

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — FALL 2015**

*Laurel Kaiser was born in Sarasota, FL where she has lived all of her life. In her 20s, she fell in love with the sport of windsurfing. Since the late 1980s, Kaiser has taught windsurfing and kiteboarding to Sarasota residents and visitors alike. She is an advocate for environmental awareness and water access, and is passionate about encouraging others to enjoy the water.*

Interviewee: Laurel Kaiser

Interviewer: Jordan Kearschner

Date of Interview: 24 October 2015

Location of Interview: Island Style Water Sports

**KEARSCHNER:**

Alright, let's just start at the beginning then. Did you grow up in Sarasota?

**KAISER:**

I did grow up here. I was born here. 1956. And some of my earliest activities were going to Lido Beach with my family because we lived near Ringling so that was our beach. And there are photographs of me, like, in an inner tube, you know, in a diaper on Lido Beach. I have awesome nostalgic feelings about the Lido Casino which I vaguely remember. It was such an amazing, amazing thing. But, you know, the white sand and the Gulf of Mexico were sort of like from the very beginning, from the time I was in a diaper I was exposed to that, but I had a huge hiatus from the water when we moved out east of town because I was into horses and that sort of thing. Until I was in my late twenties and I worked as a closing agent on Siesta Key for a developer and they had a Hobie Cat.

One of the perks of working was that I got to use the Hobie Cat so I somehow made it go. Didn't have any idea how to sail it or what it did, but I made it go and I made it come back and it was tons of fun and then the more the wind picked up the more I enjoyed it. And then one day I saw someone on a windsurfer and I thought oh my god, that's what I want to do! So I bought a couple of windsurfers out of the newspaper and in that day windsurfing was so primitive and so difficult that most people tried it and just said this is beyond, you know, the patience or my endurance or whatever because we would say you get up and fall down 150 times before you go anywhere. And so having purchased these two contraptions, one for myself and one for my then-boyfriend, he went the way of the masses and tried it for about twenty minutes and said this is just ridiculous.

I persevered and after a week was able to instead of swimming it back to the beach – and I did this on Siesta Key. Now, why Siesta Key? I don't actually know how I got to Siesta from my,

you know, roots on Lido, but I did it on Siesta Key and I would swim back – oh I know why, because I lived on Siesta Key off-and-on as a teenager. That's also how I got back to the water. Because as soon as I became autonomous and was living on my own, I figured out that in the summertime you could get very inexpensive rentals on Siesta Key so I would do summer rentals and be on the beach. And I liked walking my dog on the beach, you know, knew about the rules about high tide and that sort of thing, but I always was very drawn to the beach. But relatively afraid of the water. I never – I was never a good swimmer as a kid, although I was on the swim team, I was fearful of water. So my affinity for it and my aversion to it have been part of this mix my entire life.

As I've gotten older and more competent and... worldly, I guess, as far as the water, my fear factor has gone down tremendously and my abilities and realities are better. But here I am trying to learn to sail this thing that you fall off of it, you're in the water with whatever else is in here and you may not be able to get back! It was all very exciting. But after a week I made it come back to the beach and I thought I had prevailed. And what really happened, I found out years later when I learned to teach sailing, is that it was a different wind direction is why I sailed back to the beach so handily. It's that oh? Does that have something to do with sailing? What direction? Oh jeez, so now after having taught wind– windsurfing and other sailing for thirty years I realized that it was a miracle I ever learned to do it at all. But as I have got this bug that was so much fun, it was so physical and the wind attracted me probably more than the water did. The wind has always attracted me like a horse and the power you get from having an animal that is a lot of power that you have to use finesse to control it. So it was very much like that so I got good at windsurfing, enough to really enjoy it. The boyfriend went the way of boyfriends. And then I got married, I had a child. I didn't windsurf for a couple of years and I was like I'm going to go windsurfing again and... So then I hooked up with the guy who owned the windsurfing store on Siesta Key – I was a new divorcee. It was a past-time of his because he owned the store and we hung out together. I started racing windsurfers. I was selling real estate at the time and then I started teaching people to windsurf as a part-time job and it was my, it was my passion that I found that because I'm a good communicator and I'm passionate about having fun and at seeing people succeed, they had fun. They paid me. They learned to windsurf. I had immediate income, unlike a real estate career. And I was outside having a blast.

So I stopped signing up for sales meetings and, you know, it was just in '93 I started my own school teaching windsurfing. I'd visited Hawaii and gotten to be a much better windsurfer; I'd visited the Columbia River Gorge and gotten to be a much better windsurfer. And then here in Sarasota was windsurfing all the most ridiculously difficult conditions with the boys and so, it was just, it consumed me. And teaching people to do it and being able to teach people at a higher level to do it in more and more challenging conditions was– has just been so exciting. Of course with the advent of kiteboarding, that just set the hook even deeper because now we're really talking big adrenaline rushes and– and the factor of learning it and teaching it. It's just been– and kayaking came in somewhere along the way that we figured out that everybody's not gonna want

to windsurf and you don't have a big enough market to make a living teaching windsurfing in an area where wind is penny ante. But kayaking, my husband came up with the brilliant idea when we were business partners in, where Big E's was – that was our first store together. He had been on Siesta Key for eleven years, in Ocean Boulevard Sailboarding when I met him and he sold it. And I had been working for him teaching and when he sold the business, I started a school and–my own school in 1993 and called it Island Style Windsurfing.

And at first I just operated with a car and a trailer and I had challenges that I had to go to the city commission and get permission to teach in a city park. And it was amazing the overwhelming support that I got from the city commission that this is the kind of thing that we want not only our residents to have, but our visitors to Sarasota, and you're providing a service; how do we make this work? And so with all of the encouragement that I got in these different ways, you know of, have– being successful, having support from the city, the lifestyle that I liked; it just fostered keeping in it. So when he sold that company and I started my school, we started a store together and found that we made much better a couple than we did business partners. So that business partnership only lasted about 18 months and he went to work at Economy Tackle and I ran the windsurfing business after that and we've had a very nice symbiotic relationship with Economy Tackle ever since because they don't do sailing sports and we both do paddling sports and they're on one end of town and I'm on the other and we're able to service the community in a– in a symbiotic manner that gives people options to be able to rent kayaks up here or rent them down there and so forth and so on.

Kiteboarding... Starting in 1998, my husband said where I was headed off to the trade show in Orlando where all the products for the year are displayed, he said, “see if you can bring home one of those kites.” And I had no idea what he was talking about, but he'd seen something on ESPN about kiteboarding and usually in Europe things happen faster than they usually do here with sports. And we'd heard something about it here perhaps in the Columbia River Gorge, but lo and behold at the trade show there were two inflatable kiteboarding kites. And I was able to get the woman who brought them to sell me one, against her will, because it was just a demo model. And I brought it home and we nearly killed ourselves with it. And I mean, it just, there was no stopping it, there was no controlling it, there were no directions, there was no safety attached to it. You just hold onto it and I remember doing the first faceplant on the beach and getting drug down the beach, taking all the skin off my hip which took like weeks because it's a burn you know when you get drug on the sand, it's like. And I was like wow this is like so much power and how would you ever put these things together to ride a board and control this thing.

It took a long time to master it because it was so difficult and I had some hair raising, terrifying experiences learning to do it that I quit doing it for a year in the early stages because I got drug across Sarasota Bay in an accident that I became attached to the lines of the kite. I got hung up on them with my apparatus and the kite went out of control, snatching me across the bay – sort of like being a lure on the end of a fishing pole that I was getting flung like thirty/forty feet every

time the kite would go up in the sky and it would summarily crash and I'd stop only to see it getting ready to go again and after several of those times I thought, well it's a 700 pound test line, it's not going to break. If I happen to miss the channel marker that's between me and the road leading from St. Armands to Lido, if I miss this channel marker that's in front of me the next thing is going to be getting drug across that roadway and the powerlines and I was like this is just all bad and I'd heard stories about people in like Cape Hatteras and those places getting drug across roadways and that sort of thing.

But at any rate, the kite went down and stayed down long enough that I was able to get unhooked from it, and even being totally just scared out of my mind, I was now walking out in the middle of the bay with this kite barefoot, and I cut myself so badly that it took weeks to heal this terrible cut. A windsurfer had to come rescue me and take my kite while I sailed his windsurfer up to the beach with blood all over the board and windsurfers going, "first of all that's not the person who left on that board – oh that's Laurel! Oh my god there's blood everywhere! And this, so somebody took me to the hospital, it was such a mangled cut that I had stepped on whatever it was that they couldn't even stitch it and so that was frightening, but I thought once I healed I'd go back and do it again and I went out to the beach and got hooked up to it and as soon as it started to have power I was so terrified that I said I'm just not doing this. I really want to do it, but I don't want to die doing it.

And so for about a year I just took up sabbatical. And other people that I had trained were going out and getting drug through the mangroves, and across oysters and all these accidents were happening that were, none of them deadly, but terrifying none the less. And then... and then I got my nerve up and I went..and went to some training in Cape Hatteras and realized that we knew here more about safety than they knew there and it was like okay! So let's– we are going to be pioneers. I haven't got– and so I started teaching people again, we started instituting safety mechanisms that worked and really being more cautious about what we were doing and knowing ahead of time you know this is what's going to go wrong. And so that was a very – it's been a very exciting thing to teach kiteboarding. It's become so so much more attainable and safe compared to what it was back then, but the fact that none of us locally were ever seriously hurt was because we had a close network of people who shared information and who were supportive of one another, and that we also had the support of the lifeguards and the community in embracing this cool new sport.

That not too many years ago out access was threatened. That somebody at a county commissions meeting said something about the kiteboarders on the beach and the county commissioners had a little meeting amongst themselves, did a little google search, found out that these things could go 50 miles an hour and that people get flung into buildings and all of that, that they said "well this doesn't sound like something we should have happening on our beaches, does it? And so they contemplated banning it along with every other beach park prohibition that's in the ordinance and so I was able to rally my friends and fellow kiteboarders with the help of the Florida

Kiteboarding Association and make a presentation to the parks department and say, “we’ve been doing this here quite awhile, I’ve been assuring the county, using the parks for liability. We haven’t had any of those issues that you read about because we are proactive and they were very skeptical, but it was convincing because we had a history of people not getting hurt, you know, seriously and not complaining and– so anyway we managed to avoid a prohibition that in other places around the country they’d been shut down because they couldn’t control their local participants or the people that came to their areas and people would do dumb stuff. So we’ve been very lucky to maintain our access.

One of my passions is– at this stage of my life helping to shed light on the fact that access to the waterfront, that you can get in and out and take recreational opportunities, whatever it is, whether it’s your dog to the beach, not the beach, but to a swimming area. Or to go shelling or to go kayaking or stand-up paddleboarding... All of these things are why people move here. Not just that it’s beautiful blue skies and palm trees, but the water and not just seeing it but being able to actually get in it. And with so so many more people than we’ve ever had and access being so difficult, parking that– so forth and so on, I think it’s very important that our citizens and our legislators and everybody in the community wrap their heads around how little access we have to the water and how precious it is.

And we had a– we had a devastating situation at Bird Key Park. I’m trying to think what year that was, you might be able to research that, I’m sure you could. That there was a plan to renovate Bird Key Park which was the key area for windsurfing for many many years because windsurfing in the Gulf of Mexico, while I learned to do it there, is not the ideal thing, because you have wave action that makes it much more difficult to learn to get up and you don’t have the fallback position that you’re going to run into land no matter where you go. It’s a big Gulf of Mexico out there and you might not come back. Whereas in the bay, it’s easy to park your car, it’s easy to put the thing in and to have friends be there and commune, the windsurfing club had gotten together in 1988 and influenced the city and the county with a plan where they, this is before they knew that hard shoreline stabilization was a bad idea. And the plan was to put in a seawall between the two bridges at Coon Key and the Ringling Causeway and the windsurfing club which was huge back then– 100/150 members that were– that were out of the windsurfing shop out on Siesta Key that my husband had then owned, had put together their proposal to instead of putting in a seawall, to put in a natural shoreline stabilization material that is concrete blocks, with, that grass grows through or anything can grow through and it’s strung together with line and it’s still working over there over most of that entire shoreline, but.

So we’d, so we’d been able to access it and so here there’s this plan is – that I’d found out about rather accidentally that the whole park was going to be revised and the shoreline was going to be barricaded with hundreds of bougainvillea. And the parking would– and I mean it’s almost sometimes truth that’s stranger than fiction, but the parking which was at a premium there in season was going to be eliminated. Half of it– more than half of it was going to be eliminated in

the plan and they were going to begin in less than 30 days when I found out about it and I was like “how could this happen? I own property in the city, I read the newspaper, I’m in this park operating all the time. I’m really interested in parks and this park in particular and had been instrumental in preventing them from planting inappropriate things and getting the phone reinstalled when they did the phone work.

I’d been an advocate for this park so I was horrified so I did my first real community effort to make a difference and it was so successful because I thought if people knew about this they wouldn’t go along with it and the only way they’re going to know about it is if I tell them because I didn’t know about it. So I went out with a clipboard, and a copy of the plans– I can’t remember if.. I think I had a copy– may have not had a copy to start with. I just went with a clipboard and I put on a skirt and high heeled shoes and at lunchtime I went and I talked to every person that pulled into the park. And I said, “hi, I’m Laurel Kaiser. I teach windsurfing here and I’ve been using this park a long time and I see that you’re here to have lunch and do you know about the plan to this revision and they’re like... Course everybody said no. Half the parking is going to be taken out and this is the plan. And I said “if you’re interested I’m going to be gathering support. I’d love to have your name and your phone number and your email because it’s going to take a community effort to modify this or to stop it and I was clear that I don’t care if that’s what we do, as long as more than half the people that know about it, and that should be everybody that’s interested, agree that this is what we should do. Right now nobody knows about this, that I know of, and I think it’s a terrible idea! And I can’t even find one person who thinks it’s a good idea so...

So I came across this one guy who said “yeah, I know what’s happening. I am the president of the Bird Key homeowners association and this is a done deal. We did this four years ago and you should go find yourself something useful to do with your time. So I quoted him and sent a letter to then Kelly Kirschner who was our mayor and member of the city commission, honorary member and I spoke with him on the phone. He brought it up at a city commission meeting. None of them knew about it because this had all taken place at least four years prior as part of a MURT– the Multi-Use Recreation Trail – because it was to go through Bird Key Park. There was federal funding and local funding because at that time, you only were required to notify residents within 500 feet who would be affected by some kind of a plan. Well that reason might be good and it was a step forward that we were letting people know, but the residents within 500 feet didn’t even matter as far as I was concerned because this was a public park. It’s not just about these people that live in the area. They certainly should be included in this, but it’s not to be their park, but because they were the only one’s included it was their perspective, and their perspective largely was, we’d like this to be a walking park.

Meaning we don’t need parking. And I said to this guy who I had talked to in the parking lot. I said what about, the way that it works, you know they’re going to take out half the parking? He said “yeah! You take out the parking, there’d be less people. I have more access. I live across the

street, I'm happy." And I said, "but what about me? You know, I can't walk here." He said, "I don't really care about you." I said, "what about all the other people, you know that live in the?." He said, "I don't really care about that." And that was when he said, "this is a done deal, you should go find something useful to do with your time." And of course that reeks of such injustice and so, this is an error. Error, error! So as this went along and I talked to more and more people.

The city commission was discussing it. I wrote a letter to the editor which said, I'd just heard about this, the first letter I'd ever written to the editor. My dad had been the editor of the local paper, the managing editor. No, editorial page director is what he was as his last position at the local paper. But I'd grew up with Lindsey Newspapers and the fact that you could spread information reasonably. So this was all like a good thing and it worked. The communication, the taking the bull by the horns was working and I could see that it needed to keep gathering attention so in addition to the letter to the editor and the city commission, no in response to that we were getting attention. But they were much stronger as far, these are the reasons we should do it this way and there's nothing wrong with this and I saw that we were not going to win anything other than just a conversation.

So I took that little shed right there, that little bamboo thing. And put it on the back of a truck and toted it over to Bird Key at the entrance every day for three weeks. I got a copy of the plans— a complete copy of the plans from one of the city public works guys, Neil Gaines, who was— It was him! Who I'd met, was standing there holding the plans when I walked up the first time and said so what's going on? And they said we're going to revise this park, it's breaking ground in thirty days and while it was such a big hit for him being the project manager— for me to come a long this windsurfing— this crazy windsurfing lady and go "you can't do this!" And then there's the landscape architect and the engineer, the shoreline engineer and all these people and I am so in their hair, and yet I wasn't going away. And so...

I got a banner, about as big as this and attached it to the front of that. Save Bird Key Park! And I wrote a petition and the petition, I didn't really understand that what I needed at the time was an initiative and a petition, but I got this petition. I sat out there. SNN of course shows up, you know, and does a little expose on it. But they'd already done one little piece when I was out there with my clipboard. So it had wheels, it was going and I became more knowledgeable about what they were doing. I interviewed all kinds of people to find out why they were doing this, what they were thinking, and it became more and more absurd!

That when the city engineer told me that they were eliminating access to the shoreline to prevent injuries because the shoreline was dangerous... I realized I wasn't getting... This wasn't an even playing field and that we are often told thing when you ask questions that don't necessarily make sense, but if you'll take that answer and go then progress just goes on. But I said to myself, you know I'm teaching windsurfing over here and been running summer camps with little children for years. Boat ramps are slippery and people get injured at boat ramps. This has never been

particularly slippery. There have never been any injuries here that I know about, serious injuries, and we're revising this park and putting in over 400 bougainvilleas to prevent access to the water, to prevent injuries? I'm not buying this.

And I realized that what we were really doing was trying to keep the dogs out of the water. Trying to keep the people from parking there. Trying to make this a beautiful park to be seen and to have access for people who could walk to it and the people that I was interviewing when I'm shedding light on this were like, "no, we need access to this water. We need to it to be able to park. We want it to be able to see the water. That's a huge huge part of it was to be able to see the water. Not to have it obscured with shrubbery and I'd been fighting that for so many years. So at any rate, bottom line was I had almost a thousand people sign this petition. I had people get on board and help me. We had a gathering that was published on WSLR and the newspaper and a "hands across the water" where we basically joined hands and barricaded and said "save our shoreline." And the city commission at the end of the day had me make a presentation to the parks advisory board. The parks advisory board dir- advised the city commission to scrap the entire landscape plan and to make provisions to put back some of the parking they had taken out, and to put me on as a member of the advisory board for this park that had been meeting five years before that was now...

I mean these guys were so mad at me. I remember the guy from Bird Key who now, now we're on very good terms, beating his hand on my little kiosk and saying, "this park is an eyesore!" You know, "you should be ashamed of yourself!" for opposing what- it had taken them... They thought they were doing a wonderful thing and in fact I think all of us who were at each others- and I was never at anyone's throat. I was just like, "you guys, I don't want to be the troublemaker. This just needs to be a public decision. It can't be a little private thing." They even realized that I was not one running a business over there which anytime anybody- anytime you do anything, the first thing they'll- that happens is they'll say, "this is a conflict of interest," because I use the water.

Now of course nothing could be further from the truth, but getting past that accusation is so difficult for the person who is the advocate, that you spend up all your time defending yourself rather than actually dealing with what the problem was in the first place, but... Be that as it may, the park was revised. I was very very happy with how it turned out. No, I can't go in there and do windsurfing lessons like we used to because there isn't the green space. There isn't the parking, but it's so much better utilized than it was previously and it's so much better than it was going to be had they done it they way they were going to do it that it was just awesome.

later became a board member at the Sarasota Sailing Squadron and I have my fingers in there still trying to just keep the public eye on this prize that we have in the community. That the Sarasota Sailing Squadron is on one of the most precious pieces of land and it's public. It's city-owned property that's owned again like Bird Key Park, by all of the tax payers. Well Sarasota Sailing Squadron is a private club. So you can join, I can join, but the people who join determine

what happens within that – how you, how it is used, rather than the city determining it. We're trusted to do it and when that trust is derailed by a small group who again might want to have yacht racing instead of cruising boats. They may want to have more financially capable members than the poor guys that have been coming there for the last 60 years who don't have two cents to rub together, but they've got a little Sunfish (30:30) and they can afford to keep it there or they have some dinky boat they work on in the work area so again it became a crusade as a board member there to stop people from telling one story when it was obvious that the real story was not in the best interest of the community having this asset.

So I've got myself into some troubles with people being such an advocate (31). It's been very exciting in some respects. I was removed illegally as a board member because I went to the city commissioners and said when we had a product there to again give access to the water – that's my thing, is access. And after my thing with Neil Gaines, it will be really interesting when you play this back – I am so ADD. So this Neil Gaines guy who I had initially seen with the plans, we turned out to have a great rapport with each other when the whole thing was done. We worked together just really really well. He alerted me a year or so later that the city commission had okay'd a project, a plan, with public works to partner with a private entity to build and manage a kayak storage rack somewhere on City Island so that the public could take their kayaks and store them inexpensively and put them in the water much like they do up at Robinson Preserve.

And he thought that that might be a project I'd be interested in because I'm in the kayak business and I've got a lot of energy and enthusiasm and I have this property and a lot of other things that are going on and taking on something like that did not seem feasible to me, but it did seem to me that where this should work best was through the Sailing Squadron. That the Sailing Squadron being right there, the best place to put this rack was right outside their property on this beautiful piece of land that's called the radio station property that has an enormous banyan on it. And it had been unused, largely, property. There was a big dilemma in the minds of most people as to who, who owned the property or who had, who was supposed to be maintaining it.

Now I had personally been maintaining it for about three years because no one would mow it because the city's contract excluded it. And the Wilhelm people who came to mow it, wouldn't mow it because it wasn't part of their contract. The squadron didn't really have rights to it so they wouldn't mow it and I was keeping a pontoon boat on it because the people at the radio station had told me that this was their piece of land right here, right alongside this fence, and yes I could keep my pontoon boat there. And I was like "oh this is awesome."

So I mowed the little piece of property and so I went to the Squadron and I pitched this to their board before – this is long before I became a member and said we should do this, we should partner with the city, you guys should do this, and I brought them all together, they all sat down – the Public Works Dept., the assets manager, the rear commodore from the sailing squadron, the

commodore of the sailing squadron, the manager and we said okay this is a good project, this is what we should do. And I with my experience in building racks and being a kayaker and doing guide work was able to influence them to say the best place for doing this on City Island is not the place that the city guys said they should put it, which was over by the boat ramp so that you'd be near water.

It's like no, you want motorized and non-motorized vessels as far away from each other as you could get them and the kayaks need to go in, not on the boat ramp like you're thinking, but over here on the sand. And this is a boat ramp, right next to the Sarasota Sailing Squadron. Nobody really knows that this is a boat ramp, but it is a non-motorized boat launch. So this is where the rack should go, it's so easy to build, it's inexpensive to build. I can show you right here at my store how best to build them because we've had them go every way wrong that they can go wrong. And places like Plymouth Harbor and other condominiums that are on the water come here to look at how we build these and learn how to build them like ours because they work so well.

So I became sort of a consultant between the city and the Sailing Squadron to get this thing built, but then politics got in the way and I became a board member— and I became a marginalized board member because I didn't really know how the game was played. I didn't know you had to really compromise. That's never been my long suit. It's either right or it's wrong, we should do it this way. So I've learned a lot going through this, but I was really marginalized and ineffective there. The project didn't get done, people got combative. I got myself removed as a board member because when they went around me, I was the chairman of this project and when it wasn't going anywhere — they said they need a chairman, I said I'll be the chairman.

Then the guy who was really in charge of what gets done just stonewalled and stonewalled and stonewalled. So they made a presentation to the city, the commodore and the manager of the exact plan that we had taken two and a half years to agree on which is: You build the rack, every boat goes in and has a little gate that closes behind it so every individual who stores their boat there can walk right up to the racks racks. Unlock your boat, put it wherever you want, take it to the water, and close it up again. This became distorted in the city commission meeting when I saw the minutes of it that instead of it being open land, accessible to the community, they were going to fence it in order to secure these kayaks which was such an atrocity because we're trying to give access.

We're not trying to take it away and we're not trying to give the Sailing Squadron more land. The Sailing Squadron is not necessarily in my opinion fulfilling its duty to the community as it ought to already and now they're talking about annexing this piece of property with a fence? So I called and I made appointments with each of the city commissioners and went in with the public works department and said, "I'm not here as a Sarasota Sailing Squadron board member. I'm here as a parks advocate and a citizen that uses the park. This is what we had in mind, this isn't

the part that I've played in this, and this is the direction that I believe it should take – and not the direction that you're headed in now which is to start having public meetings to be able to fence this off. I don't think this should happen.”

So when the board heard that I had been in meetings with these public officials, they lost their minds. They accosted me and said, “what were you thinking?” and I said, “I have every right to go and discuss this. This property is owned by the city! I am a board member and I have a fiduciary relationship with every citizen in the city, the city commission, and every one of you. This can't be a conflict of interest.” So what they did is they trumped up charges. They basically, amongst themselves – this was like mean girls club. It was so surprising that people could actually behave this way. They had a vote at the board meeting and voted to remove me as a board member and I was so astonished because that doesn't make any sense!

You can't have a club that elects a board and then have the board– because one person is– and I have such a history of standing up for the mooring field that that's how I'd gotten all of these people pissed off in the first place is that they wanted to get rid of the mooring field to a large extent. This is a huge group of members that needed to be heard. They needed a voice on the board. They elected me because I was fair and open-minded. I sail a windsurfer you know, but I listened to all these different areas. I'd raced windsurfers, I'd been on cruising boats, and I'm looking at it from the standpoint of access and what is this for and realizing that this is just special interest pushing out and alienating a small group and I had objected to that. I had been very effective in objecting and going to the city was effective.

So they voted me off the board. I emailed the commodore a few days later and said, “I looked up the statutes for the state of Florida and I've looked at our rules and you really can't do this!” So I said, “here's the statute and in no uncertain terms that the only way an elected board member can be removed is by the elected body who elected them in the first place.” That just makes sense! So he said, “okay I'll look into this.” So he called some real estate attorney who gave him some vague answer and said the statute was vague. So he went back to the board and (41:09) between all of them they couldn't read it! So fortunately as it may be, I grew up in a household where reading and comprehension, spelling, grammar, communication... I grew up with it, it's in my blood. I could read the statute and interpret it, and it wasn't difficult! It was absolute. But they read it as, regardless of what your bylaws say, what they wanted to hear was unless your bylaws say something else. And what it really said was it doesn't matter what you say, this is the rule.

At any rate, for eight months they wouldn't let me defend myself. They wouldn't tell the story to the members and I got more active. I sent an email to the entire membership. I got ahold of the email list, which was then public knowledge, and I sent a three-page letter to the entire membership. I told them about my experience on the board and who I was within the city and you know what? These members, they don't care about politics. They're not there to get

involved in anything. They come to sail! They don't want a brouhaha and unbeknownst to me, there had been infighting there that had been going on for sixty years.

You know this group against this group. I didn't know! Again naive me, but by the end of the day I fought hard and long. When they removed me as a board member, a lot of the members pooled their money and said, "you can't let this happen. You are our elected official. We want you to sue them." I was like, "oh my god!" So I went to a wonderful attorney in town who had known the club for years, his name is Bob Turfs, and I told him the story and he helped me out basically with advice and so forth and so on.

The club eventually hired a lawyer and it was an ugly fight. I never officially sued them, and in I never filed the suit, but they had a copy of it, they were responding, and they were accusing me of having gone to the city to get this storage project for myself and when I said, "what you need to do is make appointments with the city commission and the public works projects and ask them what was discussed in those meetings." They didn't want to do that because they didn't want to deal with what the truth was. What they wanted was the witch hunt to get me off the board because I was standing in the way causing trouble. And I wasn't alone.

There were four of us that were very effective, that stood together and voted together, but it's a ten-member board and 6 to 4, we weren't getting anywhere. So one of the board members quit, I was basically annihilated, and the beat goes on. Right now we're getting ready for another election, but interestingly enough I survived the worst public humiliation a person could— I mean it wasn't a sexual thing, it wasn't like I stole, you know, and was accused of that, but I was accused of basically dealing for myself against the Squadron with the city. Which was so far from the truth, but when you tell the story and that print that story on the ballot. I finally, I kept telling them, "you want to put this out to the members for a vote? I'm fine with that. Tell them what you think I did. Let me defend myself. Have a hearing. You want to bring this up and see what the members think? I'm good!" But they wouldn't do that.

Then when it came to another election, and I had another year in my term, they made a ballot, they printed a whole page of allegations against me, and on the other opposite was a blank page where they would not allow me a rebuttal. It was phenomenal, phenomenal! And I still almost won the election, I mean won that vote. I think I lost by like thirty votes out of 500 and it was the biggest turnout in an election that we'd ever had at the club because – and it gives me chills now. It was because I had sent emails to every member and I did it twice! And so they shut down all communication between members! They made is a revocable offense if you communicated with any member for any reason other than sailing. I mean it's almost hard to believe!

And yet you know, the Sailing Squadron to me, even though I didn't even know about it until about 1988 when I first went to the first windsurfing regatta there, my husband grew up there. He was there when he was a three year old. His parents were there and helped build the buildings

that are there. The people in his neighborhood, Stan Low, the oldtimers that I knew as a mature woman, a young women, I adopted that place and was adopted by it. I'm a defender of that place, but you know, you really can't Don Quixote of jousting and windmills, you have to have something real. We were saying those guys have got an agenda. They said, "no! We don't have an agenda." These guys are just crass, immoral. They accused us of all kinds of crazy stuff, but that's what wins elections.

I once did a study when we were really down to it. I googled "how to win an election" and what I found out was horrifying. That really sometimes it's the person who has the best lie and tells it the most times that wins. And I was so mortified to hear that in studying how to win an election that— I mean to this day, I'm not over it how devastating that truth is and when you take away the right to communicate amongst a group of people that you're governing... You've got everything! All you have to do is give them a ballot and tell them that we are the ones that are taking care of you and this is the way we think you should vote and that's what they do! They get groups in the sailing community and the leaders say, "take my word for it, this is who you should vote for." And that's how people vote.

They have a children's group which is the youth sailing program. Many many members and they influence them! The women's sailing club which is the biggest voting block and very very active members. The ones who were doing everything they could to get them out of there and they influenced them to vote. So within this idyllic community on our beautiful piece of land, we have a political machine that has been working, but it's not as powerful as it was a couple of years ago. The board, you know, everybody isn't going to be convinced. You know it took a long time for people to realize what was going on, but fortunately before it was too late— I don't mean it's too late for a lot. It's too late for people that have left the squadron. It's too late for a lot of opportunities that we've had. Our cruising community was annihilated by the actions of this board, but nothing's forever. Things come around and I'm still in there spreading the word. I'm resilient.

So my thing...and oh my god, it goes on! My husband introduced the first kayaking tours in Sarasota in 1994 when we opened our store over here at Big E's. He grew up on Siesta Key. His name's George Kaiser. His parents bought property on Faubel Lane which is off of Bayou Louise and he and his buddies grew up going across Big Pass to the mangrove tunnels. Have you been there?

**KEARSCHNER:**

No, not yet. I've gone through the ones at Weedon Island in St. Pete, but not here.

**KAISER:**

Oh you have to go! It's the coolest thing in Sarasota. One of the most sought after things to do in Sarasota. I'm not really proud of that because it has changed dramatically, but my goal again is

to protect access and protect the environment as well and the experience as I believe it should be – that it's not Disney World.

There are animals that are living in there that need to be protected and the experience for all of the people who own in the park. It needs to be a community decision when our county parks department decides to start selling permits and never stop – as to how many people have the right to go in there and for hire put boats in the water and make a living at the expense of the access to the community and the private people. So while I'm over there making a living, I believe that we should be doing it with a lid on it that probably should have been put on it seven to ten years ago and instead of any sort of lid, it's just getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

So on November the 5th I have a presentation to the planning board, no the parks advisory board, for the county to try to get them to again influence the commission, to influence the parks department to protect public access and not be giving it away– no, not giving it away. They're selling it to the commercial vendors, but they don't own it to sell. Unless they have the consent and so forth from the community. So it doesn't end, but that was a very interesting scenario because public– no, commercial activity was banned as part of the beach/park prohibition ordinance. Commercial activity was banned in all county parks until... Let me go look at this. Until, until this thing.. I think it was 2010 that this was revised...The date's not on here...

Oh 2011! 9-10-11 is when they finally updated the Sarasota beach/park prohibition ordinances and when they did that they took out one sentence and added another sentence that said instead of being prohibited, it's prohibited without a permit. So that opened the door for a permit to be given. Before that there was no ability for a permit and so all of us who had been doing kayak tours over there. My husband started it in 1994 in conjunction with our windsurfing business. Another person started doing it and another person started doing it and there were three of us and we all got along well.

One of them was a business on Bahia Vista. One of them was operating out of Economy Tackle and then there was us and then there was a guy called Walk on the Wild Side and there was– this park you'd go to the parking lot – which is now you can't even park there – there was no one there. We knew that you could get in the water there because my husband remembered, as a kid, going through these... They're called the mangrove tunnels and what it is is the coolest thing ever. That they took these mangroves and, because there were lots and lots of mosquitos and the people were being eaten alive on the barrier islands.

They had the idea that if you cut tunnels or canals through them it would irrigate and the mosquito larva have to stay still for x number of hours for them to hatch, that if it was irrigated they wouldn't hatch and you'd get rid of the mosquito problem. Well in fact this really has worked quite well, but it was pooh-pooed that it didn't really do much good and plus we had DDT; what did we need canals for? So when DDT came along and all that long time of just

being able to fumigate the place– we don't have any mosquitos! But Sarasota County, when they purchased Ted Sperling Park, they got the mangrove tunnels. And there's actually more stories to this too.

About that property was going to be developed by Arvida back in 1978, that there was going to be an 18-hole golf course, condominiums, all sorts of stuff, and that entire South Lido Park was going to be developed by Arvida. And there had been a community upswelling of opposition to them doing that, led by a woman named Jeannie McElmurray, who became a county commissioner, and they called it the Save Our Bays Association. A bunch of people got together, including my husband who was just a teenager at the time – and I had learned this history. I didn't participate in it at the time. I had heard about it, you know, just by being in the community – and they had a protest.

When the governor was coming and you know, all these people were gathering at the yacht club and celebrating this cool thing with the groundbreaking because it was really going to happen. They did this protest with hundreds of boats linked together, making all this noise, and a helicopter that flew over, and the governor and all these people are looking and going, “what is it?” And then they brought this information out that the mangroves are critical habitat. The mangroves are critical to protecting our land. We would all be blown away in the next storm if you get rid of them! So that's before mangroves became protected. That land became nowhere near as valuable as it had been.

That's how the county ended up being able to buy it and then they cleared out the mangrove tunnels. They went in and opened up those tunnels. Now they're canopies. It's the coolest thing ever because as the mangroves grew up over these trenches, they created these tunnels that you can paddle through, and it's like Disney World only it's real! And so my husband's doing tours through there and he said last night he can remember, and he actually has a photograph of one of the first groups that he took through there, and he said he was hoping he was going to show them a manatee or something like that. He said they were so wowed by this experience.

So it became a bigger part of my business than windsurfing ever was and we bought this property because we were running a kayak operation that was thriving and one guy got the idea – internet! This is before I even knew what it meant. Everybody kept telling me, “you need a website, you need a website.” It's like, I got the Yellow Pages, so what it's costing a thousand, two thousand dollars a month to compete in the Yellow Pages? That's how it was.

This guy got the brilliant idea that he could put a website, get himself a truck and a trailer, operate in that county park 365 days a year and pay nothing. He didn't have a license to do business in Sarasota. He didn't have insurance that he was insuring the county. He largely, I don't think, had to collect tax because there was no oversight whatsoever, and he basically was putting us and Economy Tackle and everybody else out of business because he was occupying

the park and running a business there. We had been doing it on a handshake with the parks department using the best judgement and manners.

I mean we didn't have signs on our vehicles. We didn't do anything to draw attention to the fact that we were a business operating in a county park because we were respectful of that latitude that the county had given us. So we become well-aware that we needed that beach/park ordinance revised and that we needed permits. John McCarthy was the head of the parks department and I went to him and beseeched him. "Help us. We have to do something here." The more he found out about what was going on there and he's trying to solve a problem. He's calling meetings, he's going and he's interviewing. He's looking and seeing what's going on and he realized that we needed a solution, but the solution is never that simple. Now we had seven operators and we're talking big businesses going on over there and this is being promoted by the visitor's bureau. Number one guy that's being promoted by the visitor's bureau is the one guy who's occupying the park. This is just a flippin' nightmare! I meanwhile am reeling it in because I don't want to be part of the occupation of that park. I didn't think it was appropriate. I didn't want signs on my vehicles. I don't want the park overrun. I want us to all be playing by the rules. Will you please give us some rules to play by!

But it took so so long and by the time we got it John McCarthy had gone on to bigger and better things. The new regime is into making money for the county and I'm having to try to as a marginalized – once again because it's not the popular view with the parks department because they have a plan they feel is probably working quite well. It's not the popular view with my competitors because they have a plan they feel is working quite well and I'm in the middle that I want to make a living doing this. I'm devoutly here to do this and make a living, but I want to do it on a realistic level. I don't want to see how many people we can put through there and how much money we can make.

I think that a few small vendors offering a variety of services and a variety of experiences, doing it so that we have a small footprint in that park, and having it be a public access is how it should have been. So once again, before this all came down, I got a petition and an initiative together and I went to – now this was much more difficult because I am a vendor and I am advocating for what I think is how this ought to be done, but it is my business interest, unlike the Bird Key Park thing, unlike the Squadron thing. This is my business so getting a seat on the city parks advisory board, that is, for a layperson in the community who does business in the parks to bring perspective from that vantage point to this board and then now being appointed by that board to be a member of the county board represents the city.

I'm in a position now that I can bring these things up and have discussions about them. Are they still going to say conflict of interest? Are they still going to say whatever it is – yes they may, but I've created as much credibility as I can. I've created as much interest as I can and I believe that by just keeping the public aware and being ready to say, "we have a choice here. This can keep

getting bigger and you can keep getting less access or you can compel your county commissioners to reel it in.” Then what’s going to happen in the next part and the next part and the next part because, you know, this isn’t going to stop. People need access. The visitors need access. The vendor’s need access. The people that live here need access and it needs to be fair, balanced and equitable and responsible use.

It’s funny, without any notes coming full circle to that, where I am today, that with such trepidation that I have to think okay, what is it you’re going to say to them? What do you want them to do? Well, getting ready to get new permits for next year. And last year they added three new vendors and there isn’t enough room to park there now in this place so something needs to be done! Am I the one with the squeaky wheel? Yes. Doesn’t it make me popular? Does it make me sleep better at night? No, but it’s valuable. It’s what I can do that maybe someone else wouldn’t do, wouldn’t risk. You know... The business problems that you get from people maybe not liking your point of view, the distraction of not running the business.

Instead, minding, you know, this, you know, idea. But at the same time it gives me a personal satisfaction I can at some level hope to empower the people by giving them the power and giving them a venue to be heard and not making enemies with all of my competitors and learning as I go that compromise is key instead of thinking you have to stop it right this second I’ve learned. John McCarthy has my mentor to really teach me, you know, the difference between the effectiveness of my – and he probably is the first one to tell me, “you’re so passionate!” It was like, “yes I am.” I remember telling him one time about the problem over there. I said, “John, am I going to have to draw the public attention to this with a big expose?” And he said, “no!” It was like, but you know sometimes things come along around and maybe on his watch wasn’t the time, but maybe it will come. Anyways so that’s up to speed, huh?

KEARSCHNER:

Yeah!

KAISER:

Funny! You get me going. Couldn’t put a lid on it! So... any questions?

KEARSCHNER:

No, not in particular. That was great!

KAISER:

Yeah, thanks!

KEARSCHNER:

Yep, good timing...

KAISER:

Awesome! Awesome. Oh! And so now I'm very interested in what's going on at Bayfront Park because that's a huge piece of land on the Bay. You know, where the Van Wezel is. There's a bazillion people with so much money that want to revise that park, rebuild the Van Wezel, do this, do that... When people are in a performing arts hall they don't know that they're on the most valuable piece of waterfront property. I don't mean value as in money, I mean value as in access so I'm very hopeful that through my community efforts and the time I take away from my business and my family and so forth that I'm able to just help other people to be cohesive and protect our access and preserve our parks and these amenities for ourselves and for future generations.

KEARSCHNER:

That's so great.

KAISER:

Yeah! And I'm very very grateful to my parents who moved here because my dad must have been the one who kind of figured it out. My mom grew up in Clewiston— was born in Clewiston, grew up in Tampa. But my dad was a waterman that. I should say, I should add this too that as a kid we camped, but we went out in Sarasota Bay and we went scalloping. We went oystering, you know, in Lemon Bay. We owned an oyster lease, which nobody's ever even heard about, from the state of Florida. We had an oyster lease in Lemon Bay so even though I grew up out there, my affinity for the water came from fishing and shellfishing and tromping around in the Bay. And I remember finding the scallops with the little blue eyes and they were so plentiful and now if you found one, nobody even knows what it is!

But again these things are all coming back and being married to my husband who grew up in the water on Siesta Key. Fishing and shellfishing and all that and has worked at Economy Tackle for seventeen years. I feel like, you know, that it's really really in my blood – this water and our access and the bounty of shellfish and fish we have and just the ability to go out and fish for it and see dolphin and the manatee and nature. I was on the committee appointed by the county commission to revise the slow speed zones for manatees a number of years ago and I found out how small interests, like the people who want to ride speedboats, you know. We all know about the boats and props hurt and kill the manatees, but the people who want to go fast in those areas are very, very powerful and it's people like me that are able to go in there and say, “you know what, I've been there and I know that the manatee travel right through there all the time” and give that testimony and influence other people to come and give testimony and make rules that do protect.

It's like it's all been very... Very soul soothing and yet as I said, you know, the public humiliation of standing up and standing for something and having people poke their finger at you and say, you know, you're representing private interests, your own private interests, is very very

disconcerting and difficult, but you know sticks and stones they say. And so that's, I think that might be— if I think of something else I'll let you know, but that last part. I've forgotten about my early experiences. My grandparents owned property at Sebastian Inlet which they sold to the state which is part of Sebastian Inlet State Park. It was purchased by my great-great grandfather in... I've forgotten what that county is in Sebastian Inlet, but they were from Iowa and Wisconsin, but he had purchased property, you know, on the water in I guess probably the twenties or thirties and...

Yeah, I guess it's... It's interesting hearing your own story like that and realize how immersed I am in the water because I was thinking, "oh you want my experiences on the water? Do I have any experiences on the water that are interesting? Oh. I guess as an advocate more than anything else yeah, but sailing, you know, being on the water, windsurfing. The whole idea of being able to you know, go out and without making much of a footprint at all or having to put gas in it or run it, to be able to go sailing and sail around, kayak around. I've raced these things, paddled them. It's just to be able to get out on the water is such an amazing experience and to share with other people that they too can do it.

I think the stand-up paddleboarding thing has been such an amazing thing. Kayaking first, my husband brought the first kayaks to Sarasota in 1987. People couldn't even spell kayak and when they thought of kayak they thought of an Inuit, you know, with the fur collar and the thing. You know, they didn't realize kayaks could be recreational. We brought them out on Siesta Key and they were pink and green and blue and they were like, "what are those things?" and we're like, "they're kayaks! Sit on top kayaks."

And now I mean, think of how commonplace that is. Now with the advent of stand-up paddleboarding, look at all the people that are getting on the water and now my latest and most exciting thing is that the whole problem of getting people windsurfing was that they didn't think they could do it to begin with and it was difficult and now you have all these people carrying around boards that you can easily put a sail on them and the one thing stand-up paddleboarders hate is wind! So when it's too windy to stand-up paddleboard, give them a sail! And give them a really good lesson and now they're off sailing! And everybody's out. So it's a very very exciting time and having purchased this property with the idea of facilitating access to the water so that here's where we offer it all in this cool Key West house.

I just, I'm very very close to owning this now after 15 years after struggling through all that— talk about economic disfunction. I mean here I am paying a couple thousand dollars a month to occupy a property on North 41 to run a business legally and everybody else went over and just ran their businesses in the park! And I'm like how dumb can you be? But at the same time once we were in, it was in for a penny, in for a pound because we made the commitment when it was illegal to do that. It was always illegal, but here we are and I still love this place and I'm really hopeful that some day we'll be able to do something where people would like come from the

water and come and have fish tacos on the way to wherever they're going and like really have water community as part of, more part of what we do here.

KEARSCHNER:

Sounds awesome.

KAISER:

Yeah! Cool. Alright!