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Interview with Jenny Smith (FA 1098)

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**Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription**

Project name: Ranger Lore (LOCRP)

Field ID and name: #0008; Jenny Smith interview

Interviewee: Jenny Smith

Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman

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Others Present: N/A

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Context:

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Transcription prepared by: Jennie Boyd

Transcribing Conventions:

Use of square brackets [] indicates a note from the transcriber.

Use of parentheses () indicates a conversational aside.

Use of em dash — indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.

Use of ellipses ... indicates a discontinued thought.

Use of quotations “ ” indicates dialogue within conversation.

Use of italics indicates emphasis.

Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.

Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.

Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

Note: This transcription is as accurate and complete as possible. In any question of interpretation, the researcher is referred to the recording itself as the primary document representing this event.

[time elapsed in hours:minutes:seconds]

[00:00:00]

BRENT BJÖRKMAN: Okay, today is December 4, 2013. This is Brent Björkman, director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. And I'm here at Mammoth Cave as part of the Library of Congress American Folklife Center Occupational Folklore project. And we're looking at working lives of park rangers. I've been here for a few days and I will be here for a few days longer, travelling around, talking to rangers that have long tenures with the park and people that maybe have just started. And today we're actually going to be talking to Jenny Smith who, I think, has recently started a position with the, with the parks service. And begin like we've begun with a lot of other ones, talking about how did you get started, you know, maybe where you're from and how you got connected to this park or the job itself.

JENNY SMITH: Absolutely. I am from about twelve miles from here, right north of the river, a little place called Cub Run, Kentucky. Growing up with Mammoth Cave in your backyard, it didn't really have the impact on me that it would have in later years. It wasn't until I was doing research for my Masters degree that I actually found myself out here. I was looking at the role of the Civilian Conservation Corp workers here at Mammoth Cave specifically and the impact that they had on this area. And once I came out here and met with different people, Joy Lyons and some of the rangers here, there's, there is a saying that this cave kind of gets into your blood. And it very much does. Like many people, I found my entire life, my career choices kind of altered. I had planned to teach college history. And when I came out here and started kind of seeing the, the, the work that's done here and the, the type of people who work here, I immediately decided to forgo any kind of teaching career in place of trying to work here at Mammoth Cave. And I was just lucky enough, fortunate enough, I think to be selected and to be hired here and June 6 of 2013 was my first day here.

BB: So what was that like? What was the first day like?

JS: The first couple of weeks, the first day, specifically, it's a very rigorous training session, a couple weeks. And you're meeting so many new people, you're seeing so many different things, it's very much overwhelming but also completely thrilling, exciting. One of the best, best times I've ever had in my life. When I walked into this guide lounge for the first time, and seeing all

these people in their uniforms. It is intimidating but the people here are very much a family and almost from that first minute that I walked in, you feel the people kind of drawing you in. And you become one of them. So it was terrifying yet thrilling at the same time.

BB: Um-hm.

JS: Um-hm. We do a lot of sit down type training, but we also do a lot of hands-on training. Lots of going on tours and things like that. And I can remember going on my first historic tour after I was hired here and trailing Ranger Thomas Slaughter and just his amount of knowledge and information and the way that he was able to interact with the visitors just totally blew me away. I thought to myself, impossible. I will never be able to do this. That's how I felt at first.

BB: Um-hm.

JS: Um-hm. Now it's about six months later, I don't feel that way anymore. I don't feel like I can't do it. I love my job, I love working here. I think that, as I said, being a ranger here at Mammoth Cave kind of gets into your blood and it becomes more of a, not so much a career as just a way of life. I, I think that there are several careers that enable you to not just work at that but to actually be that. So when someone asks me where I work or what I do, I don't say, "Well, I work at Mammoth Cave." I say, "I am, I'm a National Park Ranger." Because I think being a ranger is one of those careers, that it becomes who you are.

BB: Um-hm. Tell me about the CCC connection to you getting interested in learning about this. Tell me just a bit about that research.

JS: Okay. The Civilian Conservation Corps, as you probably know, was a group of young men in the 1930s, part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program. Trying to combat the Great Depression, [0:5:00] to keep people from starving, losing their homes, things like that. So I was very much looking for a project to write a thesis on that was central to Kentucky and Kentucky has a great history with the CCC. Of course, they built the Fort Knox gold depository, lots of

state parks have areas that are the work of the CCC, and here at Mammoth Cave they were working not only on the surface but also beneath the surface, building trails, visitor trails—

BB: Um-hm.

JS: That sort of thing. And I became kind of fascinated with all of these men. Many of them had signed up for the CCC thinking that they were going to stay local. Lots of people ended up here in Mammoth Cave. Just from my research alone, I found men from Wisconsin and California, you know, states away from where they thought they would end up, and here they are, out in the middle of nowhere, Kentucky, working in a cave. So of course that, that brought me out here and I still, everyday, I learn something new about the Civilian Conservation Corps. Their signatures are all throughout the cave.

BB: Wow.

JS: So that's just, that's great. I love to see that.

BB: And you're still working on this as a, as a piece? Or was this for a pro-, a previous, the CCC research?

JS: Yes. The research was for writing that I did for graduate school. I still have two classes left to go, so I'm two, two, two courses shy of earning that Masters degree. So hopefully in the May, or excuse me, in May of 2014 I will have that under my belt.

BB: So this experience has been pretty over-, I mean you're, you jumped in with both feet to this thing. And you're, you're really thinking that if it would be possible, you'd really want to continue to pursue being here.

JS: Yes. I have planned to work my entire life around being here at Mammoth Cave in whatever capacity I can be here. Lots of us are seasonal, some of us are permanent. I would be more than

happy to finish out my entire career here at Mammoth Cave, even at the seasonal level. I think that I am fortunate enough, you know, I hear lots of people daily complain about their jobs. People don't like their job, they don't want to have to go to work. I still have yet to get in my car and drive to work and feel like I'm going to a job. That's how much I love it here. I just, I love it here. I, I, I'm just amazed every day. I try to tell them, know something new about the cave or about the area, the surface, each time I go in, so that I can try to impart that to visitors. And here with the people I work with and the amount of research that we have access to, it's very easy to do that. It's very easy to continually learn and push for that.

BB: Um-hm. So you're, are you considered a rookie or is that your first year or—

JS: Yes. Here, your first year, we are known as rookies. Take a little bit of ribbing for it, but...

BB: So how does that work between, what's the relationship between the new hires as seasonals and some of the, the long-term employees? How does that work? Or what's your relationships with your cohorts in, in each one of the, those kind of contexts?

JS: I think coming in here, of course, it's just like anywhere else, you're going to get a little bit of that new hire kind of ribbing, you know, kind of some teasing, but here, as I said, it's very much a family atmosphere. When I walked in here, I walked into a community of people eager to teach and to kind of share their knowledge and to help you become the best ranger, the best interpreter they possibly can, so I have not had the experience that anyone is kind of standoffish about that or not happy to share this job with new people. Everyone very much, I think, is happy to see new faces. Everyone is excited. It's, it's competitive. It's a bit competitive to get hired here and a lot of people want the position as cave guide. We've got a very rich history here, a very rich culture dating all the way back to the early 1800s as far as cave guides. So to be a part of that and to be able to work daily with the people I work with, I feel like I'm very fortunate for that.

BB: Um-hm. What's the process of getting hired? I mean what was it for you? I've heard a couple things. A couple of the people I've talked to who have tried it one year, didn't go. Tried it next year, I didn't go. What was it for you, or what do you think made them think, she's all right?

JS: Well, that's an interesting question and I'll answer it as best I can. Because it is so competitive it's very hard to make yourself stand out on the application, [0:10:00] for the application process. Of course education helps. Any kind of interest that you might have in Mammoth Cave, in this area, any kind of ties, of course they're good, but that doesn't guarantee anything. That just shows them that yes, you're interested, you like the place. The process for me, I did apply one year. That was before I really kind of got interested. So I applied. You know, you get emails to kind of update you on your status. So you might apply and not hear anything for a little while. And the first year I applied, I kind of forgot about it until I got an email that said that I had been—let me see, how was it—I had met the minimum requirements so my application had been sent on to the hiring agency. So I thought, well, that's good, that's kind of neat. A few weeks later, I got the email that said even though I was, let's see, what's the word, even though I was, I'm sorry, I just went blank.

BB: That's alright.

JS: Just went blank.

BB: It's okay.

JS: I was, what's the word, oh, gosh, I'm sorry. Can you, you can edit this, right?

BB: Absolutely.

JS: Okay. (laughs) Oh! Qualified. Okay. So, a few weeks later I did get the email that said I was qualified for the position but not selected. So that was a bit of a let down. And the next year, it

turned out to be my year. This was also the year that the sequester happened, all those budget cuts. So after I applied, about a month later, word of that came down, and I thought, well, that's it. There go, there goes my last chance. And about a month after that I actually got a call from Joy. And I was sitting in a local restaurant, in a place called Glasgow when Joy called me. I was so excited, I didn't care what she was offering, what the position was, I was just so excited to be offered a job here that I immediately said yes, called everyone I knew, I spilled my drink all over some guys who were eating nearby. They were nice about it when I explained to them why I was excited. But that was in April of 2013 and the rest has just kind of been a very, very fun and very exciting blur.

BB: Um-hm.

JS: The summer just went by very fast.

BB: Oh I'm sure. So tell me what have you learned throughout the summer as far, about yourself and about what it really means, what you need, what kind of qualities you need to be bringing forth in yourself to be a, what you think is a good guide. Or what is, what is a good park ranger or a good guide?

JS: I think a good guide, a good park ranger is someone who can relate, not only to the area. I have very, very strong ties, not just to the cave but to the area, just things that I feel personally. You know, we have lots of trails out here, so I spend a lot of time out here when I'm not working, on the trails, hiking or running. I think to be a good guide you need to have that connection with the resource. But I think you also have to be able to impart your passion and your knowledge for the cave or any park, you have to be able to impart that and express that to your visitors and to spark something in them. When they come here, they're not, they're not here to see us. They're here to see the cave. We're just here to tell them. It's our job to find that one instance, that one story that they might hear that allows them to relate and to make a personal connection with this place that, in a lot of cases, they've never been before.

BB: Right.

JS: I think it's very important to like what you're doing. In my case, as I've said, my enthusiasm sometimes can probably be a bit annoying just because I'm so happy, I'm so excited to be here. I would, I would do this job, you know, on, on a, I would do this job without pay if that were the only option I had because I do love it that much. So I think having a passion is very important. I think it's part of being a ranger. It's also important I think to kind of emphasize to people what an important place this is, not only in relation to the local area, but also to the United States and even worldwide. You know, we are a World Heritage site here. And an international biosphere. A lot of people can relate to that, whether it is the biology, the geology, [0:15:00] the science, or even the culture, the history here.

BB: Um-hm. What are some stories that you've found that are effective when you're talking to people that really, is there an example that you know, like, you know, I, I haven't been here that long, but when I say that, that really works?

JS: I like on a historic tour, I like to tell the story of Stephen Bishop and enslaved guides. I think—

BB: Give us a piece of that one.

JS: Okay. For example, if we are at the Giant's Coffin, deep in the cave, I will light my lantern and turn all the lights out. And—do you want me to actually say what I would say?

BB: Sure. Give me a piece of that.

JS: Okay. I have a quote that I like to read when I'm talking about Stephen Bishop. Of course Stephen Bishop, seventeen years old whenever he began guiding tours in this cave. He wasn't initially guiding because he wanted to be cave guide. He was guiding because he had no other choice as a part of the property from the cave owner, Dr. John Croghan, Stephen had no choice

but to come into this cave, eventually he did, I believe, enjoy guiding. He explored about twenty miles of cave just on his own and at first it's very important to remember that Stephen is a slave. If you were coming here to Mammoth Cave to take a tour, you were coming here because you were one of the most wealthy people, not only in the United States, but in the world. People from Europe were coming over here. At first, Stephen would probably not make eye contact with you on the surface. It was not his role and it wasn't your role as a wealthy person. You don't do that. You don't make eye contact with the slaves. It's just not appropriate. Eventually Stephen, being the personable guy that he is, he begins to speak several languages, Latin and Greek. He can converse with people. He follows along with the geology. He follows the science of the cave and eventually people go home and they write about their trip to Mammoth Cave. They write that they smoke, left their name on the cave walls with smoke from a tallow candle. Those things are written about in travel journals and articles. So Stephen becomes very famous and eventually people don't come here to take the Mammoth Cave tour, they come to take the Stephen Bishop tour. And I carry a quote in my pocket, a writer and poet named Baird Taylor in the 1850s wrote a book called Home and Abroad. And in Home and Abroad, he describes his visit to Mammoth Cave. And I like to really emphasize the fact that this quote is from 1855. It's a full ten years before the end of the Civil War. When President Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Kentucky is not required to free any slaves. Kentucky never left the Union, therefore, that proclamation did not apply. So in 1855, Baird Taylor says of Stephen, "He is the model of a guide. He is quick, daring and enthusiastic. He has a degree of intelligence unusual in one of his class. I think no one can travel under Stephen's guidance without being interested in the man himself and associating Stephen in memory with the realm over which he is the chief ruler." Baird Taylor wrote that in 1855, about a slave who lived here in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, and he described Stephen as the chief ruler over this entire cave. And I think those are pretty strong words. I think it's a great testament to the freedoms that the slave guides were able to fill here.

BB: That's a nice, inspiring piece.

JS: Yeah. It's a good story.

BB: Yeah. And you get good feedback from that?

JS: Uh-huh. People can relate to that. They can relate to, you know, maybe having to do something that perhaps you don't want to do, making the best out of that. And the fact that Stephen was able to enjoy some freedom under the surface that he did not enjoy on the surface.

BB: Hm. Does the work here, as a new hire, how do they acknowledge your good works or how do they, do they give you more responsibility or how do they, in your, in your mind how, what is the process of your, of your supervisors and that sort of thing? Do you know how they, how they work? Do they direct, do they give you special, if you do well, do they give you a different tour, something you've been asking to do or, or how do you make that happen too, maybe?

JS: Well, it's very important to be proactive here. Of course just like anywhere, it is what you make of it. And I've tried to make the best of this. I'm trying very hard to ensure that I have a future here. Our regular season ends with Labor Day. So we go down from the guide lounge being totally full, [0:20:00] just like a family get together at Christmas time or Thanksgiving or a family reunion where you can barely walk through for the guides to bare bones. Staff is cut quite a bit. And I think maybe being asked to work a little bit past that date is an indication that perhaps you've done a good job, you know, this summer I was allowed to go on the River Styx tour, which kind of deviates. It's a tour that's not offered, in just a very short time, but to be allowed to go on that tour and lead that tour, I think is maybe an indication that things are going well. That sort of thing. I'm hopeful to begin crawling in the future. I'd like to, to lead some of the crawling tours and that sort of thing. So I think, yeah, more responsibility does show that your supervisors have confidence and faith in your abilities as a ranger.

BB: Um-hm. Is there like a ranking system for, for new people or how do they acknowledge that you're, you're doing well or...

JS: We have audits, regular audits, where our supervisor might go along on a tour. Generally an audit would not occur until a few months in. I was lucky enough that one of my supervisors

audited me about two weeks after I put my uniform on. My partner had been bitten by a dog and she wasn't feeling well. So I led that tour, it was a sold out tour in the summertime. About a hundred and twenty-five people and my supervisor, who although he blended in with the crowd, I knew he was there at all times. But it went well. We made it through. And I got some good feedback on that.

BB: Um-hm. I also understand you were acknowledged as, with a special accommodation of Rookie of the Year or something like that. How does, how does that work?

JS: The Rookie of the Year award. Every year we have what's called the guide picnic, or referred to as the guides' picnic. And that happens around August, mid-August, before everyone kind of goes back to school, that sort of thing. And we vote among ourselves, among guides. There are two ballots. We vote for Guide of the Year, which is an award given to people who have been here for a while, and we vote for Rookie of the year, which is given to the first per-, excuse me, the first year person who they feel has done a very good job. This year, I was chosen as Rookie of the Year by my co-workers, so that award is given out at the guides' picnic. To me it was a very special event. It was very, very exciting. I wasn't expecting it. And it was such an honor that my co-workers had actually thought that I did such a good job and that I did encompass the abilities and the capabilities of a ranger enough that they voted for me to receive that. So it's a very nice plaque. It has the arrowhead on it. It has my name on it. And I'm very proud of that. I was very happy to receive that.

BB: Um-hm. How about any other public events or gatherings that go on during the year. Are there, certainly people come here to come into the cave but, and, and also to do hiking on the surface—

JS: Um-hm.

BB: But I, it seems this particular park might interact a little bit more with community for many reasons, right?

JS: Um-hm. Absolutely. Mammoth Cave has lots of ties to this community not just because of the fact that we are a national park and we happen to be situated right here. Lots of people lived in this area up until relatively recently. We became a national park in 1941, but prior to about the '30s, about five hundred families lived in this area. So lots of local people have those ties to this park. In 1883, actually, Mammoth Cave hosted the very first Cave Sing, which is an, is an event where a Christmas tree was brought into the cave and it was decorated. And there is a quote from an article written at that time, and that quote states that “The halls of the cave rang with the joyous sounds of carols and the laughter of children.” Which I think is pretty neat. And so, this past Sunday marked our thirty-fourth annual Cave Sing. It’s an event which is held every year here since about 1980. So lots of local people come out for that. But we also see [0:25:00] people—I know I spoke to a gentleman from Nashville, Tennessee and this was part of his holiday tradition every year for about nine years.

BB: Coming to—

JS: To come to the Cave Sing and celebrate that with his family. Absolutely. Each year a guide is chosen to act as the Master of Ceremonies for that event, and I was fortunate enough this year to be the Master of Ceremonies for this Cave Sing. And it was absolutely amazing experience. I was honored to be among those people who were participating in a family tradition that had been going on for years. But even talking to people who decided that this was going to start a new tradition for their family.

BB: Um-hm. Since you’re local, do other members of your family, have they worked here, or have they been connected to any of the, of the, the connected network of, of cave vendors or any of that sort of thing?

JS: Actually, no. Even though my family is from this area, more so than I thought. My parents are from Louisville, Kentucky, so I didn’t think—of course, I was born here and grew up here, but I thought our ties kind of began there. I did find out that my great-grandmother grew up here

in Edmonson County and married a man from nearby Hart County. So that would have been my great-grandmother and my great-grandfather. Eventually the family moved north to Louisville. My family came back before I was born. So there are those ties. But to my knowledge no one in my family has ever worked here. So it's kind of new for us.

BB: Um-hm. So you have experience as a new person on the job. And you've kind of told me what you say. If somebody came in next year—

JS: Um-hm.

BB: And you're, you're not a rookie any longer.

JS: Yeah.

BB: Even if you're seasonal. What would you tell them? How would you mentor them? What, what would your advice be to, to, to figure out if they were really in-, as, as in tune to this job and as passionate as you are? And then give them advice about going forward.

JS: I would, I would begin by telling them that everything is going to come, is not going to come to you all at once. That's kind of what I expected. My first day in uniform, I thought, I don't know what to do, I should know all of this. And I mean, we're talking, it can be very intimidating to work alongside Joe Duvall who's been here for fifty-some years. Or Colleen O'Connor Olsen who's been here for years and years. Or any of the guides, even if they've only been here for a year or two because they know so much. So my advice to a rookie would be let it come natural, don't force it. Because when you try to force it, you lose that connection that you have to make with your visitors. I think it's very important to establish that connection. You know, it doesn't have to be on a, a super deep level, but you do have to connect with them on some, some level. I always feel like when I go in that my group and I have kind of a, a level of trust among us, that we're all going in this together. We're all going to learn something new. Because I always learn something from my, my visitors. So I would tell a new person to, you

know, try not to cram it all in at once. There are plenty of things to learn. It's going to take a very long time. But I think some of the most important advice you can give them would be to have faith in yourself and then faith in your abilities and just believe in yourself. And also to not force the corny cave jokes. We have a lot of those. Sometimes you can tell a joke and your crowd will just eat it up, other times you can lob one of those jokes out and have it fall flat. So until you're more comfortable and you kind of know when to time that, stay away from the jokes.

BB: Yeah.

JS: Yeah.

BB: Have you had a bad experience that way?

JS: Not so much a bad experience, I've just, I have, you know, when you're new and you're just kind of trying to jumble in everything you've heard from all of these other guides who seem like they've been doing this for two hundred years and know everything about the cave, you kind of try to throw it all in there. And sometimes you'll tell a joke maybe that the audience doesn't quite get it, and you have to say, "Okay, that's a joke, guys."

BB: Um-hm.

JS: And then they laugh. But it's a pity laugh. Very much.

BB: Have you had to troubleshoot anything? That, the, like, oh my gosh, this has happened. I'm thinking, I've had these stories from people who have done this for years and years, so they always have a little something about something, just being breathtaking and, and, and how emotional for them that they moved somebody that much or something kind of tragic happened or some.

JS: Absolutely. [0:30:00] We don't see it so much in the off season, but during the summertime, you get a little bit of everything. You get people who are claustrophobic, that maybe they did not know they were claustrophobic until they got right at the cave entrance. You know, it's very much off the cuff kind of work. A lot of times you just, you might have an entire tour planned out in your mind, and it goes totally off the rails. Sometimes in a good way. There was a little girl here, a couple months ago, and I was leading that tour. And my mom was actually here. It was the first time my mom got to see me work. So it was very special. And it was a sold out tour. But I noticed in the Rotunda as I'm speaking, there's a bit of a ruckus going on in the back, very loud, not really sure what's happening. So my partner lets me know when we begin to move again that there is a little girl back there and she wants to be up close with me. It was kind of a tough situation. She was, it turns out, just from the course of the things that she said to me, because kids are so innocent and they want to tell you everything. I found out that she was a foster child and so her foster mother was trying very much to take care of her and do all of these good things with her. And I found out that she'd had a very rough life and she was only, she was only about eight years old. And she had seen things that, you know, it still makes me kind of emotional. She had seen and heard things that you and I sometimes would find it hard to imagine. And over the course of this tour, she held my hand for the whole time and her foster mother was right behind us. And you know, we were talking and she was apologizing to me. She said, "Sometimes I get really excited and I do things that my mom doesn't really want me to do, but I'm just, I just get so excited. I have a hard time controlling myself." And I just thought it was so sweet because here she is being honest. She's had a very hard life and she just had such a good time with us, I think. When we came out, she was, of course, hugging us. She wanted to try my hat on, so we took some pictures and she got to wear my hat. And I always carry a, a minimag on my belt. It's one of my backup lights. And so she had been carrying my flashlight through that, this tour. And I felt like it was only natural to give her that flashlight so that maybe whatever comes about for her, she can maybe remember the time she spent here and always have that positive memory and know that someone does believe in her and believe in her capabilities for the future.

BB: Very good. Wow. Any other thoughts about being a, a rookie, almost transitioning into not—when do you quit being a rookie?

JS: I will not be a rookie when we come back for the new season.

BB: Okay.

JS: So, spring, summer.

BB: Okay.

JS: I'll be seasoned. (laughs)

BB: Right. So, you have any thoughts about either, what are your thoughts would be when your seasoned, or your reflections back on this year? You've, you've shared a lot of, you've shared a lot about, of your passion, but do you have any encapsulating things you'd like to share?

JS: Just for me, this has been an amazing year. This is, you know, when I first came in, all of these guides, you're just, overwhelmed. I'll never be able to remember their names. There are so many. They all look alike. But that's not true.

BB: They all wear the same uniform.

JS: We all have the same uniform. Fortunately, we also wear nametags, so you, you learn names very quickly. Everyone was telling me, in training, in the guide lounge, you know, this will be the best summer that you ever spend. And I thought, maybe, you know, that, that might be pushing it a little bit. But they're absolutely telling you the truth. You, I don't think I could find, I think you could work for two hundred years and spend a different year doing something different each year and never find a place with as much heart and as much, just as much, there's just something magical about this place. I know that sounds kind of corny, but it's true.

Something about Mammoth Cave here, for your first year especially, will just be amazing. There's so much to learn, there's so much to do. The experiences are just out of this world. And not so much just the cave, but the people that we get to interact with. Coworkers and visitors.

BB: I've heard it said, it's like a second family.

JS: Oh, absolutely. I, you know, sometimes, there's a saying that friends are the family that we choose. Well, Mammoth Cave is also family that you choose. [0:35:01] Everyone here, you know, we've had kind of a rough summer here. We had a, one of our guides to pass away right after the season began. And I didn't even get to work with this particular guide very much, but I took it, you know, kind of hard, just because coming in, you tie those experiences in, I got to be with this person a few times. And just an amazing guide. So from the very beginning, the minute, as I said, the minute I walked into that lounge, it's like this is your new family. So I do have my family at home, but we're very much a family here. Everyone tries to take care of one another. Everyone always has your back, so to speak. So yeah, it's a family here, definitely.

BB: Um-hm.

JS: Absolutely.

BB: Thank you.

JS: Oh, that was horrible.

[INTERRUPTION—TAPE STOPS]

JS: Should I just tell the story or say what I was saying before that?

BB: Yeah, tell me what you were saying before.

JS: Okay. As I was saying, I had, I had planned in college to go on to law school and become a lawyer, but I was fortunate enough to have a history professor who really kind of changed my worldview and my outlook. And made me believe that I wanted to teach history. So even though my career path totally changed when I found, kind of found Mammoth Cave here and focused on Mammoth Cave, I'm still kind of doing the same thing, I think, as I would be doing in a classroom, on a much more broad level, because here we are able to interact with so many different people from so many different backgrounds, daily. As a matter of fact, a couple of weeks ago, I came into work one day and I had a letter in my mailbox from England. And a group of young men had been travelling through the United States back in September. They had some friends, some American friends, they had all went to Oxford together. And those American friends were now getting married in Chicago. So these young guys were travelling from Nashville to Chicago, and they, at the last minute, decided to stop here at Mammoth Cave. And they joined me for a historic tour. So of course, I talked about a lot of the things I like to talk about on the historic, tried to share my passion for the cave and the park here. So a few weeks ago, I get this letter and it's from one of those young men who was on that tour, and he had written a very, very nice, very thoughtful letter about two pages long, about how much they enjoyed their visit to Mammoth Cave. They didn't realize the historical ties here, that sort of thing. And he had actually been following the news, which, you know, in October, there were some government issues, the shutdown, and he'd been following that. And he was moved to the point of writing a letter all the way from England and sending that to me to tell me that he hoped everything would resolve, that he couldn't imagine the impact that the shutdown was having on us as employees, not being able to come to work everyday and share our enthusiasm and our passion. Yeah, it's, it's one of the highlights of my year so far, so I'm going to keep that letter. He actually took a picture of one of the things I like to point out on my tour and sent that picture to me. So it's a nice keepsake. It's a very nice memento of my first year here.

BB: That was just, that was just great.

JS: Yeah.

BB: It was a great story about an experience that you had.

JS: Right.

BB: Touching a visitor.

JS: Um-hm. And, and not even realizing it. And then months later—

BB: Right.

JS: Here it is, so.

BB: Right.

JS: Yeah.

BB: Well, you'll go far, I'm sure.

JS: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:38:45]