Interview with Josh Celmons (FA 1098)

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Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription

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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 April 24, 2014. This is Brent Björkman the Director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. And this is a recording, recorded interview that has to do with the Library of Congress American Folklife Center Ranger Lore project that Jon Kay from Indiana University and I are working on. And I’m here talking to park rangers at Mammoth Cave. And could you, could you tell me your name and your position here?

JOSH CLEMONS: My name is Josh Clemons. I’m a law enforcement park ranger with the National Park Service at Mammoth Cave National Park.

BB: So I’ve been asking a, kind of a basic question, Josh, about how you’re maybe connected either to the park service or, you know, what got you into this line of work and we usually start from there.

JC: My connection with the National Park Service actually started before I was born. My parents met at Chickamauga National Battlefield. And from there started a courtship and were married. I came along and a couple of sisters thereafter and we grew up in the national parks, going on vacations. We’ve been all over out west. We’ve been to parks in the northeast. And that’s, that’s how we vacationed as a family. And so from a, a very early age, I developed a connection with the parks and, and knew from that time that I wanted to be a park ranger.

BB: Was it the, did you go to state parks and federal parks?

JC: We did. We spent time in state parks, national parks, national forests. So on all different types of public land.

BB: So the type of ranger and the job you do now, did you know at an early age that you wanted to work in your current law enforcement area?
JC: I can remember riding around Cades Cove in the Smokies with my parents and writing, writing down tag numbers of people who were feeding, feeding bears and deer and (laughs) and breaking, breaking the rules at that time and then giving that information over to, to park rangers. I knew from an early, early point in my, my development, that I wanted, wanted to work in emergency services. In high school I was a volunteer firefighter and became involved in, in not only firefighting but emergency medical training at that time. And, and that just continued on through college and, and into my career at the park service.

BB: Okay. Yeah, that’s one of the things that I’ve been asking too. And you started in on it. I mean, you’ve had this love for law enforcement, for the parks. You kind of knew that this path was for you so you started to either volunteer or work toward this trajectory. So where did it go after that? How does a person get into it, further into it?

JC: So I grew up very close to Stone’s River National Battlefield, which is in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and I went to college at Middle Tennessee State University. I started volunteering there in 1998 and worked there as a volunteer for three years before they would finally give me a paying job. But took my first job with the National Park Service as actually a museum technician in, in, in 2001 and I haven’t missed a pay period since then. I’ve just moved from one job to the next and was fortunate enough to start into, to law enforcement at a fairly early stage in my career.

BB: What park did you start your law enforcement career?

JC: I moved from Stone’s River National Battlefield, I, I started as a museum tech, as I said. Went into a biological technician job and then became involved in wildland fire. Through that, that experience I was able to land a job as a forestry technician firefighter at Shiloh National Military Park. And while I was there, I had the opportunity to enter into a student position that allowed me to finish graduate school and then enter into a permanent law enforcement position after my, after the completion of my master’s degree. So I’m very fortunate that I was able to make that transition without, without having to do a whole lot
of travelling or move, move around, you know, out west, work seasons. I was able to work continuously and moved right into a permanent law enforcement position at Shiloh.

BB: Wow. You know people come at it from different ways. Yours is a very interesting way. Some people, you don't have military service?

JC: No, I, I don't have any military background.

BB: You have this service.

JC: Right. Right.

BB: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, I started with the park service while I was still in college, so this is really, really all I've ever done.

BB: Yeah. So your first, let's talk a little bit about the law enforcement. So tell me the first time when you were on as a law enforcement officer. What was the first, I mean, I think you've had lifelong training, in a sense.

JC: Sure.

BB: With your rescue, with your firefighting. [0:05:00] But when you first got into this type of position, what was that first month like? Who did you work with, and, or, you know, what was the working environment like? Was it a mentorship thing or—

JC: We completed a basic law enforcement academy at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. And then upon completion of that academy, we are required to go through an eleven week field training program. We go to a park that's not our home park and we
work with three different field trainers who not only train us but evaluate where we are from the standpoint of performance as a law enforcement officer. And so I went to Buffalo National River for my field training. And I worked with Lee Brumbaugh who was my primary field trainer. He’s now a firearms instructor at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. But I had a great time with him. And I remember my first arrest was with Lee. And I remember we were patrolling Buffalo National River, went down to the river and there was a particular gravel bar that we were just, basically just patrolling. And there was a guy on the other side of the river that, after seeing us, just took off running and went to hide in the bushes. And I thought, well, that’s, you know, that’s not normal behavior. So we probably need to talk to this guy. So, I, I drove the Tahoe actually through the river, forded the river and crossed the river onto the other side of the gravel bar. And this guy was, was looking at us, and he’s peeking out of the bushes, going back in the bushes hiding, and that’s not normal behavior. So this is my first real law enforcement action and I was pretty nervous and didn’t really know what to do. But I stopped the vehicle. We actually drew down on this, on this subject, called him out from the bushes and got him under arrest. But he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol, definitely presented a lot of abnormal behaviors. And I thought to myself as I was making that contact, what have you gotten yourself into? (laughs) It was a totally different experience than anything I’d ever done before, but I loved it. And I just had, from there just had a great time. I’ve been involved in all different kinds of investigations since then, made numerous arrests for different types of violations, and I’ve loved every minute of it.

BB: In talking to some of your colleagues, you know, we’ve talked about this idea of the image of a park ranger.

JC: Um-hm.

BB: In relationship to law enforcement and, and you really are a law enforcement officer.

JC: That’s right.
BB: And there are a lot of things that go on in the park that people, citizens don’t think about and, and can you tell me a little bit, as you feel comfortable, change the names to protect the innocent, skirt around that stuff, just, you know, some of the wide variety of situations that you’ve been in. Maybe your, that gave you some, gave you panic, gave you pleasure, probably both after, in, in hindsight as well. Those, those are, those would be interesting if you’d like to share that.

JC: Well, first off, I’d like to say that the parks are a very safe place for people to go and, and, and I would never want to discourage anyone from visiting the parks. I don’t want to lead people to believe that the parks are, are more dangerous than any other place that you’ll visit. Unfortunately though, we do have problems in the park, just like there are problems anywhere else in the country. And, and we have to deal with them. I have experienced a variety of different criminal activity. I’ve, I’ve experienced a variety of different emergency situations that a lot of times surprise people to find out that those ki-, those kinds of things happen in the parks.

BB: Um-hm. Like for instance is there something, is this park different from other parks or—

JC: Every park is a little unique in terms of the, the activity that you’ll see, but I would say that most parks, like Mammoth Cave, you’ll see a significant number of people who are under the influence of drugs, under the influence of alcohol, that, that cause problems that we have to deal with. We deal with resource violations here. Ginseng poaching, that’s a problem that we see every year that we have to deal with. We have marijuana cultivation here in the park from time to time and almost on a yearly basis we end up locating, you know, marijuana grown within the park. And those, those things are fairly common anywhere that you have public land. But we do deal with that here, and that’s something you’ll see at parks across the country. We’ve dealt a little bit with manufacturing of methamphetamine just because it’s a remote area and people can, you know, do that, that
type of activity and they think they’re fairly safe and protected when they’re in a remote location. However, we’re always on patrol and, and we, we, we generally find that activity and, and [0:10:00] it’s not a, not a huge problem for us, but certainly something that we’ve had to deal with in the past.

BB: Is, is hunting allowed on, on park grounds?

JC: It depends on the park that you work at. Here at Mammoth Cave, hunting is not allowed, but I worked at Big, Big Thicket National Preserve where hunting was allowed, so as a ranger we managed that program.

BB: You’re a pretty tight group of law enforcement guys. Do you have any kinds of things that are typical to your, your jokes and your stories? A new guy comes in and, and, you know, you give him the business a little bit or play little games. That’s, that’s pretty common to any kind of job you go into.

JC: Sure.

BB: I talked to river boat workers. That’s a real rich, rich area to talk about. Of course, in all of these types of shenanigans, some of them are, some of them are things you can’t share.

JC: Sure. (laughs)

BB: But, but as human nature is and, and that. But is there anything off the top of your head? Or it maybe happened to you or I don’t know.

JC: I would say it, many of the lessons we learn as law enforcement officers, the ones that tend to stick are the ones that you learn the hard way. (laughs) And it’s, it’s fun, I’m a field trainer, I’ve been involved with the field training program. So I’ve sort of come full circle. I went through the training program, now I’m a field trainer and I’ve been doing that for a
number of years here at Mammoth Cave. So it's interesting to see a new officer that comes right out of the academy and, and maybe they don't have some of those same experiences, and to see how they react and how they adjust to certain situations. That's always fun. I don't want to tell on anybody that I've trained, but I can, I can tell you, I can tell stories on myself. I know we now carry electronic controlled devices, or commonly known as Tasers. And unfortunately, we have had to use those from time to time to control suspects that were aggressive and causing us problems. But before that we, we, most of us carried pepper spray. And I know I was involved with a DUI arrest that the suspect did not want to go in handcuffs and was very uncooperative. And when I went to put handcuffs on him, I ended up having to, (laughs) to go hands on with this suspect and, and ended up on his back. And he was much larger and much stronger than me and I had him in a headlock. And I thought, well, this would be a good chance for me to use my pepper spray (laughs) to control this suspect. And I sprayed him. And in doing so, it was pretty cold out that evening. I had a fleece jacket on, I got a pretty good portion of my jacket sleeve with the pepper spray as well. And I remember after getting the suspect under control and getting him put in my car and in a safe situation, you know, my nose just kept running, and I couldn’t figure out why. And I kept just (sniffs), wiping my nose on my sleeve, and it just kept getting worse and worse and worse until I finally realized, you know, I’d just, essentially, I’d just pepper sprayed myself. (laughs) So, so stories like that, you know, things that you learn the hard way, those are good lessons and, and things that you look back on and you know, you laugh about now. But, certainly some things like that have occurred over my career. (laughs)

BB: Hey, you learned from it.

JC: Oh yeah, sure. Sure.

BB: I mean, it’s good pepper spray’s not around any—or do you still carry it?
JC: We do still carry it. You just don’t see it used much, now that we have a Taser. For sure, for sure.

BB: [ ] So you said you were, a lot of law enforcement guys are very proud of and they’re very active in doing particular kinds of training. Some are EMT trainers—

JC: Um-hm.

BB: CPR training. I mean, you just mentioned, what is a field, what is a field trainer?

JC: As a field trainer, we, we call them field training rangers in the National Park Service. Those officers might be called field training officers for other agencies. But essentially, we’re a mentor to trainees as they come out of basic training and so we, we try to, okay, you’ve been through a law enforcement academy. You’ve learned the basics. You’ve learned the techniques that you need to work as a safe and productive officer in the field. Now we’re going to show you how to refine those skills, polish them and put them into a practical working environment. So that’s, that’s an eleven week program and it’s broken up into three different, among three different field training officers so the ranger gets to work with three different trainers. And they can, you know, pull good things from, from those different officers and, and during the different phases, we’re evaluating different things, such as, you know, maybe we might be looking at how the officer can process and work a traffic accident. Or how do they process and work a DUI. How do they respond to a domestic disturbance? [0:15:01] Those sorts of things. And, and there are different criteria that we evaluate them on on a daily basis. So field training is an important part of my duties here at Mammoth Cave. I’m also a control tactics instructor. And we teach how to deal with suspects who are causing us problems that we have to physically control one way or the other. I’m also a use of force instructor. And so we talk about not only the practical application and appropriate application of force in law enforcement situations, but also the, the legal aspects that, that surround those types of incidents.
BB: How do you keep, with all these varieties of trainings and these responsibilities that you have, do you have updated training sessions or things you have to read or hoops you have to jump to?

JC: Absolutely. For any of the certifications that we carry, whether it be as an instructor or as an EMT or just our general law enforcement commission, we’re required to do a certain amount of training and refresher training. Could be on an annual basis, bi-annual, or sometimes three years. Depending on what the certification is, we’ll have different training requirements for in-service training.

BB: You have to go out to get some of that training or is it, is some of it brought to you?

JC: Some of it we do here at Mammoth Cave. Or, or whatever your home park would be. That’s, that’s where you do the training. Some you go back to the law enforcement academy to get a refresher training on. Most of our instructor trainings, we have to go back to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center to get a refresher class.

BB: That’s the first time anybody really, I think, said that to me. They’d been talking in acronyms to me.

JC: Um-hm.

BB: FLETZ.

JC: FLETC.

BB: FLETC. Yeah.

JC: That’s right.
BB: That’s right. (laughs) So when you’re doing the field training, you said people get a chance to work with three. It’s broken, is it broken into three parts?

JC: Yes.

BB: Do you take one part then a, then they come to this park to have the training, then they go on to someone else?

JC: Yes. And here at Mammoth Cave, we, we work cooperatively with Big South Fork and Cumberland Gap. So usually the trainee gets to experience not only three different rangers, but they get to work in three different parks which, as I said before, you know, every, every park is managed differently. Every park has unique issues. So it’s a really good opportunity for trainees to not only work with different rangers but to work in a different environment.

BB: And then that, just because you have this reciprocating relationship with our intimate region—

JC: Um-hm.

BB: That doesn’t mean that the graduate, or somebody who passes through your hands works in our—they could go out to Yellowstone or—

JC: Oh no, no. Exactly. And our trainees have come from all over the country. So you know, I have trainees that have worked in every region of the United States and, and every region in the National Park Service.

BB: Are you active in—when I was talking to somebody prepa-, trying to prepare for this, and maybe it’s part of something you talked about already—are you active in shooter training as well or, or....
JC: I actually put together, with the help of one of our local sheriff’s deputies, an active shooter course for not only the law enforcement officers in this area, but also for educators in this area. And so it was sort of a cooperative effort between several agencies, but we hosted training that included teachers and administrators in some of the local schools as well as the officers that would be responding to active shooter incidents or any kind of critical incidents in one of our school settings. And the whole purpose of that was to get everybody on the same page and say if you had an incident like this, as law enforcement officers that would be responding, this is how we would want you as educators or administrators to respond and vice versa. So we really opened up a discussion between the two different professions and hopefully resolved some issues that we will never have to, to face, but in the unfortunate event that something like that were to happen, we think we would now be better prepared for that kind of emergency.

BB: How did that, how did that collaboration with the local sheriff, how did that, how did that start? Was it an informal conversation or just your, your concern for the world in this, in this community?

JC: Well, it was, it directly came about as a result of the shootings at Sandy Hook and in the time immediately following that shooting, several concerned parents came and, and spoke to one of my personal friends who works on the sheriff’s department in Edmonson County, Kentucky, and said, “If we had something like this in one of our schools, what would you do?” And so there was a lot of concern, not only from parents but [0:20:00] his wife works in the school system, my wife works in the school system, so we have, you know, obviously a direct connection to the school system within Edmonson County. And there were some concerns among faculty and staff too that, you know, we’re not sure how we would react in a situation like that. So I got together, this is with Lieutenant Shane Doyle at the Edmonson County Sheriff’s Department, and I said, “Okay, we can, we can put something together that I think will help us be prepared and maybe alleviate some of these concerns.” Fortunately as a national park ranger, I’d been through the FLETC active shooter course actually three times up until that point. It’s, it’s now a part of our basic training, that we go through active
shooter training. So although I'm not an expert and, and Lieutenant Doyle’s not an expert, we felt like we had enough of a background to put together training that would at least gives, give people an idea of what, what to expect and what they should do to be in a better position to survive one of those incidents.

BB: That’s great. Do you know if any of your colleagues around the country have worked collaboratively with some of their local law enforcement?

JC: That’s a great question. I actually, after word got out that we put this training together, I was contacted by rangers in several parks across the country who wanted to, to do the same thing in their local area and so I provided the training materials that we put together and just some notes on things that we thought we could improve and, and things that I thought would make their training better. And then I was also, there, there became a concern here at the park, well, what if we had an incident like that at the park. And, and certainly after the shooting of Margaret Anderson at Mt. Rainier, there was a clear, in 2012, there was a clear, you know, potential that something like this could happen within one of our parks. And so the training then sort of springboarded into, let’s do something now for our employees here at the park. Our rangers, law enforcement rangers, are prepared, but the staff at the visitors’ center, the maintenance staff, the administrative staff, maybe they’re not prepared. And certainly in the Mt. Rainier incident, those people were the ones who provided for the protection of, of park visitors who were, were trapped in the visitors center when that shooting occurred. So we felt like it was very important to teach those people as well, these are some things that we would like for you to do in a situation like that. So that, that evolved into a training that happened over several, several days and we offered it several times to try to get as many people that work at the park involved and, and trained in, in active shooter situations.

BB: Wow. Was this promoted as, does the rest of the park service know about what you and your, Officer Doyle, no?
JC: Yes. Shane Doyle.

BB: Doyle.

JC: Yes, I believe there was an announcement that went out through Inside NPS, which is our, our sort of intra-Web, website that things like that are usually published on and, and best I remember, that, that did occur. And that's how people in other parks found out about it.

BB: It seems like over the last twenty-plus years, ranger law enforcement has professionalized. I mean, increasingly so.

JC: Yes.

BB: And I was wondering, you said, yes, so, I'm wondering how you work? You mentioned the collaborative effort you just, you just mentioned with the shooter, active shooter training. And you have a friend who you mentioned in the local department here, in this county, in Edmonson County. How do you work, how does the law enforcement of the park work with any variety of other law enforcements? Federal, localized state, sheriff's departments? And how do, you know, can, can you tell me a little bit about that and then tell me, again without naming any names, maybe like how you recently did, you know, an example of how you have recently.

JC: Okay. Certainly at Mammoth Cave we're very fortunate to have a, a very good and very close working relationship with not only other federal agencies but the state agencies, Kentucky State Police and our, our local agencies, especially in Edmonson County because the majority of the park lies within Edmonson County. We work with those, those agencies almost on a daily basis. We have a very close relationship with, with those, with those guys and we often get called to respond to incidents that occur outside the park boundary. In Kentucky we're fortunate to be state peace officers, as national park rangers in the, within
the, within the state of Kentucky so we carry the same arrest authority and enforcement
authority [0:25:00] as any other state officer would within the state of Kentucky. So that's
very helpful for us in terms of giving us the authority and legal protection that we need to
respond to incidents that occur outside the park. Recently, I was involved in a case, there
was a call for a sheriff’s deputy to respond to a burglary that was in prog-, in progress on a,
at a home that was right outside the park, on the park boundary. And I called one of the
other rangers who was on duty and I said, hey, you know, we should probably send
somebody that direction, because that officer was working alone and burglary calls can be
particularly dangerous to the officer who’s responding. So one of our other rangers
responded to back up the county officer. I was actually with a trainee at the time checking
an archaeological site that had been looted and we were pretty far from a vehicle, so I knew
it would be difficult for me to respond in any timely manner. However, we did go ahead and
start heading towards our, our patrol vehicle at that point. I was able to catch up with the,
the sheriff’s deputy and the first responding park ranger, just outside of the park as they
were pulling away to go attempt to locate the suspect. They had identified the suspect and
knew where he lived and they were going to go check with a family member to see if they
could locate the suspect. So we had three law enforcement vehicles, we had the sheriff's
office in, in lead, a park service vehicle in front of me and then my patrol vehicle was the
last one in line. And I told the trainee at the time, I said, “Let’s just kind of hang back. You
know, this isn’t, now there’s sort of, the immediate danger has passed. We’re just looking
for this guy now and, and we don’t want to drive into this residence just to interview family
members with, with three vehicles.” We felt like that would be too much of a show of force
or a presence at that time. So we’re kind of hanging back, just following them, driving down
this road. And, and they drive past a particular residence and there was a young man out in
the, the front yard of this, of this home. And he looks up and sees the two law enforcement
vehicles go past that were in front of us. However, he hasn’t seen me at that time, and as I
round the corner, he, I see all this take place, he sees the first two vehicles and immediately
turns and starts to walk back towards the house. And then he looks up and sees my vehicle
and he starts to run towards the woods. So based on the description we’d heard of him, I
felt like this was our suspect. And so we jumped out and I was able to, to chase the suspect
down and apprehend him and, and so that’s just an example of how oftentimes we have to work together as, as neighboring agencies to resolve situations that occur in and outside the park. And oftentimes, we’ve had those, those local agencies come in to assist us in emergency situations, but also situations where we need, let’s say we need a drug dog for a search of a vehicle or a campsite. I know in 2011, we used the Brownsville Police Department, they had a K-9 unit at the time that we used in over eighty searches throughout that year. And in every search located contraband. So we have a very strong working relationship and it’s paid off, I think, for both the local agencies and for the National Park Service as well.

BB: Wow. Did you, did you, that suspect that you as the third car—

JC: Um-hm.

BB: Was that the person?

JC: Yes. That was him. Yes it was. Yes.

BB: So that, it sounds like the professionalization over your career for thirteen years now, since 2001, I think—

JC: Correct. Yes.

BB: Maybe, and you worked in a variety of parks. Has it been increasingly this way? Was it initially not as collaborative or has it been, have you been called on with locals, local law enforcement—

JC: My experience has been everywhere I’ve worked that you work a great deal with the, the local officers. You know, I’ve worked law enforcement now in five different parks and in each one of those cases, we worked with the state and local officers on a regular basis. So
things have become definitely more specialized. We’re still involved as rangers in, in wildland fire and structural fire, search and rescue, emergency medical services. However, we have now more specialized employees, particularly in, in fire that deal more with, with those type incidents. However, we still are called to respond [0:30:00] and, and support those operations. And as these different professions have become more specialized, I think we’ve gotten better in doing the overall job. I think it’s very difficult for one person to be an expert in all those different fields. It takes a very special person. I think all of us have areas where we excel and are better trained, better equipped to work as a ranger, whether it’s law enforcement—and you might be a better investigator, you might be a better patrol officer, you might be a better administrator. You know, if, and if collateral duties, you may be, you may be more experienced and more talented in the area of working in wildland fire or emergency medical services. But you’re never really, I don’t feel like, an expert in all of those areas. So I think it’s important that we have some of those specialized positions and that we continue to look at branching some of those things out.

BB: I’m making a connection now to the fact that you’re doing, somebody might teach EMT training or—

JC: Right.

BB: And you have these, what you talked about before—

JC: Right.

BB: You have ad-, advanced training, recertification or whatever you wanted to call it. And there’s probably a lot of pride in that too, that I am the specialist in this certain area.

JC: Sure. Sure. And it works well especially here at Mammoth Cave. That’s exactly the case. We have guys who, you know, this is, this is what they do. This is what they’re good at. So when it comes time for training or if there’s a particular type of incident that comes up we
say, well this is who we want to handle it. You know, they’re the expert in this area. And we can all can, we can all assist that, that operation, but definitely we have specialists within the specializations (laughs) if that makes sense.

BB: So your job title now is, current job title is, you're, you're leading the law enforcement...

JC: Currently I'm the Acting Chief Ranger.

BB: You’re the Acting Chief Ranger now?

JC: Right.

BB: And that's the first time you've had that position?

JC: That’s correct.

BB: So can you talk about becoming, maybe it's so collaborative that this question is moot, but to go from one of the guys to being in this new role of, do you do the scheduling, how is that different than being a regular law enforcement person?

JC: That’s a very good question because the way you've put it is exactly how I’ve put it multiple times. You do, you, I've gone from being one of the guys to being the leader and I would say that I’m a leader of a, of a group that works well together. So it certainly is a collaborative effort. But as that leader you do things like make the schedule, assign cases as they come in, you would assign collateral duties as needed if, if certain projects come up that need to be accomplished. You know, as acting chief, you take care of a lot of administrative duties that are not the things that when I signed up to be a park ranger that I thought I would be doing. However, they're challenging and, and rewarding when you, you are able to, to accomplish things for the entire division. So it’s a different, it’s a different hat. It’s certainly a different level of responsibility. I would not be successful if not for the
hard work and, and effort and suggestions that come from the guys that are in the, in the field. So as an acting chief, I'll go back to being one of the guys so that's another unique part of the challenge of being an acting chief is that not only am I trying to improve things for the guys that are in the field, but (laughs) I'm trying to, to smooth the road out for myself when I go back to, to being a regular field ranger as well.

BB: That makes, that was very helpful. I understand that. So an acting chief means, are the, are you, is it a, am I understanding a rotation thing? Or you're acting until they find a chief?

JC: So our, our former chief retired and we're, we're, have been in the process of hiring a new chief and that new chief has been selected and the new chief will be here within a couple of weeks. So we've actually had a couple of us that have taken on the acting chief duties and so we just try to keep the, the ship steered in the right direction until the new chief gets here to take over.

BB: Got it. So why, Mammoth Cave, why is, why is Mammoth, is Mammoth Cave different than any other, any parks? You know, you're balancing that on this point in your life, a growing family, [0:35:00] probably and—

JC: Sure.

BB: Putting down roots perhaps.

JC: Sure.

BB: But, I've just heard a lot of things about this particular park. And I don't know if that's, I would hear similar stories if I was, if I directed my concentration elsewhere.

JC: As someone who's worked in, in several other parks, I can tell you that every, every park is unique. And there have been places that I've worked that felt like home and places that
did not feel like home. Certainly Mammoth Cave is one of those places that feels like home. And it’s been my experience with people that I’ve trained, whether it be field trainees coming out of FLETC or seasonal rangers who are coming here just for the summer, everybody tends to want to come back to Mammoth Cave. And that’s the case with our new chief. She started her career here as a cave guide, years and years ago, and has worked several other national parks and is now coming back to Mammoth Cave to be the Chief Ranger. So I think that Mammoth Cave, the resource itself, is a reason to want to stay here or to want to come back here. But this is also a great area to live. It’s also a great area to, to raise a family. We’re very close to Nashville, we’re close to, to Louisville. And just a, just a nice place to be in general.

BB: That’s good. So you could stay here for a while, maybe?

JC: I could. I could see myself staying here for a very long time. I could also see myself moving on. I’ve enjoyed the challenge that the acting chief ranger detail has, has given me. I think that if the right situation came along at another park that I felt like had some of the same things that, that Mammoth Cave has, then I would be, I would be tempted to move on.

BB: I’ve asked people about the concept of, of stewardship.

JC: Um-hm.

BB: And everyone has their own take on what that means. Some is very intimate and goes away from just park work.

JC: Sure.

BB: But can you enlighten me what you think stewardship means?
JC: For me, it’s somewhat personal. I think having grown up as I said, in and around national parks and other public lands for a great deal of my, my childhood, and, and growing up on a farm too, having a connection with the land and, and natural resources, it gives me a great deal of motivation to try while, while I’m here to make sure that when I leave it’s actually a better place than, than when I started. And I want for my children and their children to be able to come back to Mammoth Cave and experience some of the same things that, that I’ve been fortunate enough to experience. So to me it’s, it goes right along with the mission of the National Park Service and that is to make sure that all these special places within our country will be here for generations to enjoy.

BB: Great. Do you have any, I like to ask people, do you have anything else you’d like to— like, he didn’t ask me that, or, anything else that you want to get across? You have such a wide, wide range of, of, of the way you progressed through, through this to this point today. But, you know...

JC: I think that working for a government agency, at times you feel a little bogged down with the bureaucracy and, and red tape. And sometimes that is the most challenging part of, of working for the National Park Service. Caring for the resource, caring for the people, taking care of the visitors, that’s, that’s really the easy part. And certainly this job when it’s most rewarding is when you hear back from somebody that maybe you helped out of a bad situation and, and, and you get feedback from them that says, hey, you know, thank you for, for what you do and what you did to, to help me in this bad situation. And that’s, that’s when this job is, is most rewarding, when you can see the direct impact that it’s had on somebody else that visits the park.

BB: Okay. Thank you.

JC: Yeah. I’d also like to, I mentioned the, the shooting with Margaret Anderson.

BB: [ ]
JC: And that was out at Mt. Rainier, January 1, 2012. And I knew Margaret pretty well. Margaret and I were in the same FLETC class. And I recently went back to FLETC for a refresher training and I visited the, the memorial that is there for fallen federal officers. And that was the first time that I’d seen Margaret’s name on that memorial. And I've made it a personal mission of mine that when I’m training new officers or retraining old officers that we remember why it is that we do some of the things that we do in training and so that we don’t have to bury another one of our officers, another one of our brothers or sisters. And so this job is very important from the standpoint that the resource means a lot to us, but the people that we work with mean a lot to us as well. And we’re like a very small family. We, we’re spread out all over the country in almost every state and in, in all the territories. But we’re really a tight-knit family, especially the law enforcement rangers within the National Park Service. And any time we get together, whether it be for a training or for a detail, responding to a natural disaster, a fire, a hurricane, or a special event, we see the same faces over and over again. And we are a very tight-knit family. When something like that happens it impacts us a great deal. So you know, we do, we do take it very personally when something like that happens and it’s my mission as a trainer now to make sure that that doesn’t happen to anyone that I have had direct contact with again.

BB: That’s great.

JC: Yeah.

BB: That’s a great piece. Thank you.

JC: Yep.

[END OF INTERVIEW]