00:00 Frances Flanigan: My name is Frances Flanigan. I've been in environmental advocacy work for, a really long time, 40 years. I hate to acknowledge that, [chuckle] for the record. But going back to the '70s, when the environment was a new issue, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, that kind of thing. And I was a very young mom, with nothing to do except take care of kids.

00:26 FF: And I remember saying to a friend of mine, "What I'm I gonna do? I need an issue, I need something to get involved with." And this gal said, "Well, the environment is the next big thing." So I joined a couple of local organizations and got familiar with some... Very early stages of some of the issues. And one of the friends who had advised me came to me in 1977, I think it was, and said, "There's an organization called the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay that is looking for a Maryland staff person, and I think you'd be very good at that."

01:00 FF: So I said, "Oh well, that's interesting, let's talk about that." One thing led to another, and I got a job with the organization called the Alliance, which was relatively new at that time. And I ended up working there for at least 30 years, ended up being the executive director, held that job for 23 years. And it was in that position that I got to know the Town Creek Foundation and then the other funding sources in the Bay Area, and all the different environmental groups and what have you. It was a very interesting time to be involved in environmental work, and of course the Bay was, was and continues to be a big issue, and was very gratifying to be able to be engaged in that in a constructive kind of way.

01:41 Speaker 2: So in those early years, getting into it by the suggestion of somebody else, what kept you in it? What was that moment of inspiration where you felt like this was something that was very important to you?

01:54 FF: I don't know that it was a moment, but when I was in college, I had been very interested in science, and politics actually. And public policy kinds of things in a very elementary way, of course, when you're 20 years old. When I got started, it was the time of the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, several big pieces of national legislation that set the stage for action that followed for 10, 20, 30 years.

02:22 FF: That has all evolved now, and we're in a much more sophisticated place than we were in the early 1970s. But the first job I got back then that really turned me on to public participation, was with a little group in Baltimore, there was an organization downtown called the Baltimore Environmental Center. And this is in the early '70s when most people would not have had any idea what that meant.

02:49 FF: And I got hired there, this was even before I got into the Chesapeake Bay work, working on air quality issues in Baltimore with an EPA grant. EPA was brand new at that point. The beginning of EPA, that was a very interesting time in United States, I think. Remember, that that

was Richard Nixon's presidency, and he was the person who created the Environmental Protection Agency.

03:14 FF: They were doing all kinds of things of course, with Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, their job was to implement those two national laws. But here at Baltimore we got a very small grant like $5000, which didn't seem so small at the time, when I think about it now, it's a tiny amount of money, to go out and meet with communities in Baltimore to talk about the importance of air quality and what we could do here to improve air quality.

03:40 FF: I don't think most people were really aware that air quality was a problem, and that if your child gets asthma, it might be related to the air he's breathing. And that was very eye-opening to me. We went to all kinds of groups, Kiwanis clubs and garden clubs and so forth, and we did a little side show on air quality in Baltimore. And people asked very basic questions.

04:00 FF: Most people were pretty open to hearing about it, there were some of course, as they're still are today who say, "Oh no, no, that can't be a problem." But that was, I think, very important to my future career because I learned how important it was to be able to talk to people, and to educate people in an easy, non-threatening kind of way.

04:22 FF: And when I moved to the Alliance and ultimately became the executive director of that organization, we were all about citizen participation and public education, and getting things down to a level where normal people could understand what you were talking about, and where you as the facilitator learned to listen to them, understand what their concerns were, tried to get a handle on what people understand, what they don't understand, and so forth. And that really has been, I guess the basic thrust of my career through at this point many years.

04:56 S2: And in that work of talking to people, how much of it is educating individual people versus taking larger civic action?

05:07 FF: That's a good question, and I think it's a combination of both. A lot of it is individual, but obviously there are a lot of people. So if our goal is to educate every individual, we're never gonna get there. But what we have tried to do is figure out which groups of people were gonna be influential and perhaps educating, changing the minds of other people, and then of course implementing political action. The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, which initially had been called the Citizen's Program for the Chesapeake Bay, was not an advocacy organization, it was a consensus building organization.

05:45 FF: And our goal always was to provide good information with the hope that key groups, the Watermen's Association, the farmers groups, the local government organizations, the environmental groups, that all of them would learn and act based on where they were coming from. And that you would then hopefully end up with a good political result, a good public policy result.

06:08 FF: Most of the time I think that works, sometimes it doesn't, but we've had a very, I think a very successful Chesapeake Bay restoration effort, that began in 1983. And it's all built on that idea

of bringing people together, finding out what people are willing to do, what you can require them to do, and how you can get enough support in enough different places in the community, to make something stick. And I think we've been pretty successful with that here.

06:36 S2: In that time period, what changes have you seen take place and where do things need to keep going? Has the conversation changed or What kind of progression have you seen in that time?

06:50 FF: I think the progression has been huge. I think the conversation has been huge. I remember one time going... I think I had to go to a meeting in New York or some place, where... But it was related to the Bay with groups from other estuaries around the country, and I remember getting into a cab, and the cab driver bringing up the Chesapeake Bay, and I thought myself, "I think we're making some headway here because even the cab driver is aware it. There's a Chesapeake Bay Program." And I think we're building on that. I think though, that where we are today, is we're in difficult... We're in some difficult territory because a lot of what remains to be done, requires people to make really fundamental changes in how they live.

07:32 FF: It requires local governments to spend more money to do things like manage storm water, it requires state and federal governments to spend more money, pay us more laws, and it requires all of us individuals to change the way we behave. So I think it's hard for people. It is also, though to me, quite interesting to be sitting here in 2019 and looking at this kid from Sweden coming across the ocean in a little boat to tell the United Nations about climate change.

08:01 FF: Who would have ever thought that something like that was gonna happen? And I do think it says something pretty important about all of us adults, when it takes a kid to help us make that message heard by people. The older you get, I'm finding as an older person now, the older you get, the harder it is to change your mind about things.

08:20 S2: Could you talk a little more specifically about those progressive changes that you've seen, and what those actually look like?

08:28 FF: When I think back to the '80s and the '90s, when we were very involved in Bay-related stuff, we started working with groups of people that had common purpose, for example, agriculture. One of the things that I did was to reach out about... Out to all the state agriculture agencies, and those connected to the federal government, and try to bring them together. It was a very hard sell, and to some extent, still is with farmers, 'cause they did not wanna think that they were part of the environmental problem. I think those farmers think they're good environmentalists.

09:05 FF: But of course, there were lots of issues with the use of chemicals and runoff, and all that kind of thing. So we started with groups like the individual county level farm bureaus, going to their farm bureau meetings. Going to farm bureau meetings in the middle of Pennsylvania, and driving home at 2:00 AM from their evening dinner, having had what seemed like a pretty successful interaction with a group of farmers up there.

09:30 FF: And little by little, you began to see farmers adopting better practices, and you began to

see the organizations that spoke for farmers beginning to turn the corner. I think we've made a lot of headway there. And that kind of step-by-step progress, I think, has been made with a lot of other kinds of groups too. The farmers always stick out in my mind because they're so important to us, here in the mid Atlantic, and probably more important today than they ever were when you think about all the issues we have with healthy food and all that kind of thing. We really need our farmers to be good environmentalists, and I think they have been, they have come a long way.

10:07 FF: And so, working on that kind of thing is very time consuming, very tedious. You go to meeting, after meeting, after meeting, but you do begin to see change after a while. And I think part of it is that, they... Others begin to realize we're all just people, we're not out to get you, we're really just trying very hard to find ways in which we can all improve our behavior.

10:28 S2: Is there a particular story from your career, where you kind of... That has really stuck with you as a light bulb moment of seeing somebody come into an understanding of environmental impact?

10:42 FF: I mean, there were stories with watermen, who you would think... Larry... People like Larry Sims, God bless him, who... He always thought that they would take the last fish out on the Bay, the last crab out of the Bay, but they came around.

10:56 S2: How do you balance, when talking to fishermen and farmers? Some of these changes have a financial cost associated with them. And so, how do you go about working through that, and talking about that, and understanding the value in environmental impact, when fishermen and farmers are generally, don't have a lot of finances? Or how...

11:17 FF: Right. Well, I think that's tough. That's a good question. I think that the secret has been, frankly, that we didn't make it all about the fishermen and the farmers. There have been laws and funding mechanisms that require everybody to pitch in. The most current one, right now, that is so controversial for some people, is the rain... So-called rain tax, which is not a rain tax at all, but the storm water fee. Storm water has been a really, really tough issue for people to understand.

11:52 FF: And it's, I think it's the modern day example of the things that farmers had to come to understand and learn about back in the '70s and '80s, and the fishermen as well. Today, it's all the rest of us, and what we're doing on our own property, and how we're managing all that rain water, which ultimately is gonna make a difference for water quality in the harbor and the Bay.

12:13 S2: Can you talk about some significant challenges or oppositions that you faced in your line of work?

12:20 FF: There is always opposition from, I was gonna say business, but that's not really true. It's hard to pinpoint whether there was one group... Lucky thing we have with the Bay was that everybody loves the concept of the Bay, even if they never get out there. So that part was not really that hard. But I think when people are all, they're asked to pay more money, when businesses have to change their practices, with regard to how they manage their effluence and stuff, that costs them

money, of course.

12:56 FF: And I think that gets, is tough for people. But it does seem like we've had just a complete culture change in the United States, not just here in the Bay area, but in the United States, with regard to pollution control, and what have you. This is 2019, we're living through a period of denial about a lot of environmental problems and issues. The most important one of which, of course is climate change, but we've got an EPA and a political leadership right now that is trying to undo all kinds of stuff.

13:32 FF: It's important to think about the environment, but it's also important to realize these are public health issues. The environment's not out there for us to enjoy the beauty of it, or the... It's not an abstract kind of thing, it's a real thing that has an impact on all of our lives every single day. And I don't think that we have the political will right now in the nation to really come to grips with that and realize if we miss this country up, if we mess this planet up, that we're gonna have a hell of a hard time bringing it back. It was hard enough to begin to restore the Chesapeake Bay, but then that's it's small compared to the challenges that we're facing now.

14:12 S2: You're retired from the Chesapeake Bay Alliance.

14:13 FF: Yes, yes.

14:15 S2: From now on, being retired for the rest of your life, what role do you think you intend to play in this work?

14:24 FF: I... [chuckle] That's a good question. I'm very, very involved with a number of environmental organizations, Audubon Maryland-DC, Blue Water Baltimore, The Irvine Nature Center, and I was on the board of the Centre for Agro-Ecology, which the Town Creek Foundation very generously funded for years. I'm going to keep doing that work as long as I can. I think that education and education of kids and then education of adults at the policy level, is gonna continue to be important.

15:00 FF: And it's really kind of fun to be able to do that without having to worry about, "How am I gonna get the next paycheck done, the next round of payments for the staff?", and that kind of thing, to just work as a volunteer with other people who are so committed to these issues. One of the major emphasis of these organizations that I've been involved with for the past decade is educating children, and I think that's the future for us.

15:27 FF: And it's just so gratifying to see how interested kids can be. And children are much smarter, this generation that we're working with now are much smarter about environmental issues, and they certainly were when I started. And that's been really gratifying. It gives me hope that things will hopefully turn out okay, although we have a long way to go.

15:47 S2: And with the government right now, and the work you've done, and I imagine over time with different people in both local and national governments, it can feel like two steps forward, one

step back.

16:00 FF: It sure can. [chuckle]

16:02 S2: What has given you the energy and the resolve to keep going?

16:07 FF: Progress, I think. Success, progress. It's sometimes a little bit at a time, tiny step at a time, but sometimes great big steps. Back in the 1980s, when the Bay effort was really building a big head of steam and garnering a lot of public support, we had politicians who were willing to go way out on a limb.

16:28 FF: I mean, Harry Hughes, of course comes to mind. Bless his soul. He was just a wonderful leader. And had it not been for him, I don't think we'd be where we are today. But it's not just people at that level, but of people at much lower levels within government, and in various organizations and business, have all come together. And I think that that's, when you see that kind of coming together, you realize that in a democracy, we really can make things work if we're all pulling in the same direction.

16:58 FF: And even when we're not, there's room in this country and in most of these issues for differences of opinion. I remember one time going to the Town Creek Foundation with a grant application, when I was still with the Alliance. And we wanted to... We had done a lot of work with local governments, and as I mentioned before, with various groups that might be considered opponents of environmental improvement. But this particular project that we wanted to get funded was to deal with local governments and pulling people together. But it wasn't advocacy, it was an education kind of thing.

17:34 FF: And I remember Town Creek saying, "We can't fund that, because we wanna do... We do advocacy." And I thought to myself, "Gosh, this is the precursor to advocacy, because we're educating. We're trying at least, to educate people so that they can become good advocates." And we eventually got that project going. But I understood it that Town Creek was really very interested in, and I think till the very end, advocacy. Some of the work that they funded has been immensely important in the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay.

18:07 S2: What is something that you're most proud of in your work? Is there a particular story or moment, or just a general concept or idea of something that, looking back on your life's work gives you a sense of pride?

18:20 FF: Probably not a specific moment, but I think, as I reflect back, the fact that the work that we started in the 70s continues, that it's been sustainable. And that a whole new generation of educated environmental folks are now leading that work. That's really very gratifying to see that. And I think it's probably somewhat unusual.

18:46 FF: Lots of things don't seem to have much staying power, but we've been at this for 40 years now, and I think that while sometimes people are saying, "Oh no, the Bay again, we're tired of

hearing about that." I think that there has been a really fundamental change in how we deal with the environmental issues and Maryland and in the Bay region. And I think that makes it all seem incredibly worthwhile to me. And hopefully in 40 years into the future, somebody's gonna be saying the exact same thing.

19:08 S2: What tips would you give the next generation of advocates as they continue this work?

19:08 FF: Be smart, make sure you have all the facts, don't attack people, realize that everybody has a point of view, and it may not be your point of view, but they have a legitimate point of view. And if you're gonna get people to change their perspective, you gotta work with them, you've got to, You've gotta become friends, you've gotta realize we're all hopefully going in the same direction. It takes time, it's not something that happens quickly, particularly if people have fundamental disagreements about either what the issue is or what tactics should be used to address that issue. So it's work for a patient person.

[chuckle]

20:03 S2: We talked earlier about the life changes that people have to make now to save our planet. What would you say are three things that people can do right now to make a difference?

20:15 FF: One obvious one is transportation. And I think all of us are much more aware of air pollution issues related to transportation. I drive a Prius, I've had that little car for 11 years and I love it. And if it ever stops running, I'm gonna get another one. And I think that's become pretty accepted now, not that everybody has to drive a Prius of course, but transportation and air pollution which is of course a bay issue. I think that's really important. I think that we're all recognizing that it takes money that we're gonna have to pay to make some of the changes, not all the changes, most of them cost money.

20:53 FF: And I think a new one that we're, really, this is probably an issue with a future, not something that we thought about too much in the past, related to agriculture, and that's food. The whole issue of what we eat, how we grow our food, the part that animals play in the food chain. I think we're just on the cusp of some very big important knowledge gain there and hopefully the changes in people's behavior with regard to food. That's not something I would have been thinking about 30 or 40 years ago, beyond the fact that we were saying to farmers, "Don't use so much fertilizer." That was the extent of the food thing that I was aware of. And that, I think that is really changing.

21:36 S2: What would you hope to see the world, or I guess Maryland like, in 50 years, as far as the environment?

21:44 FF: Well, Maryland has a fabulous environment, I mean it's a beautiful state. And we have natural resources that are, in my view, priceless. I hope we're able to maintain them, and I'm pretty optimistic that we can. I think that if we are lucky, Maryland will truly be a national model, and other states will be emulating some of the stuff that we've been doing. I also think that we've got

worldwide problems, and we've got to be aware of that.

22:11 FF: The fires in the Amazon have been in the news lately, that's a huge problem. The oceans are warming, we have plastic trash everywhere, particularly in oceans. The atmosphere is changing. The planet is changing. And I think that what we've learned here in the Chesapeake is, this is a little microcosm, and with careful action and thought and time and money, you can make changes. Now we've got to multiply that to a worldwide thing. We've only got one planet, and we're not doing such a hot job of taking care of it. We've got many poor people in the world, we've got migration issues. We've got huge issues, all of which have an environmental angle to them.

22:52 FF: And I think that we've all gotta get smarter. I don't think that we here in Maryland or in the United States can put our heads in the sand and pretend that those things don't affect us, because they do, even though we maybe are having a better life than some of the rest of the people in the world.

23:07 S2: That said, are you hopeful for the future?

23:10 FF: Most days. [chuckle] There are days when I think, "Oh my Lord, how are we ever gonna do this?" A lot of that is because when your political leadership is not on the same page, you think, "How... " We seem to be going backwards in so many instances. And we seem to be so unconcerned here in America about what's happening in the rest of the world. If we don't care about the rest of the world, we're sunk, 'cause we're all in this together.

23:41 S2: What keeps you hopeful most day?

23:43 FF: There are a lot of good people in the world. And I prefer to think that there are more good ones than careless, thoughtless, bad ones. And I'm sure that's true. But we've really gotta keep working on the kids, we've gotta get the kids to pay attention to what they're doing. And I do think the children, that this generation of children that are growing up today are much more tuned in than we were as kids, if we can get them off those iPhones and get them to pay a little more attention to what's going on around the world, make career choices and life choices that are healthy from an environmental point of view, we'll all be better off.

24:17 S2: You were talking about earlier when you started getting into this work, you had young children. How have you raised them to think about the environment?

24:26 FF: They drive me crazy. If I have a plastic straw in this house, I'm going to get shot by my two daughters. They are rabid environmentalists, and they put their... They make action. Their action speaks louder than words, they do what some of the other older folks like me talk about doing. They actually do it. And their kids are pretty good too.

24:50 FF: So, that actually is a hopeful thing for me, 'cause I think, well, if you teach your child they do learn and it does affect their behavior. Not that everything's perfect there even. It's hard in a country where we have... There's so much consumerism, and what have you to really be a good

environmentalist. We're not going back to Walden Pond, I don't think. That's not going to happen, but... [chuckle]

25:15 S2: Are you from Maryland?

25:16 FF: Yes.

25:18 S2: As a child and growing up before you got involved in environmental advocacy, was the outdoors something that you were passionate about?

25:26 FF: Yes, a little bit. But I grew up on Sparrows Point, the steel mill. My dad worked for Bethlehem Steel. And this was in the '50s. It was dirty down there. We went to the beach, we got... Dad made sure we had a beach vacation every summer, because it was clean at the beach. It was dirty on Sparrows Point. Not that it wasn't a wonderful community, but in terms of environmental havoc, the steel mill's [chuckle] not a good place to be. It certainly wasn't back then.

25:53 FF: But my grandparents had a, what we called "the farm", a little three-acre plot, and they raised dahlias as money. That was their, how they made their living. And we always thought that going to the farm was like people today going to the Grand Canyon, or some place. It was a very special place, being able to be outside, where it was clean, and the air was fresh, and flowers were growing, and so forth. That was always very important.

26:20 S2: Do you think your childhood growing up in Sparrows Point has affected your life's work?

26:26 FF: Probably. For the better, actually. I talked about it being dirty, and so forth. But I also realized that that place provided jobs for, at one point, 40,000 people. Many minorities worked there, they made a good living. And it made me realize that there are trade-offs sometimes, and that jobs are important, industry is important. So we have to find a way to encourage, and perhaps require Industry to do its best with regard to environmental activity, but we can't do without it.

27:00 FF: We have to have industry, people have to have jobs. And so that was a real important life lesson. I think, at the time because, of course when you're 12 years old, you're not thinking of it as a life lesson exactly, it's just the way it is. But I've reflected on that a lot as an adult.

27:16 S2: And in your line of work, how much have you worked with corporations, in terms of environmental impact?

27:20 FF: A good bit. At the Alliance, we always had corporate leaders on our board of directors. They were wonderful, and they didn't always agree. But they knew it was important to be engaged, they provided money, they provided brain power. And the stuff I do today with these local non-profit organizations, corporate involve-ness is very important. And these days, of course, you see many corporations who wanna make sure that their employees get out, and do some environmental work as a volunteer activity. And I think that's really terrific. We're seeing more and more of that. The more people experience the positive aspects of doing being engaged in some way in the

environment, I think the better, better we are.

28:05 S2: Have you done any work that's pushing against corporations, or encouraging them to take environmental actions?

28:11 FF: Oh, sure. Blue Water Baltimore, I was one of their founding organizers of that... That organization's been around 10 or 11 years. I was working with David Carroll in Baltimore County, back in the early 2000s, looking at all these little local watershed groups. And David said, "Go out and find out what they're doing." So I did, I got to know all of them, and realized they all care about the streams, they all care about the harbor. Why don't we get them together, start talking?

28:42 FF: One thing led to another, and bingo, we had a new organization called Blue Water. They have a Waterkeeper, part of their role, certainly, the role the Waterkeeper is advocacy. And they filed suit against corporations in Baltimore who are not doing what they ought to be doing. We also have worked very closely with the Department of Public Works to help clean up the sewer system. And sometimes you have to be tough about that. So I do think that's very important, but it's only part of the story.

29:11 S2: Are there any final words, or thoughts that you would want to leave?

29:15 FF: I think that we have done a good job in Maryland. I hope that foundations like Town Creek, and other funding sources, will recognize that their support has made a huge difference for the State of Maryland, and for the Chesapeake Bay region. And I hope that that will continue, 'cause the job is not done yet.

Town Creek Foundation Interviews: 2019-20
Conducted by the Peale Center for Baltimore History and Architecture
Genevieve de Mahy interviews Frances Flanigan