SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — FALL 2011
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Jono Miller came to Sarasota in 1970 to attend New College, where he met and married his wife Julie Morris. Together they formed an environmental consulting partnership, studied the Myakka River, and shared duties coordinating the Environmental Studies Program at New College. Jono has walked all of the beaches in Sarasota and Manatee Counties and has canoed the length of Southwest Florida's coast from Tampa south to Flamingo. An artist, writer, and environmental advocate, Jono is best known for his work in Sarasota County on land protection, the Myakka River and water issues..

Interview with: **Kaitlyn Bock**
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Interviewer: **Kaitlyn Bock**
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Transcriber: **Kaitlyn Bock**

Bock: Thanks for being here. Before we get started, could you just introduce yourself?

Miller: Well, my name is Jono Miller, I've been working here at New College on and off, guess my first job here… I've been here since 1971 and at the moment no one is entirely sure what my job is.

Bock: It fluctuates?

Miller: Well, I worked for the vice president, but I also have a role in the environmental studies program and we are looking for a title that would have both those things but I'm not sure it exists yet.

Bock: Oh, okay. So I just want to start back with your family history; where's your family from?

Miller: Well, My immediate family was very rooted in New Jersey. I grew up 20 miles from Manhattan. I went to the same grammar school my father attended. He met my mother when they were in baby strollers, so we all grew up 20 miles from New York City. My mother's mother was from a suburb of Newark. When you go a little further back it's a little more diverse. My mother's father was actually born in Florida and so there was a Florida connection way before I thought about coming to New College.

Bock: How long were you in New York for?

Miller: Not New York, I was living in New Jersey from birth until I went to college, just outside of Manhattan.

Bock: Oh, right, just *outside* of Manhattan. So what was New Jersey like?

Miller: New Jersey is a very fascinating state. It is very small, very densely populated. Even though I grew up about 20 miles from Manhattan, we had two acres, chickens, a big garden. It felt very suburban, but suburban closer to rural than urban. We had a big park near our house. It's a surprising state. The Appalachian Trail runs through New Jersey. The pine barrens which are big system that if they had palm trees would look a lot like Florida. If they got a high water table, sandy soils, stunted pine trees that are adapted to fire, black water rivers. So, um, there are parts of New Jersey that are kind of reminiscent of Florida once I got down to Florida.

Bock: Do you have any siblings?

Miller: I am an only child. My mother was an only child and my father was an only child. So, not only do I have no siblings, but I have no cousins, no aunts, and no uncles.

Bock: Oh my gosh! That's a really small family!

Miller: Yes. And my son is an only child as well. So he is an only son of an only son of an only son. But Julie has siblings. But her mother was an only child.

Bock: Wow! That's really unusual!

Miller: Yes. I've never been aware of meeting someone that is an only child of two only children.

Bock: Maybe in China! (Laughs) So, can you tell me a bit about growing up in New Jersey?

Miller: Well, my father was a big explorer of the state. He worked in Manhattan but he had grown up, you know he would carry a shotgun on the way to school. And hide it in a hollow tree and find it on the way home. He was very interested in the natural world. He knew about fossils and plants and birds and arrowheads. So we spent a whole lot of time, up until the time I was like 12 or 14, from about 6 to 13, every weekend my father and I would drive somewhere in the state and look for things or explore or whatever. My mother didn't go out with us as much but she was also very interested in natural history and also a big reader. She got me into the *NewYorker* and the *Times* at an early age. So, even though we were very close to the city it was a very natural history-based experience, growing up there. There was a big, in addition to a big park near our house, there was an even bigger reservation that actually had been partially constructed from Miller property that had been condemned by the state to create this park. So there was a really big natural area that we would go to explore that was quite close to where we lived.

Bock: What was your house like growing up?

Miller: It was strange. It was on two acres of land and there was only one bathroom and it was upstairs. It had a cellar which we don't get in Florida. I don't know when it was built but it was old. It was not a '50s post-war kind of house. It was built maybe in the '20s.

Bock: Did you have any pets?

Miller: Lots of pets. At one point we had 9 dogs because we had three dogs but one of them had puppies. We kept chickens, pigeons, box turtles, and cats, so yeah. It was a lot of pets around.

Bock: Jeez, that's like a farm.

Miller: Yeah, in ways it was. My father two very large garden plots and he would, um, we would raise a lot of you know food, a lot of corn, a lot of tomatoes, a lot of basil, we would take the basil down, you know there was a pizza joint at the end of the street that was part of the bar and my father would take basil down. There was an old Italian from the old country who made the pizza, and we would bring him fresh basil and he would give us pizza. We grew a lot of food.

Bock: What did your parents do? You mentioned your dad worked in Manhattan?

Miller: My mother had gone to Mount Holyoke and had a political science degree and then went to NYU Law School and graduated from NYU with a law degree. I assumed, based on stereotypes, that not many women went to law school. She was there during the Second World War and there were so many men gone that there were actually a more significant portion of the law school was comprised of women. My father had gone to Syracuse and he left prior to graduating to enlist the army. He ended up serving in the South Pacific and when he got back he took a job with a shipping company. Well, actually when he came back he took a year off to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder and be in the pine barrens and cut trees and shot ducks and sort of worked things out, I guess. Then he married my mother. So he continued in the shipping business and ended up vice president of a South American shipping firm. He finally decided to retire before most of the other people that worked there were indicted. They all thought he was sort of a chump for not taking money and then when they were indicted and he wasn't, he felt pretty smug.

Bock: (Laughs) Yep, that probably felt good. So it was just the three of you growing up?

Miller: Well, yes, but because when I was growing up both my father's mother and my mother's parents lived in joining communities. So, obviously, Christmas and Thanksgiving, we would frequently visit with grandparents.

Bock: What were some of the things you liked to do as a child?

Miller: Well, from a relatively early age, I was interested in plants and around 12 or 13, I got a greenhouse for Christmas. It was a modular greenhouse that you sort of bolted together. It was… and so, I would grow cactus and carnivorous plants and other things that would interest me in this greenhouse. So I was always interested in plants. Of course, we had pigeons, we raised homing pigeons competitively. Pigeon racing is a big deal in New Jersey so that was a fun endeavor. I was never too much into sports but I guess my mother at some point assumed I was bored and signed me up when I was 12 for fencing lessons at the YMCA. So because of that, I ended up attending a school that started a fencing program and I was the only student that had any idea how to fence. So as a freshman I was on the varsity fencing team. So, just a lot of outdoor activities. I would hunt with my father, I was a hunter until probably age 18. I had 20-gauge shotgun before I had a two-wheel bicycle. That was part of our culture. But just a lot of exploring and

collecting, looking for sharks teeth, looking for arrowheads, look for florescent minerals. We would go out with a UV light at night. Going to a place called Carnelian Brook, and looking for carnelian in the water.

Bock: What did you hunt?

Miller: Uh, my earliest recollections were duck hunting in South Jersey, where my father had lived after the Second World War. We'd get up very early in the morning at like 3 or 4, and drive down to South Jersey. We'd walk out before daylight and find a muskrat house out in the marsh to sit on, like a big sort of beaver lodge that was sort of elevated above the rest of this marsh grass. My father's hearing was compromised because of the war, but he had excellent vision. He would sit on one side, and tell me if ducks and geese were coming. I would sit on the other side, and tell him if I heard them coming. And it was fascinating because dawn would break, and the ducks would take off… and I'm a little choked up here. Uh, my father told me that, uh, I needed to remember it because I would never see it again in my life. And the ducks would blot out the sky, you know you couldn't really see the sky because the number of ducks flying around was so dense. And it was true, and I've never seen it again.

Bock: So why did you decide to stop hunting?

Miller: Well, when I came to New College I had to decide if I was going to bring my shotgun or not and I think I finally decided against it. So instead, I brought my cactus collection. I got down here and got a planter but it rains so much in Sarasota that it all rotted out in short order so that didn't work out. Um, I don't know, I think I was more interested in the environmental movement, and the need to kill things to have a good time outside just didn't seem so central so there was just a shift.

Bock: So where did you go to high school? Was it in that rural-ish area you described or was it in the city?

Miller: Well I was not a great student in public school. I had a fifth grade math teacher named Mrs. Chigger. Mrs. Chigger and I did not get along. She sort of soured me on math which is sort of interesting because I could have been potentially really good at math. So I wasn't getting good grades. It was the situation where they were saying "Well, your son tests good but he isn't getting good grades. Would you consider sending him to a private school?" So I started going to a day school that was a male prep school but you would go on the bus in the morning and the same way back. So I did that my junior year but the same pattern was repeating, I would score high on aptitude tests but low grades. So they said "Well, would you consider a boarding school?" and I said, "Sure. I don't care." So I spent my junior year at The Hun School, in Princeton, and ended up being elected to the student council and getting really good grades and doing well on the National Merit Exam. That led to a piece of mail from New College. New College was one of the first institutions to take advantage of the National Merit scores in order to recruit students. Julie and I had partially heard about New College from that National Merit mailing that the college did.

Bock: Did you apply to many colleges?

Miller: I applied to five colleges. I was accepted at Cornell and New College. I had visited Cornell, having lived in Princeton. It's a beautiful oak sprawling campus, and I thought that this is going to be like living in Princeton only colder. I could pretty much predict what my trajectory would be if I went to Cornell, and I had no idea what would happen if I came to New College. Even though I don't perceive myself as a risk taker, I thought I don't want to die wondering. I'm going to go to this strange school in Florida.

Bock: Was it a big move for you? Was it difficult living away from your parents?

Miller: Yes, it was a big move from New Jersey. I'd only been to Florida once previously so I had no idea what it would be like. There were no close relatives living in Florida at the time. I don't remember my parents visiting when I was at New College much. So yeah, it was a pretty big change to leave suburban New Jersey where I could take the train into New York City, and come to a place like Sarasota. Yeah, big change.

Bock: What year did you come to New College?

Miller: I came to New College in 1970.

Bock: Was Julie the same year?

Miller: Julie was in my same orientation group.

Bock: So, I'm very curious… What was New College like in 1970? What was it like your first year?

Miller: Well, I think I had already lived away from home being at a boarding school, so that wasn't a problem or particularly an abrupt change, but I'd also been going to school with males since seventh grade. So, the advent of hanging out with women my age was different. That took some getting used to. I was interested both in art—I'd done well in art in high school—but also the environment because of my background in natural history. Having read *Silent Spring* in the *New Yorker* when it was serialized, I was sort of pre-adapted to be interested in the environment. New College at the time was advertising itself as a place for first-class minds. When students arrived having been standouts in their high school, they quickly realized that there were people here who were smarter than they were. They would conclude that they must be second-class minds, that they had sort of gotten in by a fluke, and weren't really supposed to be here so everybody went through this process of recalibrating where they stood in the pecking order of intelligence. So my strategy was to tell the art students that I hung out with that I was primarily interested in biology and the environment and then I would tell the environmental students that I was mostly an artist. And that way I was covered, that way I didn't have the feeling of being inadequate, each thought my interest lay in the other realm. I might have done more with the art, but that gradually became less what I was working on, and I ended up more solidly in the environmental.

Bock: So the environmental interest was kind fostered in your youth, when did you feel sold on it?

Miller: My interest in the environment, it stemmed from my father's interest and involvement in natural history in the state of New Jersey, and that translated from just raw natural history into a more environmental approach. Because we lived 20 miles from New York City, there was intense development in the state. We would go for a drive and come home. In the summer my father would come home and it would still be light in the evening so we would go for a drive. One year, we would be looking at a field with the deer grazing coming out of the woods in the marsh, the next year we would go, and it would be a subdivision. So, the issues that confronted me when I had arrived in Florida had already been previewed with the urban sprawl and suburbanization in New Jersey so this was really, we are only talking a little more than a decade after the Second World War. The building boom and the suburbanization of New Jersey was already underway, so I'd already experienced many of the problems related to density and growth and the need to build. I guess one of my first environmental activists roles… I think I was still in high school, and they were going to put an interstate highway through a big preserve near where we lived. I remember doing an illustration showing a gigantic interstate interchange going through this natural area, making a little poster or flyer for people. I already would consider myself an environmentalist by the time I'd gotten to college.

Bock: Did your parents support you going to a school like New College?

Miller: My parents were curious and questioning and would have been happier had I gone to Cornell but they were happy with my decision.

Bock: Were they activists as well?

Miller: My mother was sort of a legal women voter's activist. My father, well, yes and no. We were interested in helping fight a big jet port that was proposed for a wetlands system. But I don't think we would say he was an activist the way I'm an activist but they were engaged in the community.

Bock: So when you first got to New College, what was Sarasota like? Was there sprawl?

Miller: Well, coming to New College in 1970, the antecedent, what had preceded our arrival in Sarasota, and that it was the spring before that it had been the first Earth Day and I had been in Princeton for Earth Day. Prior to that, the summer before had been both the first lunar landing and also Woodstock. There was this convergence of different movements or events, the lunar landing was interesting because it was effected people more was not that people were on the moon, but that people could look back at the earth and for the first time they could see the earth as a small planet in our universe. That led to the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and that led to a new paradigm, a whole new understanding of the planet. When I was growing up the planet was always depicted in illustrations that didn't have any clouds, it just looked like a globe without countries labeled. But once satellite imagery and space imagery showed the planet with these swirling images that image really changed things. Woodstock sort of hinted at what young people could do even if it was listening to music rolling around in the mud, it was somehow inspirational. Earth Day was this recognition that there were some really big problems that needed working on. So, to arrive at New College and find that there was going to be a course of environmental biology that was going to deal with these environmental issues, everything sort of funneled into that. It made sense that that was what I needed to be studying.

Bock: So, did you identify with those people that were impacted by that image?

Miller: Yes, I was very affected by the whole earth image and the whole earth movement. I actually contacted the library and asked them to get a copy of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and they did, so I felt good about that. I started corresponding with the people that had contributed to the *Whole Earth Catalog*, so that was a big deal.

Bock: What about the hippies? Did you consider yourself a hippy?

Miller: I had very long hair but I was not connected to the drug culture in any way, never bought any marijuana, I was never very interested in it. When asked about it I used to tell people that I was naturally bummed out, I didn't need drugs. So there were a number of us that were sort of part of the culture, but not steeped in the drug aspect of it. But very interested in what we would now call sustainability, living more frugally, alternative technologies.

Bock: Did you find a lot of like-minded people at New College?

Miller: Yeah, there were different groups of people. There were a bunch of guys that stayed up and played poker and drank, people into drugs, but there were a lot of people like Julie and myself that were very inquisitive and wanted to discuss things and interested in the environment. So lots of like-minded people.

Bock: What did the school look like?

Miller: The biggest difference at New College then and now in terms of how it appears is that the library wasn't there and Sudakoff wasn't there. So when you sat in Hamilton Center and you were eating you could look and see the cars go by on 41, and when you had to go to the other side of campus you could walk down a little shell trail and when you got to the curb you'd look both ways and ran across 41. You didn't even cross at the light. There was just this little foot path, so that was a bit different, the library was in College Hall. So that was significant, we didn't really have control of Caples [Campus] when I arrived. It had been owned by Ralph and Ellen Caples and they put New College in their will. Mrs. Caples was still alive in 1970 even though she visited Sarasota for her honeymoon in 1898, but yeah there was a lot of longevity there. Structured, physically the college was different.

Bock: How many students were going there?

Miller: About 500 students in the early '70s, but we had a greatly expanded off-campus study program and so I think it was possible that a quarter of the students might be away at any given time. The tuition was so high that the college could afford to allow students to go to other schools and transfer the tuition there. So it was much smaller, felt a lot smaller than it does today.

Bock: Was there a particular professor that really impacted what you did here?

Miller: The professor that had the biggest impact was John Morrill. He offered the environmental biology course that I took my first semester. He was a professor who he dealt with developmental biology so he knew the inner workings of cells. Many of the creatures that he studied

were marine, or aquatic organisms. He had estuaries both on the West Coast of the U.S. and in Italy and here in Florida, in addition to that he had a masters degree in botany. He knew about terrestrial ecosystems and plants, and his father was a chief landscape architect of the park system in Chicago. It gave him, sort of osmotically, a landscape perspective. Here was a guy who could talk to you about anything from the sub-cellular level to the organisms to the ecosystem, and was familiar with both estuarine ecosystems and terrestrial ecosystems. He was a prodigious reader; if you said you were interested in something, he would hook you up with a stack of documents and say, "Go read these and come back," and if you didn't read them he wouldn't deal with you for several months, but if you did read them he'd give you more stuff to read. As ambitious as students were, he would feed their interest, and he had wide interests. He wasn't just interested in cellular biology, he was interested in development. He would sponsor ISPs[1] dealing with art, and it is very unlikely to find somebody with that broader range of understanding of the natural world.

Bock: Could you speak a little bit more as to why he impacted you? Why you feel like… why he is meaningful to you?

Miller: Well, Dr. Morrill was in a position to sort of satisfy all that interest that was related to the environment, he was sort of in what you would call the second wave of environmental groups in Sarasota. The first group was people who had a natural interest in conservation or the outdoor world, but no particular training or academic background, but then you had those like Dr. Morrill and others… and I can't even remember his name. There were several people who studied biology or the environment when they'd been in college. They were in a position to lead this new interesting field of environmental studies, so when we got here there was no environmental studies program and it was created by Dr. Morrill. We were some of the first students to participate in it.

Bock: At the time, what were you hoping to get out of your education?

Miller: I don't think I spent five minutes in the four years thinking about what kind of job I would have. I was not interested in a career, I was interested in learning as much as I could at what I was interested in. So I studied three-dimensional geometry and energy and architecture and took very few classes, mostly wrote contracts that didn't involve classes. I had read a book by Mr. Fuller. Fuller maintained that if you did good work, that would be recognized in society. I was convinced that I would be doing good work so I didn't worry about a job or a future. I didn't have a particular career in mind. I remember shortly after graduating I was introduced into being a seasonal naturalist in Everglades National Park, but the idea of designing an education to be focused on a job was not something that occurred to me.

Bock: What were some of the things or writers that really spoke to you at the time?

Miller: One of the books that impressed me the most was a book called *On Growth and Form* by D'Arcy Thompson; it's a really thick book. He was an Englishman who was trying to understand why the principals in the natural world appear the way they did. Why did a ram's horn grow the way it did? Why did one seashell look this why and another look slightly different? Why did crabs' carapaces differ but always seem to have similar forms. Put a crab shell on graph paper

[1] Independent Study Projects.

and stretch them in different ways you could make the shell look like another crab shell. The whole question as to why you can't have an insect the size of an elephant. All these questions are related to scale. I was very interested, indirectly, in design; that included design in the natural world but also architecture. So that's a book that stood out for me, and what I would do with that book because it was hundreds of pages long was… At that time I had a typewriter, all we had were manual typewriters. I'd read through this book, and when I found a quote that interested me, I would write the page number and type this quote out. Not only did I have a record of it, but by typing it, you know it sort of reinforced the memory of what I'd read. I ended up with a pretty thick little booklet of quotes just from this one book, can't remember if it was an ISP or a course, but it took me a long time to work through that thing.

Bock: Did you write a lot?

Miller: I kept a journal, but I wouldn't say I wrote a lot. There were a lot of other people who wrote considerably more. Yeah, I would… There was a journaling style called the Progoff Journal and so one of the things about New College at the time is that we would get different people through and explain things that they were into. So there was this journal system called the Progoff Journal. There was a decision-making technique called synectics and a guy came through and explained synectics. So, many of us would be rather deeply interested in decision making, and how to come up with creative ideas to come up with ideas and not stifle their creativity and take those ideas to narrow down on valuable solutions. A lot of what we got interested in was the result of people coming through campus and having a particular technique. We were very affected by the guest speakers that we had.

Bock: There were a lot of them?

Miller: Seemed like it. I'm sure I didn't go to all of them, but every year there'd be several people who sort of changed the way we thought. Adelle Davis came to talk about nutrition and we'd go off in some direction about getting more whole foods in the kitchen. So yeah, we were affected by our guests.

Bock: Can you tell me about when and how you met Julie?

Miller: I met Julie the first day I got to New College; we were in the same orientation group. I must've not gotten a memo or something, I ended up with a mattress, no sheets and no blanket, and didn't know what'd I'd done wrong. In the orientation group I learned that Julie had come to the campus with a sleeping bag. I had brought my cactus collection down, but she had brought something useful. I borrowed the sleeping bag from Julie and that was sort of the beginning of our relationship. And then we were both in this environmental biology class together, we both had similar interests in the environment. We ended up studying together, we were two students that participated in a National Science Foundation student-originated grant. So we got that we were the two younger students in this group that worked on this grant.

Bock: You started dating first year, and dated all four years?

Miller: Well, I don't (laughs)… Dating is word that is kind of foreign to a guy that's from prep school. No, I was interested in having a more multi-dimensional relationship with Julie from the outset, but she was feeling a little put upon by a lot of people that were interested in having a

more multi-dimensional relationship with her. So she eventually sat me down in the road that goes between the "letter dorms" and Dortstein (dorm), and said she really needed me as a friend and I said okay I can do that. I was a friend until probably '75.

Bock: I remember in my first year she taught sections of the environmental studies class and she asked us to tell her our favorite places on campus. Of course a bunch of people said the bay and she sort of laughed and told us that she actually had bad memories from the bay because that was where she went to cry after breaking up with her first New College boyfriend. (Laughs) So, I don't know, I always liked that story but I was always curious about when you came into the picture!

Miller: Mmhmm. Yeah, not 'til later.

Bock: So what about the Bay, was the big camphor tree there when you went to school?

Miller: Oh yeah, the camphor tree has been there since the Ringling era. We had a pontoon boat for research. I don't remember where the boat was stored because it would've been dangerous to keep docked at the dock. Periodically, this pontoon boat would be at the dock and we would go out and do classes getting seagrass or water samplings or whatever. When I came to New College, based on the photographs I had seen, I assumed I could sit on the dock and someone would come by with a ski boat and I could take off the dock and water-ski out into the bay. It was a certain amount of reorientation when I got here. But, you know the bay was very similar. It was probably more polluted at the time than it is now. But the camphor tree was there; of course the library was College Hall, so we spent a lot of time in the vicinity of the bay just because we were hanging out in the library reading books.

Bock: When did you start feeling like Sarasota was home?

Miller: Well, it took me quite a while to really bond with this area. I had come from the temperate forests of the Northeast, of the mid-Atlantic states. I had a beech tree outside my room that was enormous. We had giant sugar maples on our property. We were used to very substantial trees. When I got down here the pine trees were kind of short and stunted looking and palm trees didn't seem very significant. At that time there were a lot of sandspurs on campus. The area where the library is now was an open field… a lot of sandspurs. And so it was not an instantaneous process of connecting with the landscape. Because we took this class, and Doctor Morrill, in addition to reading, most of the weekends he would take us on field trips that would range from Rookery Bay down near Marco Island into the Big Bend coast. So by putting students in canoes and taking us camping and taking us to conferences we really started to get connected with the Florida landscape in ways that you would never do in a classroom and Julie ended up doing her thesis on aquatic vegetation and Myakka park. I don't think I was particularly helpful but I went out with her several times, but that got us connected with the Myakka River. By the time we graduated, we were both pretty connected to this landscape; we both left Florida in probably around December of '74. I went to both San Francisco and New Jersey; the longer I was away from Florida, the more I realized I was really pretty rooted in Florida. I understood the system there in ways that I didn't understand what was happening in California or even in New Jersey. So that brought us both back to Sarasota.

Bock: So you started going to Myakka in your last year, I guess?

Miller: Right. Julie was dealing with her thesis on Upper Myakka Lake. I don't really know how she got onto that. Previously, Myakka was a place that when your parents came to visit, you would go drive around to Myakka and then go out to eat at St. Armands or something like that. But going out with Julie and wading in the water and actually worrying about the alligators and all that sort of stuff gives you a different connection. So, that work that Julie was doing and the work that we had done in the environmental program led us to being hired to run an environmental field program for Antioch College. So we graduated in the spring or early summer of '74 and in the fall of '74 we led a 47-day canoe trip from Fort Meade on the Peace River down to Chokoloskee Island in the Everglades. That was an incredible opportunity to further bond and connect with the Florida landscape.

Bock: Wow, that's incredible.

Miller: Yeah.

Bock: A 47-day trip? What was that like?

Miller: It was great. To do this 47-day trip we had gone ahead and positioned supplies about two weeks apart from different communities along the way. But for a two-week period at a time we wouldn't have any contact with the outside world. It would just be own little self-contained group, moving either through rivers or bays as we kept paddling southward. It would be interesting to go back and re-do that trip because a lot places that we camped are now developed and you couldn't stay there, interesting things there.

Bock: Do you know if you would still be able to paddle down it?

Miller: Yeah, you could. The Peace River is a lot drier nowadays. You'd have to catch the Peace River at the right stage in order to canoe it because there has been so much decline in the aquifers and the water tables that it's dry a lot of the year. As I said, there would be a number of places that we had camped that you wouldn't be able to camp because they've been developed. You'd have to watch where you canoe. If somebody was dedicated, you know… If people recreate John Muir's walk or William Bartram's walk, than they can certainly recreate an adventure in 1974.

Bock: So what was your thesis?

Miller: Well, I was a fairly arrogant guy. My thesis was basically an attempt to record what I'd learned at college. There was no hypothesis, there was no experiment. I wasn't trying to prove anything in particular. I was just trying to process what I thought was valuable insights I had learned in college. So, you can go look it up. It's a very strange document. At times I've wished I'd done something else but it has citations and quotes in it. It isn't just me rambling on, it's linked to different documents. It was pretty much just an attempt to summarize what I'd learned.

Bock: So what did you want to do after college?

Miller: Well, we had already lined up this job with Antioch. In order to take Antioch students on a field trip in the fall, we had to interview prospective students in the spring. We could only take 10 students. So we had to go up to Yellow Springs, Ohio, interview a bunch of students, and then come up with a process to decide who was going and who wasn't going. We did all that but we didn't have cars at that point. So, 24 hours before my baccalaureate, I was standing by the side of the road on a highway in Ohio with my thumb out trying to get back to Sarasota and I made it. I wasn't in great shape for my back, though. So, yeah, we had work from the moment we graduated through December of '74, and then, as I said, I left Florida and did a number of odd jobs. I tried sort of the wedding photographer thing in New Jersey, I was in San Francisco for a while, but then someone with the parks system, the state parks, had contacted Julie and said that they needed an annotated bibliography of the Charlotte Harbor region and this area south of Sarasota, and would she be interested in writing that. She was, but she knew that a lot of the information was known about that region wasn't text but consisted of hydrographic surveys, aerial photographs, maps, and that were sort of graphic information that would complete what had been written. So she called me in New Jersey and said do you want to work on the graphic part of this and I'll do the text part and that was sort of the start of our environmental consulting partnership that we started together in '75.

Bock: So, you said you were doing wedding photography?

Miller: I tried (laughs). I had a really good camera with some great lenses. I offered myself up to take wedding pictures of different people that we knew in New Jersey and I took some good pictures but I was not a professional wedding photographer.

Bock: Did you feel like you were really looking for a job in the environmental area, were you confused about what you wanted to do? Or did you feel strongly about waiting it out?

Miller: Yeah, I don't know, after college I was trying to sort out a relationship and check back in with my parents. I hadn't lived at home for four years, so I was trying to see what that was like. I don't think I was very job focused; I was sort of just drifting along. What would've happened, I might've gotten some sort of naturalist job in New Jersey, and done interpretive nature programs because I knew a lot of that stuff but it was a lot more interesting to think about coming back to Florida and starting that Charlotte Harbor region.

Bock: Have you been in Florida since then?

Miller: Yes. We both came back in the fall of '75 and lived here since then.

Bock: Just in the Sarasota area?

Miller: Yes, just in Sarasota, in probably three different houses.

Bock: What do you think it is about Sarasota that has kept you here for so long?

Miller: Well, part of it is New College. There are always new students that are bright, and interested in things, and the longer we're around, the more resources we can share with them. So that's been a very positive relationship. We just know a lot about the area, we understand it, so it's a lot more satisfying to be somewhere where you understand the patterns of the season and

what might get you. It's funny hear people show up and are worried about going up to Myakka and worry about alligators, when they're probably a hundred times or more people having trouble with fire ants than alligators or snakes. So we just have a really grounded sense of where we're living, what weather systems to watch and which ones to ignore, how to prepare for a freeze… what to do when you're camping and a thunderstorm is coming… we've got it down. It's a very comforting situation to be in and if I lived in some other part of the country I think I'd be well prepared to research what I needed to know, but it would take a while to get those skills.

Bock: Definitely. So I guess you developed a sense of place in Sarasota sort of early on? It didn't seem like it took too long.

Miller: Yeah, the first year or two we were a little rough but I think because of Dr. Morrill's course, and getting out and canoeing and exploring the state, it didn't take very long to develop a sense of place

Bock: How do you think Sarasota has changed over time? Since you've been here…

Miller: When we got here, Sarasota had more of an arts community. I would say, I don't know what to say about the retirement community. Certainly places like North Port were retirement driven whereas now they have a much younger sort of family demographic. Obviously the population has increased a lot but by the same token, the amount of land that's been set aside has increased a lot too. The biggest change has been the reduction in agriculture. There used to be a lot more ranching, a lot more citrus, in Sarasota. A lot of that land has been divvied up between developmental and environmentally protected areas.

Bock: Has it been sort of unsettling to see a lot of development happen or you've seen a lot of change in the community? You have so many non-locals in the community?

Miller: The thing is that I don't… but maybe it harks back to my interest in plants. The thing that's hardest for me is to see is trees that I have knowledge of lost because people are just clueless. There was a Persimmon Tree that I just knew about that was a female Persimmon that produced fruit every year near Pioneer Park. When they did development down there, they just cut it down. It wasn't particularly in the way, it wasn't where the building was going to go, but you know somebody just cut it down. There are some pine trees on the trail right now that are probably going to be cut down and to me it's just sort of symbolic of what little understanding people have of where they live and what's preceded them. I try to get students to think about what a given landscape looked like 50 years ago, and what's it going to look like in the future. And the way we treat trees is indicative of how clueless many people are in those regards.

Bock: What do you think about the ways that people chose to plant trees that are aesthetically pleasing that don't offer much to the ecosystems—with royal palms, or whatever type those tall skinny palms are?

Miller: *Washingtonia* palms. Well, my planned interests have always been in whatever… cosmopolitan. I was around and I think helped in the early years of the Florida Native Plant Society. I helped form the Sarasota Fruit and Nut Society. I was supportive when Doug Perry was starting the Sarasota Bamboo group. I'm still interested in succulents. I've stayed away from cactus but I'm still interested in succulents. I'm interested in edible fruit trees. I'm interested in all different

kinds of plants, so I'm not a purist. I'm just hung up on natives, but I'm not hung up on exotics either.

Bock: Can you tell me about another developmental thing or change in Sarasota that particularly impacted you?

Miller: Change that particularly impacted me? I'm not sure…

Bock: Well, for instance, a lot of the people I've talked to… Some of the older people that grew up here talked about the dredging of Midnight Pass or developing Bird Key or something like that. A development or change in Sarasota that has seemed significant for you?

Miller: Yeah, those big impacts in Sarasota Bay happened prior to our arrival, so we got here after Van Wezel was built, after Lido Casino was torn down, after the dredging of Lido Key. So, some of the big environmental changes took place before we arrived. One of the things that was hard was that I was involved in a campaign trying to save a piece of property that was called The Oaks that was down in the Midnight Pass area. We were naïve and had a good campaign, but maybe not a great strategy and ended up losing that acquisition fight. It ended up being a high-end suburban residential development which was crushing. Some of the people that worked on the campaign just sort of burned out and we never heard from them again in terms of being activists. It's hard to see the importance of an area and get involved in the campaign and it doesn't go well, takes a toll on people.

Bock: Yeah, I guess it's part of being an activist. There are successes and failures.

Miller: Right. There have been other campaigns that we lost. You wish that you could go back and time travel and run the campaign a little differently. But there has been a lot of success over the years so you have to just accept that you're not going to win every time and stay with it.

Bock: So since you've been living here in Sarasota, have you mostly just been working for the college on and off?

Miller: Julie and I did our environmental consulting pretty intensively from '75 through probably '80 or '81. Dr. Morrill invited us back to help teach some classes in the late '70s. But in '81 we accepted a job coordinating the environmental studies program and we would each work part time in that capacity. So we didn't close the environmental consulting agency but we did it less and less and we only took jobs that we were personally interested in and we thought were benign. You know, people would approach us "We want you to do a study about how you can put rocks on the beach so that when there is a big storm, it won't affect our condominium." And we would say "We don't do rocks on the beach. If you want us to tell you what plants are there or how we would approach that issue, but you gotta hire somebody else if you want to put rocks on the beach." So from '81 to '84 we were just OPS[2] and working here with no real benefits. And then in '84, our employment status changed and we were hired with benefits. So, when people ask me how long I've worked here, you can either count from '84, '81, '77 or '78—or, I actually had a summer job here in '71 so it's either 30 years or 40 years or however you want to look at it.

[2] Other Personnel Services, a designation for temporary employees of the State University System.

Bock: What was your summer job?

Miller: Well, when New College was private, a really large percentage of the students came from out-of-state. And of those students, a really large percentage came from around the suburbs in Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, D.C., and Baltimore. So, we concocted this plan to provide an alternative way for new students to get to the college. We were going to start a bus in Boston and drive down the East Coast and pick up students along the way and camp. By the time they got to Sarasota they would already know some upper classmen and they would also have peers that were in their entering class. It was called the "Bus to Us." So I was hired, along with other students, to work on the logistics of it and contact students that had been admitted and ask them if they were interested in taking this bus trip. So we organized it and drove a bus and camped in the Great Smoky Mountains. It was a great adventure and that was my employment in '71.

Bock: That sounds awesome! I wish they still had that.

Miller: Yeah, it was a fun idea but obviously, 70 or more percent of our students come from Florida now. So, you're not going to start a bus in Jacksonville (laughs).

Bock: So, um, I'm wondering… Why do you teach?

Miller: Why do I teach? Well, when I was a kid—and I'm thinking maybe 9 or 10, could've been 11 or 12, I don't know—I would stand on our back porch, elevated probably 5 or 6 feet above a throng of 7- and 8-year olds, and usually run a natural history museum or course. I would show them minerals and fossils and arrowheads and plants and some of the earliest work that I had was natural history interpretation. I had a job, probably when I was 16, helping out a summer program in New Jersey and I'd been to most of these sights. So we would go to Sandy Hook and I would teach them about the osprey nesting or the prickly pear cactus that grew there. Then the summer before New College, I got a job as an interpreter, not an interpretive naturalist but cultural, a cultural interpreter at a restored village in New Jersey, called Waterloo Village. I ran two three-hour tours a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. A group of people would pay admission, then I would lead them around from the blacksmith shop to the mill to the canal to the herb garden, to this house, to that house, and explain the roles… how everything worked, how the mill worked, how the blacksmith worked, how the… you know. So, I always had a background in interpreting the natural world or the cultural stuff for people, and so, that then continued when we got the job with Antioch, the field program. And I don't know to what extent Dr. Morrill knew that background, but he approached Julie and I and asked us if we would teach a class that was called "Our Changing Local Environment." It was an introduction to New College students of the habitats that were in the region. Not just what their plant and animal composition was but how development pressures were changing them. To me, from the earliest age, I've always been engaged in trying to help people understand what's going on. So, that's always been part of the deal.

Bock: So, something you really enjoy to this day?

Miller: Yes, and I'm looking forward to teaching that capstone class this spring.

Bock: Well I really enjoyed your capstone class that I took my first year. I remember we mostly just read. We just read really good environmental books and talked about them. It was nice.

Miller: Yeah.

Bock: Ok, so I still have a few sort of off-topic questions I was hoping to get to. So if you're okay backtracking a bit… um, this one is a bit different but I'm always interested in asking it to older generations. I was wondering, while you were growing up, what your experience was with the racial tensions going on at the time.

Miller: Huh. Well, I lived in a community, a suburban community, in New Jersey that was not racially diverse. Um, most of my parent's generation had experience growing up with help that were black cooks or nannies. So, I grew up with stories about Irene who was a maid, who lived in the house with my mother's mother and grandmother and, um, you know, I was told she thought a great treat was wrapping a sweet potato up in tinfoil and keeping it under her pillow so in the middle of the night she could eat a sweet potato. I grew up with stories like that, because my Mother's family was from Florida. Occasionally my family would come up from Florida to New Jersey and there was a guy named Uncle Bartley, and Uncle Bartley showed up with a Florida Cracker accent and I assumed he was black. He was Caucasian, but because of the way he sounded I was sort of going on the way of his voice more than the way he looked. I must have been, I was probably pretty young at that point, but I think I had a fairly muddled understanding of racial stuff at that point. And then of course ended up in prep school and in institutions where they had some rudimentary commitment to diversity so we had Iranian students and black students because that was viewed as broadening experience for people. When I was at the school in Princeton, I had a friend who was a black guy that wound up coming to New College and he was a swimmer and he was a cyclist, and into karate. He was a very athletic guy but we were pretty close, but yeah, not a lot of contact with other races growing up, but a pretty strong message from my parent that notwithstanding, we didn't look down on any other peoples, so that was my experience.

Bock: Was Sarasota racially diverse?

Miller: Sarasota has always been very racially diverse, but always been terribly segregated. So it was entirely possible to go to school at New College, and go down to the beach and not encounter black people, but nevertheless New Town was right there. So it's very segregated.

Bock: What do you think are the most significant differences living in Sarasota since you've arrived here? Does it feel different as a place?

Miller: Well, when you live here continuously, it's all a gradation. It's completely different but because we've been here every day since 1975 it has always seemed like a natural, if not always what we would favor, a natural progression. You know, downtown is much better than it had been when I got here. There was a Publix on Ringling that's probably about to close if it's not already closed, there was a Winn Dixie and then there were two or three small grocery stores. All of those went away except for the one Publix on Ringling. When I got here there was, where the opera house is, was a movie theater with a screen, and there was sort of an art house on Palm Avenue with two screens, all those theaters went away. So we went through a period downtown

where there were no movies, only one grocery store that was pretty far out, well now we've got Burns Court with three screens, we've got 20 screens at Hollywood 20, we've got Whole Foods, we've got a grocery store on 10th, we've got one opening south of town, and I guess I mentioned Whole Foods. So downtown, in terms of its vitality and what's going on, has vastly improved over what it was at one point. So that's clearly better. The condition of the bay is better. We have far more protected land, so that's better. So there've been a lot of improvements, obviously they've been offset somewhat by the number of people or whatever. I remember talking to a gentleman in the '70s who said it took him the same amount of time to drive from Nokomis to Sarasota in the 1940s than it did in the 1970s because the roads were narrower, et cetera. So I think we tend to view everything as getting worse, and I'm sure if people came back from the 20s came back now they'd be shocked, but I'm not sure things are getting worse.

Bock: I think that's interesting. I think that's unique, I think most people identify changing times with something bad. More people mean that's bad or we lost community or culture. Perhaps, it could just mean growth of a different type.

Miller: Well people were panicked, and I guess still panic-stricken, about Facebook or email et cetera, but something like Facebook has enabled me to reconnect with people I knew in college and establish relationships. In a way it is kind of like being back in college because there is always this network of people that all have their feelers or antennae out for interesting news stories or technology that is looking over the horizon or new ways of looking at things. I get several things a day that are really engaging. I don't get a lot of cat pictures or stuff like that. I'm mostly getting insightful posts from people that are really thinking about what's going on or where the future is heading. So it's very engaging and even though that community is not necessarily geographically fixed, it's a pretty neat development.

Bock: Do you think that as an environmental activist, you have to sort of think positively… that it's necessary...

Miller: Well, if you are an environmental activist, you have to be an optimist, I believe. I don't think you could function or you could sleep at night if you thought that, jeez, we're all doomed and we're going to hell in a hand basket. I don't think that there would be any motivation to try to save land or create ordinances or get elected, or do anything. So I think activists fundamentally are people that believe that things can get better and believe that things can get better as a result of concerted action by either individuals or groups and so fundamentally even though environmentalists get characterized as being against everything, or being negative, in reality I think by definition they have to be some of the most optimistic people.

Bock: I think you have to have faith that people and things can change for the better, otherwise there's no point.

Miller: Right.

Bock: Do you feel that with all the environmental work that you've done for the community that you've sort of accomplished something for yourself, or something that you wanted in your life?

Miller: Well I don't think I've accomplished something for myself but it is pretty clear to me that Sarasota would be different had I not gotten involved. So it is not hard for me to see ways

the community has changed. One of the more intriguing things… people really want their name on a brick or name on a building or name on a park or whatever. There is this sort of interest in perpetuating your name and link to some accomplishment in the community, whether it is a donation or years of service or whatever. That has no interest for me. That is something that really aggravates me and I wish the bricks didn't have names on them. People have said to me "Oh you've done a lot for the community. You've done this or that. When you're dead we'll have to name a park after you because you've helped save all this land." I think, no, that is the last thing I want. I don't want anything named after me. And they say "Why is that?" and I go "First, it is not about me. Secondly, when they blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City it was like the Jesse or Alfred Murrah building or something. So here was this poor guy they tried to honor by building this building and now it is associated with this awful thing." I don't want some news story to come on and say "There was a little girl found in Jono Miller Park."

Bock: Oh gosh! (Laughs)

Miller: I don't want to hear that! I don't want anyone else to hear that, so it's not stuff that I feel like I accomplished for myself, but I've always been very taken by the stories. The old man that's planting a peach pit or whatever, people come by and ask him "Old man, why are you planting this peach pit? It is going to take 20 years to grow. You won't be eating the fruit." And then this guy points out that he is eating fruit from trees that he didn't plant that were planted by previous generations, so… It is sobering. When I canoe down the Myakka I see ways that it has been abused and ways that continued use will degrade it. I realize I tried really hard to buy land or protect areas and I know it is going to change and not for the better. So it is a little hard but we are much better having those lands along the Myakka protected than just a row of houses or condos along the river.

Bock: What do you think are ways that you feel that you've affected the community?

Miller: Oh my..

Bock: Things you feel proudest about…

Miller: One thing is on my blog, and I did in other ways previously, I try to introduce memes or thoughts or concepts, that once more broadly acknowledged or accepted will change the way people understand things. Julie and I worked on some of the earliest comprehensive plans of the county and we actually determined what the habitats would be called. We got to name the habitats in Sarasota before the state of Florida got to develop a comprehensive system that named all the habitats. Well, when you take their generalized system and specifics it doesn't work very well. We thought it would be much better to come up with a system that dealt specifically with what we found here, and some of that lingers. We got a hold of sophisticated satellite imagery in probably the early '80s, I'm guessing. It was a false color infrared between Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor, and in that image heavily vegetated natural area or pasture areas would show up as a dark red. As we looked at it, there was an area centered in Myakka park that was a dark red and all around it either ranches or development were lighter colors, and we said well this is really an island, it's an island of habitat surrounded by other uses, so we started calling it Myakka Island. Well, now if you go out to the park, there's a brochure about Myakka Island. Somebody may have noticed that and realized and come up with it separately, but it's things like that,

ways of visualizing or characterizing different aspects of the environment that just become part of peoples' understanding of what's going on around here. So those are ideas. In addition to the ideas, I've been centrally involved in most, with the exception of Myakka River State Park, I've been involved one way or another in most all of the land acquisition in the county for preservation reasons, and that's tens of thousands of acres, and centrally involved in two referendum campaigns, to get the public to agree to tax itself. When you tell people now, you've got a Republican-dominated community to agree to tax itself to buy land from private land owners, a lot of people would say that's impossible, you can't do that. That kind of work, more recently working to get the chicken ordinance passed in the city. Similar reaction—people said there's no way you'll get that thing through, and it passed 5 to 0. Everything from relatively small campaigns… I was at a hearing last night, where my position lost 3 to 2, but that was just on the specifics of that and part of the reason I was at that hearing was to again introduce ideas that need to be echoed and reinforced and eventually will permeate the community, and eventually the people will think that this was self evident, but it wasn't self evident in 2011. Somebody had to point out these things.

Bock: Has it made it easier that you have a partner that's involved in the same things that you are?

Miller: Yes, it's been...Julie and I for many years shared a job position here at New College and it was pretty hard for me to imagine how a couple could each have separate jobs in different fields and still could work. It seems like the only possible way to make it work is if people are working together, some people probably can't even imagine working with their spouse or partner. I tried to convince National Sierra Club when they have an award ceremony that they should have an award for a team, whether it has been a wife or two guys. I don't really care who it is, but there are many, many examples in the conservation movement of success that's linked to two people working together as opposed to two people working separately. Yes, so it's been very helpful to work with someone who not only understands what I'm trying to do but is supportive and contributing and a partner in moving most of these campaigns with Julie's support, so that's been crucial.

Bock: When did you guys get married?

Miller: We got married in '84, and our son was born in '87.

Bock: Is it true that you were living on campus at New College in Pei [dorm]?

Miller: We lived in Pei with our son during a summer program. They wanted all the people that were teaching these high school students to live on campus, so even though we had a house... Probably at that point, we still had a house about a 20-minute drive away, we still hadn't moved closer to the college. So anyway, we started out in a downstairs Pei room with the windows open and the students above us had the a/c unit cranking. The ceiling of our room was acting like a condenser unit, it was really cold. The humid summer air was condensing, and we'd come in to have little rain droplets on our bed. We switched and got an upstairs room, but then someone stole our son's tricycle. He would go up and down the walkway to Ham's Center[3] in Palm Court.

[3] Hamilton Center, a campus hangout.

Some creep stole his tricycle so all the kids in the summer program pitched in a bought him a new tricycle.

Bock: That's so funny! Aw, yeah, I heard rumors. People had said that they didn't know the whole story about you guys living in Pei with your son. That's really great. How long have you been living in the house that you're living in now?

Miller: 20 years, I'll be celebrating my 60th birthday in less than a month and I celebrated my 40th birthday in this house.

Bock: Do you have chickens right now?

Miller: We do have chickens right now.

Bock: That's great.

Miller: And we have a neighborhood cat that's pretty interested, so I'm working on my cat thwarting skills.

Bock: So, can you tell me a little bit about your house right now because it's really sort of something special, I think?

Miller: Well, Julie and I...when we weren't working at New College, we bought a house that was about 20 minutes south of here called the Main Colony. It was a 1921 frame with three outbuildings and we were able to buy a lot next door that had a citrus grove. We had about an acre of land. We had chickens, we had pigeons, and it was kind of a rural existence in unincorporated Sarasota. Of course, the chickens and pigeons were illegal, but the neighbors didn't mind. It wasn't an issue. But when our son was born, that complicated things. You know, we would be driving up to the college to work, we would look at the college and go, "Oh, I guess I left that disc at home, I better go back and drive home and get it." Drive 20 minutes south and get this disc, and then go to work. There was a lot of commuting time. We heard a speaker named Dan Burden had been the state bicycle coordinator, and he said that 10 years previously, he'd heard a speaker say that people should try to live close to where they work so he resolved that he would never be in a situation where he couldn't bike or walk to work. He would either change his residence or his occupation so he could bike or walk to work. He said that since he'd made that decision, that'd been the most powerful decision that changed his life. I thought that either this guy didn't try very much or this is pretty powerful stuff so we started ourselves. We'd be in the same position. We'd need a babysitter so we'd drive to New College, hire some female student drive her back to our house, leave her with our son go have dinner drive back to our house, drive the student back to New College. It was a shuffle. So, we started looking for a house closer to the college, and we found a house on north shore drive that was, I think, a 57-second walk from this office to the house, but the house had been purchased a few years previously by someone who had fixed it up, in a way that we would have never fixed it up. They added a caged pool and redid the kitchen in a weird way, and they wanted a lot more money for it. If we had bought it a few years previously, we could have fixed it up ourselves, but that got us interested. We had heard about a house that wasn't on the market, but was for sale, and so Julie took me. We drove up this cul-de-sac with these single story cinderblock houses on it, and I said that "There is no house on this street I want to live in" as we're driving up to it. So we got to the end of the cul-de-

sac and here was this long, strange 1941 house with no air conditioning, which was probably the reason we were able to buy it. There weren't a lot of people buying houses in Sarasota that didn't have air conditioning. It had a 1000-square foot great room, and enough land to plant fruit trees, and bamboo and what not. It's probably about a mile from the campus. We walk sometimes. Julie bikes pretty frequently, but it's just really nice to be able to go home for lunch or whatever. That's our strange 1941 house.

Bock: What was your plan for the landscaping?

Miller: Well, the house we live in now is strange. It was originally on seven acres of land and it was accessed from the north, by 47th street, and the front of the house faced 47th street, the back of the house… there was a 55-foot long screen porch that faced basically seven acres of woods. So it was a very private experience, but when the area was subdivided it was urban infilter place, they ran a cul-de-sac up from the south, so all of a sudden what was a screen porch that looked out on the woods became a screen porch that looked out on the street. So, one of my goals was to put in enough planting so you could sit on the porch and not be aware of the neighbors or the street. Put a lot of vegetation in the front yard, to both minimize the amount of lawn, put in a lot of fruit trees, screened the house from the street, tried to leave enough of the backyard open so our son could practice soccer, or play Frisbee or something like that and slowly that's been filling because he's living in Brooklyn now, and there's not a lot of soccer taking place.

Bock: How old is he?

Miller: He's 24.

Bock: Should've gone to New College… (laughs)

Miller: He wanted to go to New College, but we really persuaded him that he really didn't want to go to New College. I think it's much better for him to get out town and deal with a different group of people. He went to a great college and ended up playing on the Division 3 National Champion Ultimate Frisbee team, so I think that was the right move for him

Bock: So do you plan on living here for the rest of your life?

Miller: First of all, yes, I don't see how someone could be rooted to an area and be telling themselves in "x" years, they're leaving. That seems really like saying, I'm fully committed to this marriage, but in five years I'm going to get a divorce. It seems like when you're married to a landscape, you're married to it and that is a permanent relationship. Obviously things could come up, but... So yes, I plan to live here the rest of my life. The question of where here is, is a question of debate. We own some property on the Braden River which is sort of an overgrown natural area. We could build a house there. We could stay where we are in a neat house where we don't know how well it would do in a hurricane or we could try to buy a lot downtown and try to build a house that was our dream house and we wouldn't have to worry when a hurricane comes knowing it could withstand a 130-mile an hour wind or something. I don't know which of those three will end up happening, but whether it's downtown Sarasota or near the college or in Manatee County. We don't know yet.

Bock: Should probably bring this to a close, I just have a few more questions, just small questions. What's your favorite spot in Sarasota?

Miller: I think my favorite spot is on the Myakka River, I was interviewed on TV one time, some sort of independent producer, you know he was asking pretty predictable questions, and he said something like "What's your conception of heaven," and I went, "Whoa" and I said, "Heaven is canoe camping on a river, and every day you wake up and canoe down a stretch of the river and it's different than the day before and then you camp and then you wake up the next morning and then you keep canoeing it's different than the day before." So, I really like canoe camping particularly on rivers, so the Myakka, we don't get out there as often as we'd like, but it's very special to move down the river.

Bock: Don't you love early in the morning when there are so many birds out? You know that one spot where everybody goes to check out birds? It's just beautiful.

Miller: Mm-hmm.

Bock: What's your favorite Florida tree?

Miller: Well, having just written a 240-page master thesis on the cabbage palm, I would say the cabbage palm is my favorite Florida tree.

Bock: The cabbage palm is your favorite Florida tree? Why?

Miller: Well, I've been struggling with that for a while, but I think I have a pretty strong streak of justice or fairness. Live oaks get a lot of air play, they're special and revered and the turkeys love them. A lot of people are really interested in pine trees and the pine ecosystems et cetera, and the cabbage palms are equally important in both our state's history and their role in the environment, and they've really been given short shrift in terms of research as to how long these things live. Nobody really understands what their original geographic range or distribution is based on. Why they were so limited in their distribution. So I just feel like here's a plant that is so crucial and so important, but it tends to be neglected, overlooked, or dismissed by people. It's sort of become a personal campaign. I've had this recent, ongoing… there's a woman in North Port who says cabbage palms aren't trees, and so I sent her a list of 11 of the most recognized authoritative botanists of the state of Florida, all of whom have documents that refer to cabbage palms as trees. Basically saying to this woman that if you want to say that Florida botanists seem to think that this is a tree and I don't agree with them, that's fine, but don't tell me scientists don't think that this is a tree, because this thing is definitely a tree.

Bock: Big Issues. (laughs)

Miller: Yeah, right. (laughs)

Bock: My last question is you're an educator on Florida ecology, what do you think are some of the most common misconceptions that people have about the environment here?

Miller: That water that flows down rivers into the bay is wasted. That's a big one. I've been doing a lot of stuff on water lately, so that's one that stands out for me. Umm… I'd have to think

about that. The idea that the Everglades is just a swamp with trees, the Big Cypress was, but the Everglades itself is really an open marshy system. I don't know, interesting question. As I say there's so much misunderstanding, there's people out there that confuse mangroves and mangos. People believe that beaches are very fragile ecosystem when really they are in fact, I would say that, the beach is the most resilient ecosystem in the state, you could go out with as big shovel as you could carry and dig a hole as deep as you wanted, and you could come back 24 hours later and the hole would be gone, filled in with sand. If you got to Myakka park and drive truck through the edge of the wetland, you could come back 20 years later and see where the truck had driven through the wetland. The beaches are actually very resilient, but their depicted as being fragile, so that's a misconception. A lot of misconceptions about the cattle industry, over all I think the beef industry in the country is a fairly unsustainable operation. But in Sarasota and most of Florida, our part of the cattle operation is probably the most sustainable. It's basically cattle wandering in the woods eating the same plants that deer or buffalo would've eaten and calves, and there's no supplemental feeding. It's all organic, but it's only when those calves are shipped out west to be fattened up in confined feeding operations that things really start going haywire in terms of sustainability. But cow calf operations in this part of the state are really pretty sustainable… just trying to think of some of the other big ones. That's what comes to mind right off the bat.

Bock: Do you think people having misconceptions like these could be really harmful?

Miller: Yeah. Bob Johnson, who's the chair of our board of trustees, once proposed that in order to get homestead exemption… which is a break on taxes you get if you own and live in a house… that in order to get that reduction in taxes that you should have to take the equivalent of a driver's license test which would be rudimentary knowledge about the state of Florida so you would have to know what an aquifer is, you would have to know what an estuary is. So there would be little booklets you could print up and people would be cramming for these tests. The idea was that if you are going to be a resident in the state of Florida, a citizen, more than just a resident but actually a participating citizen you should have some rudimentary understanding of what the heck's going on around here. Another popular misconception about our region is that either the gypsies, or the Indians, or some group cut a deal with John Ringling that blessed this area and hurricanes are not supposed to hit Sarasota. They're going to hit to the south, and hit to the north, so we don't need to worry. That seems offensive on a number of levels, so yeah, there's a lot of misunderstanding about the natural ecosystems around here, and I'm sure it is debilitating. I wish people understood that what they put on their lawn effects what fish people are going to be about to catch, and so there's a lot of disconnects. People sort of compartmentalize things in that what I do on my property doesn't really affect anyone, but virtually everything you do on your property does affect your neighbors or the bay or whatever.

Bock: My last question is what's your favorite beach around here?

Miller: I don't know how broadly "around here" stretches. I have a special feeling and relationship with an island in Charlotte Harbor, and that's because when we were students we purchased some USGS Quadrangle maps which were the best available maps at the time. We planned a canoe trip into Charlotte Harbor and hypothesized, based on viewing this map, that it would be possible to canoe into this little channel into a lagoon which had come up right behind a beach. When we got there, it in fact was possible to canoe through this little mangrove tunnel and come

up and camp right behind the beach. We weren't the first people to discover it, but we'd discovered it on our own, so that always had a special place for us. Then closer to home, I guess my favorite beach would be Caspersen Beach, which is south of Venice, which is a relatively wild beach with no houses or condominiums behind it. Then when it comes to really close, it would be North Lido. Julie and I did a study about management of North Lido and even though it's kind of messed up, it's a place where we've had a 41-year relationship with, we've watched it change, and it's an easy beach to go to. So, all three of those in different contexts are fair beaches.

Bock: Have you ever been to "Tree Beach"?

Miller: Tree Beach was originally called Beer Can Island, and is technically called Homer Grier Beach,or something like that. Yeah, and in fact, Tommy Meyers, he lives on the eastern side of Longboat [Key] up there, and he knows all about that. It seemed like an awfully long drive for not that much more so we didn't spend a lot of time up there. We did an ISP where we started at the Charlotte County line with maps, aerial photographs, and each day we would walk north and Julie would pick us up where we stopped and then drop us off the next morning so we ended up walking all of the beaches in Sarasota and Manatee County and keeping records of what condition they were in. So, that was an interesting project, and that's something students could do over again and compare notes with what's going on today.

Bock: It was just observational?

Miller: We would record if it was beach, and then dune, and then houses. If it had stabilizing rocks, or if the dune was missing, or if there were no houses. We sort of coded each section and then we'd make annotations about how much erosion, did the beach seem to be falling out, the plants eroding back, and those sorts of notes. It was distinctive because most beach analysis back then and probably now is done by aerial imagery and people just take aerial photographs and they measure and they say well this beach has receded 100 feet but we were actually on the beach looking at it and recording both the physical reality but also the experience, were there houses behind it or what. That was an interesting project.

Bock: Okay, I think I'm going to put this to a close, but thanks. Thank you!

Miller: You're welcome.

Interview Part II – Dec. 2, 2011

Bock: Could you introduce yourself again because the audio got messed up the last time?

Miller: Ok, well, I'm Jono Miller and I came to Sarasota in 1970 and this is December second, 2011.

Bock: I was reading through our old interview and going over some things I thought were interesting that I didn't touch upon then. One of them was the pigeon racing. I was actually wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

Miller: I don't remember how my father and I got involved in pigeon racing, but it was a very big sport in New Jersey and we acquired a… well, there used to be up, to the Second World War at least, maybe the Korean war, the US Army had a Signal Corps headquarters in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and that's where they trained pigeons for use in wartime. But at some point they decided they didn't need pigeons anymore and they surplussed all the lofts. And because the lofts had to be moved during the war, they were modular. So we bought three of these modular loft sections that then bolted together. The Army could make one that had twenty sections if they wanted. And we put it in our backyard and started talking to some of the old-timers, mostly a lot of Italians that had learned pigeon racing in Italy and were still flying in New Jersey. We didn't approach it the same way everyone else did, necessarily. Everybody had a name for their loft when they raced. Ours was the Boomerang Loft on the premise that all our birds would come back. But eventually we ended up doing pretty well. We had a bird that came in third in one race and it was hundreds if not thousands of dollars, I don't remember the amount that we bet in dollars on that bird. There are thousands of birds in the races. The young birds race from a hundred to three hundred miles and the old birds I think were from three hundred to six hundred miles.

Bock: Oh my gosh, I was thinking like down a road (Laughs).

Miller: No! You take your birds to the club and each bird has an identifying band and a separate removable band is added for the race and then all those birds are put in crates and all these trucks converge at some place in Pennsylvania and they stack them all up and at some point in the morning they open them all simultaneously and these thousands of pigeons take off and fly in a big circle till they sort of get oriented and then they head east to New Jersey. And when your bird gets to your loft you have to remove that removable band, put it in a special locked clocking device that records the exact instant that you got the band from the bird. And then you take it down to the clubhouse, they cut the wire seals, open the clock, and calculate how many yards… yards per minute? Yards per second? Something like that…the speed that the bird was flying. Because every loft is a different distance from the origin. And so the bird with the fastest average speed wins. It's called poor man's horse racing. There's lots of money bet on the pigeon races.

Bock: Yeah, I was going to ask if there was gambling like that.

Miller: Yeah. It's not as big in Florida. I don't know about the competitive racing scene in Florida, but it's very big in New Jersey.

Bock: It still is?

Miller: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Bock: So you didn't continue doing that when you moved to Florida?

Miller: Julie and I had pigeons when we lived down near Riverview High School on Ashton road. We didn't have racing homers, we had what are called fireball rollers and they fly around and then, I don't know, some people think that it's related to epilepsy, but in the middle of flight they'll do backwards somersaults, and then 90% of the time catch themselves before they hit the ground and start flying again. So that was pretty interesting. There's other birds called tipplers that, you let them out in the morning and they just fly around your coop for eight hours in big

circles and then land again. They're endurance flyers, but they don't, it's not like they're going somewhere else, they're just flying continuously. There's all different kinds of pigeons.

Bock: So you did that just with your dad when you were growing up?

Miller: Right, with my dad when I was growing up and then with Julie when we lived down on Ashton road.

Bock: That's really interesting. I've never met someone that did pigeon racing before.

Miller: It was a lot of fun.

Bock: Let me see… Because a lot of this project has to do with water, I was wondering if I could get maybe a few more personal stories of experiences that you've had on the water in Sarasota. Ones that stick out.

Miller: Well, as we may have discussed before, Julie did her thesis on Upper Myakka Lake and that's when I was first introduced to the Myakka River. And after we graduated we were very involved in water, although not in Sarasota County. We put canoes in at Fort Meade on the Peace River and canoed to Chokoloskee in the Everglades, so that was a 47-day trip on the water. And after that we were away from Florida for awhile, but when we came back, our first job was working on a sort of an annotated bibliography of the Charlotte Harbor area. But then we got a job with Sarasota County looking at the Myakka River. They were interested in figuring out if it was possible to use soils or other physical characteristics of the land to create some sort of zoning that would protect the river area. We did a lot of work on the Myakka. We mapped all the soils, and what we discovered was that using soils as a basis for trying to manage development probably wasn't going to work very well because there were some really incredibly high-and-dry soils right on the edge of the river where the river cut into an upland area. So that would be a really logical place for someone to want to build a house. They're elevated, have a view of the river. And that would have been a really conspicuous thing from a scenic perspective. So that was in the late seventies. We were also hired by Ken Alvarez locally to canoe the Myakka to see if it would be a suitable destination as part of the state trail canoe system. It was very difficult. At that time there was no herbicide spraying of water hyacinths or water lettuce so there were these big hyacinth jams. We left Myakka State Park and started canoeing downstream and got about a mile downstream and it was just solid floating aquatic weeds. And so, you know, it was like the African Queen or something. One of us would be in front pushing the hyacinths aside and the other's in the back, pushing the canoe forward and we would portage around some of the big blockages. As a result, even though the Myakka is a state Wild and Scenic River that was designated by the state legislature, it's not part of the state canoe trails system because at the time it was surveyed it wasn't really canoe-able. And even today I wouldn't recommend putting it in the state canoe trail system. It frequently doesn't have enough water to paddle and people will call up and say, "Can we canoe on the river?" The answer is, "How fast can you drag your canoe?" (Laughter) Because, sometimes, when it's below 2 feet or in the range, you just don't have enough water to float a boat. And the other extreme is during flood stage, the river is so narrow in places and the hammock is so open, that when the water comes up above the flood stage, above the banks, then you're canoeing through the hammock which is really beautiful. But, the distance between the oak trees and the hammock is approximately equal to the distance between

the oak trees and the river. So once you leave the river, the only real way to tell whether you're in the river or not is to put your paddle down and see if you can hit bottom. So it is possible to wander off and get completely disconnected from the river. That happened to Julie and Jon Thaxton and myself and Dru was along. We went on a canoe trip on the river, I think one December it was in flood stage. We got basically lost. We knew how to find our way back to the river but at some point we had no idea where we were. We knew we were on the Myakka River but there was so much water you couldn't tell where the river was. So we did a lot of early work consulting on the Myakka for the County and this job for Ken Alvarez. We started doing the Myakka bird count and we'll be doing it again this December. But we did other consulting on the Myakka as well. There was property that had belonged to the Ringlings. It was called the Ringling Tract. Then it was purchased by the MacArthurs of the MacArthur Foundation. The County acquired most of that through a referendum that we were active and working to pass for both water supply and to protect the habitat. But then we were hired to work on an inventory of what was on the property and ending up mapping all the wetlands and all the habitats on about 32,000 acres. And then in '85 the Florida Legislature passed the act that designated Myakka a Wild and Scenic River within Sarasota County. Bob Johnson, who is chairman of our board of trustees, pointed me to the council that oversees that. The Myakka River Coordinating Council is a pretty unique body that was created by the Legislature but there are no terms so you either resign or die in office. So I started serving in '85 and this is 2011 and I'm still on …

Bock: Oh, wow! (Laughter)

Miller: So that body had started picking up on some of the work that Julie and I had started earlier which is how could you devise regulations that would protect the river and also the character of the river when you canoe down it. We succeeded in getting a rule adopted and a management plan adopted that helped protect the river. That also factored in with the County's efforts for land acquisition that I was involved in. So we ended up acquiring a lot of land in the Myakka River basin. I think there's more protected land in the Myakka basin on a percentage basis then probably any other river basin on the west coast of Florida with the possible exception of the Turner River which flows into the Everglades. So I had a lot to do with that, the Myakka River system. Not as much with tidal creeks, but over the years there were a lot of New College students that studied the tidal creeks and we've been on most of them. But really, our focus has been the Myakka.

Bock: Do you still visit Myakka often?

Miller: Yeah. I'm hoping to walk down to Deep Hole in the lower lake on the 10th of December. So, yeah.

Bock: It's beautiful there. So, changing the subject a bit, I wanted to ask you about your time running for [Sarasota] County Commissioner. Why did you decide to run?

Miller: I was basically recruited to run for the County Commission. I didn't call up the Democratic Party and say, "What do I need to do get on the ballet?" People called me and said that people had been talking and thought I would be a strong candidate. They asked if I would run and I thought about it for quite awhile and decided to do that. The first time you run for office there is just a really steep learning curve. I made a number of mistakes. Not big blunders but just

more out of naiveté. I didn't end up with a campaign manager that had a lot of experience and I should have been asking people for their endorsements sooner. I was running against two candidates which was a little different than many races. One of my opponents had the backing of… well, she was the former mayor of Sarasota and she had another mayor endorsing her. But I called around and got, I think eight former mayors endorsing me and if I had called that other mayor first, I probably would have gotten that endorsement. So I didn't realize how important it was to start early. I kept a blog, I rang doorbells, I raised a lot of money. I raised more money than anyone had raised, at least through their campaign previously. I got the endorsement of five newspapers and the endorsement of half of another newspaper. They said I was the most qualified but they couldn't endorse me because I was a Democrat. So I ended up doing better than any Democrat has ever done. I received more votes than any Democrat running in a County Commission race. And I think at this point I've received more votes than anyone who has never served. Anyone else that has gotten this many votes ended up on the Commission. It was a good experience. I didn't like people lying about me and they ran a lot of inappropriate, negative ads at the end. And the money for those ads did not go through my opponent's campaign account but went outside the account. So that was hard. They say it takes about a year to recover from a loss like that and I think that was about true. And we are about to enter the subsequent race for that position and I don't think I'll be competing in that.

Bock: Do you feel like it's important to be politically active?

Miller: I've always been politically active—if politically active means civically engaged. Weighing in on issues. I keep a blog and comment on everything from term limits to tree pruning. So yeah, probably since the late '70s I've been very engaged in local issues.

Bock: What did you hope to do if you became County Commissioner? What was your biggest dream for it?

Miller: One of the things I wanted to do as County Commissioner was expand and build our regional position. Because Julie and I had been environmental consultants and involved in a number of regional issues, we had an understanding of the area from Collier County up through Tampa Bay. We had worked on things like a comprehensive plan of Hendry County and Charlotte County. So I knew a lot about the region and I think that's fairly unusual for commissioners to start with a regional background. And so, something I wanted to strengthen was our role in the region whether it had to do with water supply or transportation or transit or navigation. That was something I had hoped to bring. I had also been involved in a lot on the comprehensive planning processes over the years. Julie and I had mapped the whole county twice for the whole comprehensive planning effort. And there were just a lot of disconnects in comprehensive planning. I think ideally for every policy there should be identified strategies to implement those policies. There should be milestones. There should be a budget and it should be clear. Who is in charge of implementing it and where the money is coming from to fund that budget. Too often there will be objectives we are trying to reach in the comprehensive plan. You get to that year and they haven't been done. Everybody says that we could just make it 2014 instead of 2010 or something. So those were a couple of things that were particularly interested in. I wanted to improve public process. I've always been very process oriented. I felt there were ways the Commission could act better with the public. But, I didn't get that chance.

Bock: But you don't plan on running again?

Miller: I would consider serving again. When Shannon Staub announced that she was going to retire before the end of her term, I applied to fill out the rest of her term—knowing that I didn't live in her district and I wouldn't move to her district and I wouldn't run for her seat. I was just going to do it because I knew quite a bit about the county. I could step in and do, I thought, a better job. Also there weren't that many people applying to fill out Shannon's term that had ever faced the voters. I had gotten 79,000 votes. All but a few of the other people applying never got a single vote. So it seemed to me that it would make sense for the Governor to appoint somebody that actually had some affirmation from the community. But, he didn't do that.

Bock: What do you think we could improve upon as a community?

Miller: I think a really big problem that Sarasota faces now but has always faced is that a really large fraction of the people living here, didn't grow up here. So, their understanding of the community and how it's changed and what it consists of is a lot shallower than states or communities where the majority of people have grown up there. I interact with some people who not only grew up in town but they remember the old landmarks and what they did as teenagers. They also have a very extensive network of the people they were in high school with. That's a much richer sense of place than somebody that moves down here and buys… Whether it's in a beach or an old-fashioned subdivision or a gated community. It's hard for those people to develop a really deep sense of where they are living. So issues that come up that relate to the water supply , the condition of the bay, or even issues relating to education—people are relying to a great extent on what their understanding was of wherever they lived previously. So it makes it much harder to develop policy that really reflects our area and what our situation is. I think that's a problem that's always going to haunt any community where there is a lot of immigration and people didn't grow up there. The only change would be if Sarasota's growth slows down and there are more opportunities for people who have gone to school here to stay, we may get to a plateau where there is a higher proportion of people that know the community in a more nuanced way. But, it's hard when there are a lot of newcomers. I think sense of place is a really big issue in Florida in general, maybe not so much in parts of the panhandle or places that haven't experienced a lot of growth. It's not something that's taught. Like, when students come to New College we don't say "here is how to figure out what's going on in Sarasota. Not only will that help you learn about Sarasota that will help you when you go to graduate school or get a job somewhere else. You'll have the skills to figure out where you are and what the dynamics are." It's not really taught so people just sort of develop their sense of place on their own and it can be pretty hit or miss.

Bock: What do you think about the generational gap in Sarasota between the older residents and the college students? How do you think we could be involved in a more active way with each other?

Miller: Well, it's interesting. Sarasota is one of the geographically older communities in the country. I think we have a pretty viable downtown right now. I think there are a lot of places both in Florida and the rest of the country that would envy the activity we have in our downtown area. But, like Austin [Texas] and some other places—and this was just reported in the *New York Times*—there is sort of a convergence that is unlikely, or I guess no one really predicted or

thought about it. What's happening is that young, recent college graduates aren't generally interested in living 15 miles out in the suburbs with a lawn. They would like to be in a metropolitan, downtown area where there is a lot of stuff going on. And by the same token, people who are in their 60s or 70s, whose kids have left home, are trying to downsize and see the advantages of being able to walk to a restaurant and live in an urban area. So we are having a convergence of both people in their 20s and 30s and people in their 60s and 70s all wanting to live downtown. That's great except the older people are not sure they want to hear the outdoor music and the bars and stuff like that. This has been as issue in Boston and I guess in other areas, like I mentioned in Austin, where they are young families and they would like their kids to be able to get some sleep and it's noisy. Anyway, I brought this whole situation up when we were talking about the chicken ordinance. We were ridiculed from several fronts when we argued that allowing people to keep chickens would help retain some of the young people that attend Ringling and New College. People thought that was a pretty spurious argument. However, it turned out that before the end of the campaign we received a number of letters from alums saying that they really didn't feel that welcome in Sarasota. Had there been a stronger emphasis on bicycle routes and a little more leniency on outdoor music and the ability to keep chickens or that the community garden wasn't run out of the Rosemary district, that they would have interpreted things like that as the community was interested in having people in their 20s and 30s. That's not always the most popular thing unless people recognize that you need people in their 20s and 30s in order to make the community work. So, I believe that, and I think both the City and the County in general need to reach out more. One of the things I was interested in if I became a commissioner was that, my understanding is that they have changed the entrance requirements for a number of county-level positions. It used to be that students could graduate from New College and immediately get jobs in local government. That the County understood that New College graduates could read and write and work independently and whether they had a master's degree or two years of experience or whatever, that they were a pretty good hire. But I think those rules have changed and we see a lot fewer New College graduate going into local government. Well, those were really good jobs. They were really good for the community and they were good for students even if they just stayed a couple years and went on to graduate school. They were getting good practical experience and some people didn't go to graduate school and ended up with professions locally that originated from local work with local governments. So, again I think local governments should be creating local conditions that support Ringling and New College and any of the other schools… Pineview. People either stay or else come back to Sarasota

Bock: Well I'm all out of questions. Thank you very much!