of the Chesapeake Bay... ?

Will Baker: I started as executive director and the board changed the title about 24 months later to president, and the head of the board used to be the president, is now the chairman. And I'm the president and CEO.

Eve Austin: So one of the things Town Creek is hoping for, I think, is if you could share some of the challenges that you've experienced over the years in doing the work that you do, some of the challenges and kind of how you saw your way through them. I don't know if you have a particular story about one, or any way you'd like to share it.

Will Baker: One of the... When you run an organization, you have two principle masters, if you will. One is the bureaucracy, as a way of describing running an organization. Hiring and firing people, making a budget, raising and spending money, doing the business of organizational management. We have over 200 people, full-time people, working for us, so it's a big organization. In some respects, smaller than others.



The other aspect is the mission, and achieving with that bureaucracy, if you will, with that institutional entity, what the mission is. And so I get to do both, and must do both, as the CEO, and there're challenges on both sides. It's easier, probably, to explain the challenges in the mission. The Chesapeake Bay watershed's population of humans has about doubled since the organization was started 50, 55 years ago, meaning all of the pressures are intensified. Climate change has intensified all of the pressures on the Chesapeake Bay, and politics, especially under the era of Donald Trump, who is about as anti-environmental a president as, I think, history will ever record, intensifies the pressure on the Chesapeake Bay.

So for years, when people would say, "Why isn't the bay better?" And some would say, "Why is it no better?" And some would say, "Why is it worse?" Because the more attention a system like just big Bay gets, the more the media write, and the more the media write, often the more negative stories are out there. So people could ask any of those questions.

And for years I would have to, I and others at CBF, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, we call it CBF, would have to say, "Well, it would have been worse." And that was a very true answer, and in many respects, a very good news answer. It could have been much worse without all the government effort, without all the private sector work, without our contribution at CBFs work. But it wasn't a very satisfying answer.

The great news is that, for about the last 10 years, science has been documenting the fact that the system is really improving. And when I say "system," it's a six state, 64,000 square mile watershed, all of which drains into the bay's mainstem, which is 200 miles long, up to 30 miles wide. Just the tidal portion of the bay is large in itself, but science has told us to view the entire watershed. The entire watershed of the Gulf of Mexico, for instance, is half of the United States of America draining into the Mississippi and into the gulf. So watersheds are much larger than the body of water they flow into. So it's getting better, and the science documents on a number of metrics improvement, not to say that it's not got a long way left to go.

On the running of an organization side, the challenges are, first and foremost in any not-for-profit raising the money, we get very little government funding, less than 10%. So we're raising money from individuals primarily, foundations as well, like the Town Creek Foundation, and some corporate support. Not much. So you have to show that you are worth the investment, if somebody is taking money out of their pocket and saying we're going to invest in your mission, which is what fundraising is. And, in order to do that, you have to have a well functioning organization, both in terms of mission and in terms of how you perform with the money that's given to you. And that means employees who do a good job, who are motivated, who are not... factually, they're not getting as much salary as they certainly could in private sector work, but who are motivated to do a great job because of the mission.



And, in every aspect, I feel the Chesapeake Bay Foundation scores A pluses. We're so lucky, and people who work for CBF have called it much more than a job. It's a culture. It's a family. It's a life's work. We've had people who have worked for 50 years. I've worked for 43, so there are people who've worked there longer than I have. It's just a wonderful place. I don't know. I'm rambling.

Eve Austin: No. Actually, the person who was just here just this very morning, mentioned... One of the things that he mentioned was the importance of people fun together. And, I don't know, it just made a connection for me when you're talking about your employees, just the thought of it's hard work and it doesn't pay that well, maybe. So I'm wondering what have you done to keep your employees happy and functioning well, even if they could be out making more money elsewhere, or is it all derived from the intrinsic value of working on the bay?

Will Baker: I'm tempted to say I don't know. I'm too close. It's just what we do, and the result has been most people stay a long time. I don't really know why because I haven't worked anywhere else. I've served on other boards, I've been exposed to other organizations, but I have no idea why CBF is as lucky as we are.

I don't know. You can go through all of the normal sort of BS, if you will. We try to treat people well. We really respect work life balance. People work hard because they feel they must, and we don't have any time clocks. You get the work done and it's very apparent the few times you have an employee who just isn't getting the work done, and they tend to leave on their own accord.

We have these wonderful buildings for those who work in the office part of the operation. Those who are outdoor environmental educators, who are doing restoration work in terms of habitat, are outside. So what could be better than that? I don't know.

I know why I love it, but it's hard to say what are the attributes? I will say one thing, that certainly was absolutely part of my growing up in a career, and that is take advantage of opportunities. And I talked to a lot of young people who are looking for work or who are interning with us, or in otherwise at the start of their careers, and I always say, "Don't get locked into one idea about what you want to do in your work life. You can do good things in whatever field you may be interested in, even if you're working in something completely different, as a volunteer, as an advocate, as a member, whatever. But take it advantage..."

I had no idea I was going to have a career in the environment. I thought I was going to become an architect. But an opportunity presented itself and I had perhaps the good sense to into it, to let it flow over me a bit to not resist and say, "No, I have to go intern for an architecture firm, and then go to architecture school." And I think that's something that I think a lot of people could benefit from. Don't get so locked in. You



can do good work. You can pursue anything from any number of platforms. Just a thought.

Eve Austin: Yeah. No, that's good. So you're saying that, even today, October 21st, 2019, the bay is getting better. Things are improving.

Will Baker: If you are... Let's see what the example I could pull right now. If you are a striped bass, a rockfish, right now you might feel like things aren't as good as they were 10 years ago, because striped bass are under various stressors, some related to fishing, some related to habitat, some related to water quality. If you were a blue crab, you might feel like things are really doing pretty well. Blue crabs have been on the up and up now for a couple of years.

If you're looking at some water quality parameters, they're looking much better. If you're looking at others, they're not so good. But what we at CBF and what many scientists do, we try to look at the entire system and say, "As an entity, in totality, is it staying the same, getting worse, getting better?" And clearly, the scientific metrics are, in totality, it's getting better.

Think of the human body. If you just broke your toe, you're in a lot of pain. But you may be really healthy. And so, because you're in pain, do you say you're not healthy? On the other hand, your body, all your joints, everything may be functioning wonderfully, but you have brain cancer, or you have stage four lung cancer, and you have a certain amount of time to live. You feel okay, but you're about to die.

So an environmental system, natural system, is the same thing. Many different elements to it. You have to have a little bit of art added to the science to describe is it going in the right direction, or not? It depends on what part of the system you're looking at, as opposed to the totality of it. And the totality of the Chesapeake Bay is clearly getting better, but nowhere near as good as it needs to be, or can be.

Eve Austin: Right. So what do you think will be some of the challenges that kind of new, young, up and coming environmental activists, or people working to improve the environment, what do you think will be some of the challenges they're going to meet trying to get it closer to where it could be, should be?

Will Baker: The hardest thing is finding a platform from which to work. Most of us need a job that pays a salary. And so, it's very tough to break in. And I always tell people a lot of it happens to be being at the right place at the right time. So if this is something you really wanted to... As we talked about earlier, sometimes you can look for other ways to be a good environmentalist rather than working for an organization. But just keep saturating the marketplace with your face and with your resume, with your telephone calls, and be a little bit of a pain in the neck. Keep pushing, because one day you'll find you're at the right place at the right time.



So that's getting the platform. Once you have a platform, or say, without a platform in this country, political activism is where things happen, is why things happen. And I say planting a tree, helping grow oysters, all of those are important, and we encourage and we engage people in doing all those sorts of things, and more. But you have to also let your elected officials know how important clean air, clean water is, whether you're 95 or nine, and we have nine-year-olds who are letting their elected officials know, who are working in their schools or on their own, writing letters, going to see people, making telephone calls. We our democracy. We don't always appreciate it as much as... we don't always appreciate it, but it really is... it does make a difference to push our elected officials to do things we believe in.

Eve Austin: Yeah. So it's for people who are more inclined to plant a tree or get out on the water. It's maybe getting out of their comfort zone and dabbling into some political action that's going to make a difference.

Will Baker: Plant a tree, and then get invested in the future of that tree. So planting a tree is not enough. You've got to help that tree be successful in its own right, and to help that tree be successful, it needs to be taken care of. It needs to be part of a larger system that is going to thrive. And to do that, you need clean air, you need to not have an over abundance of development in that area that is damaging its ability to grow. And I'm using the tree somewhat as a metaphor, but it can be very much literal, as well.

And so when we get people out planting trees with the family, as we just did this past weekend, we encourage them to also think about what it is that the tree needs to succeed. When they grow oysters, when they put oysters back in the bay onto a sanctuary reef, you need good water quality, as well. So get engaged and involved in helping what you do be part of a larger successful effort.

Eve Austin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's good.

Will Baker: And there's nothing like having a little sweat equity in something to say, "I want to make sure it succeeds."

Eve Austin: How do you guys actually encourage people to do that? Are you giving them, teaching them about the political process at the same time that they're planting a tree, or... ?

Will Baker: We feel very strongly, and we do a lot of outdoor environmental education for kids. So it's somewhat similar. We expose people, we expose students, we expose teachers to the bay and its rivers and streams, and we give them opportunities to get invested, to get engaged. And then, we allow them to self select if they want to learn how to be stronger advocates.



So when you come plant a tree with us, we don't necessarily shove advocacy down your throat as you walk off the field, but we encourage them to see opportunities and to go the next step with us to learn more and see how they can help be part of an advocacy system.

Eve Austin: Okay.

Will Baker: And same with students. We very much support and encourage and give help to students who want to become student leaders and do more after they've been out with us for a day, or a three day field trip, but they have to self select to do that. We're not demanding of that of them, but when they do, we give them all the help and support they can to continue to be leaders, to join the right clubs. There's environmental leadership forums, and things like that, and we've had students go all the way through high school, through college, and some actually serve on our board of trustees.

Eve Austin: Oh, wow. I was going to ask you if you have a memory of a particular person or story or individual. A young person.

Will Baker: There's so many, but one just, because she's such a good friend and she's currently on our board, a woman from southern Maryland, an African-American named Devan Ogburn, who, and she's on our board, so it's public knowledge. I'm not divulging anything about Devan, and she'd be the first to say, "Tell my story."

She started on a CBF field trip. She became involved with the, now, I've got to get the right name. The Maryland Student Leadership Council, I think it is. She actually became chair of it. She went to American University and continued to work on environmental issues, continued to stay involved with CBF, served as an intern once, then was elected to our board. And this year she's studying on a graduate program in London.

And there's a great video of her at one of the rallies we had on a particular piece of legislation about five years ago, and I can't remember exactly what she said. I should, but her quote was something like, "Don't take away clean air and clean water from me. These are my rights. Don't take them away." And then, she tied it to the legislation that was being considered that day.

Eve Austin: Powerful.

Eve Austin: Yeah. So, who knows? Had it not been for that initial contact when she was a little kid, or a younger person. Yeah.

Will Baker: We see it over and over and over again, and it's sort of funny. One of the places we see it the most is people coming to us looking for a job, will say, "And the first time I



got interested in the environment was when I went out on that canoe program 17 years ago." Or we've actually seen it with legislators, with people involved in government who say, "I got my interest in the Chesapeake Bay on a field trip in 1982." And then, they'll name the educator they were with.

Eve Austin: Wow.

Will Baker: That's rewarding. Boy, talk about something making you feel good. Wow.

Eve Austin: That's really good. Yeah. And did you grow up on the water?

Will Baker: I did not.

Eve Austin: You did not?

Will Baker: It's a little bit of a story that you kind of embellish, but it's actually true. When I started at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, I didn't really know the difference between a duck and a seagull.

Eve Austin: Really?

Will Baker: And now, I'm still not too keen on it, but I can fake it a lot better now than then. And I did. Talking of seagulls, sure, but I did not grow up in a family that was water-oriented, or even terribly environmental-oriented, but I grew up in a family that was very socially-oriented. Both parents, one a lawyer, one a doctor, who were constantly in making the world a better place. Well, in high school and college I was an antiwar activist.

I grew up in the 60s, came of age in the 60s, and so I always believed in being part of an effort to do things, to stir the pot, to push to make things better, to oppose bad things and support good things. And having an opportunity to have a career in a field that allowed you to do that full-time for the environment, what could be better? It was like a dream come true.

Eve Austin: Yeah. That's fascinating. A lot of the other people I've spoken to, they did grow up on the water. They'd described that's how they got their start, playing in the river or a creek.

Will Baker: I would go down to Lake Roland with my little fishing rod and fish for sunfish and bring them home and asked my mother to cook them. And somehow none of them ever quite got to a plate. She knew that you didn't want to eat fish out of Lake Roland.

Eve Austin: And that's still true.



Will Baker: It's still true. But that was about the extent of my outdoor activities. We'd go to the beach in the summers. My father was a golfer, and every once in a while he'd take us fishing, but we were not hunters and fishermen in our family.

Eve Austin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Was your family pleased with your career choice? Did they understand it?

Will Baker: Yes, I think they were pleased.

Eve Austin: They were urging you to go become a doctor?

Will Baker: Well, my father would have loved that. My mother always said, "You should be a lawyer because you argue with me all the time." But, no. I wanted to be an architect, like my big brother.

Eve Austin: Right. Well, you've done great work, and you're still working full-time and...

Will Baker: Yes. I'll be 66 in December. I don't think the word retirement is in my vocabulary. What would you do if you've retired?

Eve Austin: I know.

Will Baker: I need to go somewhere every day. I need to be with a group. I need to be part of things that are happening, and I'm not going to go build model ships in the cellar.

Eve Austin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, Chesapeake Bay Foundation is lucky that that's your stance.

Will Baker: Well, I hope so, but... I also don't want to overstay my welcome. When you've been somewhere for so long and you've run something for so long, you do worry if you should be moving aside for new leadership, and I think about that every single day. I always tell my board and my colleagues, "Don't hesitate to tell me if I'm starting to get a little senile, if it's time to go."

Eve Austin: I don't know. Also, are there things that you all do to cultivate the younger leadership?

Will Baker: Oh, yes.

Eve Austin: Yeah.

Will Baker: So growing staff, in every respect, is really important to us. And so is diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, DEI. And so we are constantly looking at recruiting, how we



recruit, how we bring people in. Once we do, how we train. Opportunities to get outside the organization to be exposed to other things. So it's something that all senior management talks about a lot in our human resources team, who are just terrific [inaudible 00:30:34].

Eve Austin: Well, we're at 30 minutes and I know that you have other appointments today. Is there anything, I guess, yeah. Any last words you might want to share? Anything else that you'd want to discuss?

Will Baker: Well, to the extent people are listening to this and thinking about what they might do in their careers, I would tell people that if you're not doing something you enjoy, think strongly about whether you can find something that you enjoy. Life is too short to punch the time clock. Now, some of us have to do it, and the old expression, "Americans live to work, whereas many other parts of the world work to live," it's worth thinking about.

Work, for Americans, for many of us, is really part and parcel with our lives. And if you're not doing something you feel good about it at the end of the day, that you actually enjoy much of the day, try and find another opportunity, because they're out there, and you'll be rewarded. It is so great to be able to get up in the morning or go home at night and feel good about what you've done. And if you can find that sweet spot, man, everything else falls into place.

Now, family, health, other things have a role to play, obviously, but it's really important in terms of a career to do things you enjoy. And if you absolutely can't, then look for ways on the side to get involved in things you enjoy, or look for ways to get your employer to be involved in things that you support and advocate for, because you'll feel really good at the end of the day. Even if you're making widgets, get the widget maker to look for ways to either be more sustainable, or more diverse, or be more attuned to health care, or to the health of the employees, things like that, so you feel good about what you do.

Eve Austin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Will Baker: It's well worth it.

Eve Austin: Well, thank you.

Will Baker: Thank you.

Eve Austin: It's October 21st, 2019, and I'm interviewing Will Baker. We're sitting here in my office in Baltimore, Maryland, and this is for the oral history for the Town Creek Foundation.

Town Creek Foundation Interviews: 2019  
Conducted by the Peale Center for Baltimore History and Architecture  
Eve Austin interviews Will Baker



Will Baker: Thank you very much, Eve.

Eve Austin: Thank you.