

Dennis Burk
Interviewed by Dr. Jen Corrinne Brown
April 20, 2017
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Transcribed by Maxwell McClure

Jen Brown: It is April 20th, 2017. This is Jen Brown and I'm here with Dennis Burk, um, on the campus of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, and we're here to talk about his work as a volunteer at the Texas State Aquarium, and his various adventures, um, and involvement with environmental history. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Dennis Burk: Yes, you do.

JB: Okay.

DB: You surely do.

JB: Thanks. Perhaps a good starting point would be for you to talk a little bit about your background and early life.

DB: Okay, um, I grew up in the Midwest, Wisconsin specifically. Lived in Milwaukee, lived in Madison, lived around the state as I grew up, went to high school there of course. And, um, because of the lakes, I got into the watersports even though six, seven months of the year there were frozen lakes. Um, did a lot of water skiing and a lot of boating, and every time I got a larger boat, I went further down the Mississippi, or I went somewhere in the Great Lakes and cruised around. I used to look at this beautiful boat at my house in Madison nine months of the year covered in snow partially, if not all. And, uh, I came down to Corpus Christi, Texas, on a vacation one time with the thought of, "I need to get out of that snow and see where I can go!" So I came down to Corpus Christi, I brought some cash with me, and back in those days there were savings and loans everywhere, so I opened an account at a savings and loans, so I had money in town and I got a real estate agent and got a house over in Portland, Texas, when Portland had one Whataburger and two streets, there wasn't much over there. This was 1979 and, um, got myself a little job down here on Water Street working with Tradewinds Ford as a service advisor which I had done in Madison at a Ford dealership. So, I went back to Madison and gave two weeks' notice, and the owner of the dealership said, "I know what you're doing, I don't blame you a bit" (laughs). I hate to lose you, but I know where you're going. So I hooked up this big twenty-four-foot boat, pulled it down to Corpus Christi, put it in the Gulf of Mexico, and went deep sea fishing and discovered the beauty of the Gulf of Mexico. And I have a whole little lecture that I actually give to local people whenever the question comes up, or whenever I'm at the aquarium as to, in quotations, "Why is your water so brown here? Because we have been to Florida, we have been to the Caribbean, you know, we can see the bottom. Why is your water so brown?" So, I actually made a PowerPoint and gave the answer to that question as a topic of my talk down here at the education center on Water Street. Anyway, um, after doing that a bunch of years, I met a Canadian nurse here in Corpus Christi, she and I started to do a little cycling, and she said, "You know, I have been here a couple years. My visa is expiring, um, I have an aunt

who lives in Copenhagen, Denmark, why don't you come home with me for Christmas and we'll fly to Denmark and cycle around Denmark and stay at my aunt's house?" So me being the free spirit at that time that I was, I'm thinking, "I've got a house, I've got this big boat, I've got a car, and it's all paid for, my furniture, and all this stuff," and I thought, "What a time." I was twenty—I was thirty-nine, sorry, thirty-nine years old, and I said, "What an opportunity for me, the adventurous person I have inside" (laughs). I sold everything I owned, put it all on a Visa card in a money market uptown here in Corpus Christi and we drove home to her folks house for Christmas from Corpus Christi to Ottawa, Canada, and in January, they took us to Montreal, and we flew to Lisbon, Portugal, with our bicycles disassembled in boxes as our checked baggage. We unloaded, put our bikes together, and we rode around Europe for six and a half months. Coming back to Canada in August after going in January, and I spent another month in Canada, and she said, "You know, if you want to go home and see what's going on, you know, you can take my old car. I'm going to get a new car." So, she gave me her old clunker that still had Texas plates on it (Brown laughs), it was sitting in Ottawa, and I drove back to the United States, stayed with my folks for Christmas, and moved out to Colorado, and I lived in Boulder, Colorado. This was 1988. I had my fortieth birthday on that bicycle trip in Ireland. My last name, Burk, doesn't sound Irish, but it's extremely Irish. [5:00] If you go to Ireland and look at the Burk name, it's all over the west coast. Uh, the Burk family name was very important to the running of the government in Ireland back in the, whatever, sixteens, I guess. Um, so I ended up in Boulder, Colorado, and worked again at an automobile dealership. I worked at a Mercedes Benz dealer in Boulder, and I started to—I have always had a huge interest in science no matter what it was, the biology of science, the mechanics of things that go with medicine, and taking care of people, the new surgeries, all the new instruments. So, I went up to Boulder community hospital and I applied for a job and I said, "I have no experience in the medical field whatsoever, but I want to get into it. If you give me a chance, here I am, if I don't work out, tell me, "Sorry, it didn't work out," and I will leave. And I went from being a unit assistant, an orderly if you will, to taking, um, medical terminology classes, I became a phlebotomist, drawing blood all over. "Here comes the vampire," I got that every day (Brown laughs). And um, I missed my ocean. I hiked in Colorado, I skied all over Colorado, I loved—it's a beautiful place. They have winter. I came down here originally to get rid of my winter and now I'm out there in winter again. So, I called Memorial Hospital from Boulder, told them I had graduated from nursing school in Denver, and what's the opportunities? The guy said, "We have jobs, I can't give you a job on the phone, come down here for an interview." So, I flew back to Corpus Christi, I stayed with some old friends here, and I had a job in two hours at Memorial. That was 1993 and I have been here ever since.

[7:04]

JB: Oh, wow.

DB: I stayed, I worked for Christus Spohn, I went from surgery, I went to, um, education department. My last couple years I was a nursing educator. Whenever they had anything new, policy, procedures, instruments for us to teach the nursing staff, they would bring it to the education department, and then thirteen of us would go out to six hospitals and teach three thousand nurses by their signature that they'd got the education. And on top of that, I did all the CPR classes, I taught nonviolent crisis intervention, I did all kinds of different classes besides

just whatever the education had going for us. Annual reviews of all the staff, all their questions they had to answer knowing they knew their jobs, all that was done. So, then I, in 2010, I said, “You know what,” I said, “I have lots of hobbies, I have kayaks, I have a Harley Davidson that I love to ride, I have the aquarium that I’m volunteering at, I want to go out and volunteer at the national seashore and do all the turtle work that they have.” So, I told my boss that, “I think it’s time for me to retire.” And she goes, “Please don’t go but I understand” (laughs). You know, so in fact, the head of human resources said, “Tell him he can’t leave!” You know, so, uh, they were all happy for me anyways. So, I retired in 2010, and so this June, it will be seven years already. So, let’s get back to, uh, the aquarium. Here’s a real interesting story about the aquarium. You’ve heard my story of coming to Corpus Christi and leaving Corpus Christi. In about 19—, someone could look this up to be, to have a date correct, but about 1980, ’85 or ’86, there was a Bayfest that they always have downtown on the barge dock next to the Art Museum, they built, someone, they—I can’t even tell you who they were at the time. There was a group of people [9:08] that would love to have had an aquarium in Corpus Christi. So, they built a little block house cave-like things out of cement blocks and, uh, they got Coca-Cola to sponsor the t-shirts, and it said, “Texas State Aquarium?” big question mark. And they were like an aqua green tee shirt and in pink it had the words asking, “Would you like an aquarium here?” And on the back, it said that Coca-Cola was sponsoring those shirts and the idea. So, I think maybe some, maybe Mary Hicks for one was there. There were a lot of people who would really love to get together and have an aquarium, in this little blockhouse cave, they had little tanks of fish just to get at people in there. Well, I was one of those people with a t-shirt. I was one of the very first volunteers thinking, “Wouldn’t that be awesome?” As a diver, uh, I had taken and got certified for my diving my first time here in Corpus Christi and then I became a divemaster with another shop here in town. Had my test fifteen miles offshore in five-foot waves, had to go down fifty feet and rescue a person feigning that he was drowning, bring him to the surface, and swim him to the rig against the current. That was my test for divemaster (laughs).

JB: Wow.

DB: Plus being available to give classes, being an assistant in classes, that’s all part of divemaster requirements. So, um, thinking then, I’m thinking, “Oh, wouldn’t that be awesome?” Well then, this whole trip came up to Europe, the Colorado stay for almost six years, the coming back to Corpus Christi, and I arrive, and here’s the aquarium. It’s three years old. Where do I go immediately? To the Texas State Aquarium, 1993. Told them I’m diver certified, and I know my fish, so let’s get into this. So, they had me come on board and do the feeding shows; I’m an entertainer at heart, I had my own shows that I did, and I still do there to give the audience a good time when they’re not just watching somebody giving out food to the fish. I’m blowing air rings, I have a huge conch shell on the floor I pick up and I tell them, “Watch this.” And I drop it and show them how fast it sinks and then I quickly grab my regulator and burp it with air, fill it with air, and put the regulator back in my mouth, and then I let go of it, and it goes sailing up above the tank. Just part of the show, you know whatever I—

JB: —So you’re actually in the big tank? (both speaking at once)

DB: The rig tank is where I do a lot of the cleaning.

JB: Oh.

DB: And this is in the Flower Gardens exhibit, is where we do the feeding shows, where the back wall has a big photograph of the flower gardens and it says, “Gardens in the Gulf,” that represents the flower gardens. And then on the wall we have a display of how the flower gardens were formed, what caused the flower gardens. And I can get back to my initial PowerPoint talk that I was telling you about. I’m on the beach out here on Padre Island [12:24] and people walk up to me and they go, “Do you live here?” And I go, “Yeah, I’ve been here a long time.” “Well we’re from Florida, we thought we’d come over and see the Texas coast,” here comes the quotation, “Why is your water so brown here?” (laughs) You know? And I tell them, “It’s a very simple answer, it’s physics, it’s geography, it’s the way things are here.” I said, “Coral needs to be in water seventy degrees or warmer to live to form a reef.” The Texas Coast, and in fact, the entire Gulf of Mexico in the winter gets to be forty-eight, fifty degrees, fifty-two is warming up, right? So, coral can’t live here. Coral is very heavy. If you go to Florida, or the Keys, or wherever you Caribbean vacation, pick up a handful of their sand and let it go, it goes immediately to the bottom because it is heavy coral. You see the clear color of water, you think it’s so gorgeous, it is. Here in Corpus Christi, we have the Mississippi river putting fine farmland from Iowa, Wisconsin, every second of the day. Red silt is in the Gulf of Mexico, which is very feather light, comes to our coast with our southeast winds now when you go out there and wiggle your toes, it’s silky, silky, beautiful, but it can’t come out of suspension when the waves pick it up and crash down the little silt, if you can follow a single particle, you would see it maybe never gets to the bottom before it gets lifted again with all of its buddies. So, you can’t see through that silty suspension. When our winds calm down, you can go out in the late fall and see your toes. If you go twenty-five, thirty-five miles off shore to the rigs to dive, the visibility is one hundred feet in all directions. The bottom of the gulf has a light layer of smoke, if you will. It looks like a rock concert about one hundred feet down because it’s the silt being picked up in the currents swishing it around very, very deep. But from seventy, eighty feet to the propellers on the boat, you can see it crystal clear out there. It’s absolutely gorgeous. So, I tell people after my talks, so I said, “Now that you know coral needs warm water we don’t have, we don’t have the heavy, heavy sand that amounts to crushed coral. We have light, fine, silt, we have southeast winds blowing the silt to our coast. Now you can explain why the water is so brown. It’s not really that—there is nothing dirty about it. It’s just suspension filled for visibility.

JB: Um-hm.

DB: So that’s the story of that.

JB: Do you—how many times do you think you’ve given that talk?

DB: I probably have given that talk, I’m just going to throw out twenty-five times pretty easily.

JB: Uh-huh.

DB: I gave publicly at that education center down there. And then when I’m at the aquarium, I stand in front of the tanks, and I love to go off on a little talk. People will come up, and I’m assigned to a certain room, and maybe a typical volunteer will be there to answer questions if

they're asked. I don't wait for questions, ever. I walk into my room I am assigned to like the offshore rig, and people are all in there looking, and I say, "Hey, have you guys looked up, have you seen what we have up here?" [15:53] And I get them to look up and see the rig that's around them, and I've had people tell me, "We've been members here five years and we have never seen this." And I go, "That's why I come in here," (Brown laughs) you know? So, when I go to the flower gardens, I do the same thing. I walk in there. I don't wait for questions because they will never ask them. They don't know what to ask. So, I will approach, and I will say, "Did you guys ever hear of the Flower Gardens?" And they go, "No, what's that?" You know, and I say, "Well, I live in Corpus Christi, and I'm a diver, and if I go to a picnic, or I go to a party, or someplace where I don't know everybody." And they go, "What do you do?" I said, "Well, I'm a retired nurse, but I'm also a volunteer at the aquarium, and I'm a divemaster." "You're a diver? Have you ever been to the Flower Gardens?" That's almost the first question that comes out of people's mouths when they hear you are a diver and they want to know if you have been there. I was invited two years ago and spear lionfish by this group in Galveston trying to clean the reef of the destructive lionfish that are out there. They're all over the Caribbean now. So, um, I had given that a lot. I'll stand in front of a Flower Gardens and then I will tell people why this is such a special, rare little place, and exactly from Corpus Christi, it's two hundred and twenty miles to the Flower Gardens. From Galveston it is one hundred and ten. And how does it exist? And that there's this little, tiny, wizard of a current that comes over and just hangs out there in the winter and keeps the flower gardens sixty-nine to seventy degrees, just barely survivable. Of course, the summers are hot, the water is warm, there is no problem. Some salt domes rose up in prehistoric times, hundreds of thousands of years ago these big salt mounds came up on the bottom, some little polyps were drifting along in the ocean, they landed there, and they didn't die. [17:49] So, they—more came and they formed a reef and now there is the Flower Gardens Banks. Had that not been kept alive by that little warm whisper of warm water in the winter, there wouldn't, it would have never existed. We'd never have the Flower Gardens. So, the mystery is solved by, yes, we know why coral lives (laughs). It doesn't, it stays alive because of the temperature.

JB: Um-hm. How would you describe the Flower Gardens as a diver?

DB: The Flower Gardens is unique in the fact that it's different heads of coral, and then there's some desert, and then there's more parts of coral reefs. So, the Flower Gardens is, literally, if you tell people how unique it is and the size of it, um, then you tell them the actual square miles is forty square miles. And they think, "Oh, that must be huge!" [18:41] Well no, it isn't. It's, you know, certain little spots where the coral formed on these domes that are high enough to get the sunlight, to keep the whole ecosystem going. Um, if those domes hadn't risen up, and the Gulf there is four hundred to five hundred feet deep right at the flower gardens, things would have never formed, never lived there if those domes hadn't come up high enough where it's, from the surface, it's about sixty-five to seventy feet to the top of the reef where sunlight can change, and warm, and, you know, help things grow that maintain the coral and maintain the fish life that came there because fish love structure. You can put anything in the ocean, anything, a bottle, a stick, a float, coral heads, they will come to it. They're drawn to that for protection, for food, um, you know, a place to mate, a place to give birth, whatever. So, structure is the important thing, and that's how it all developed. And the story I tell people, "How did they get the name?" "You know," I said, "Fishermen years ago used to go out in that area of the Gulf. It's way out there. But they were catching a lot of fish, things were good, then they move over here and there's

nothing biting because they're in the open Gulf of the flat, sandy bottom." And, um, how does anything get a name? There's got to be a story that goes with it, so I said, "This is perhaps how it happened. One day, somebody said, 'You know what? We need to go out there and dive and find out why there's so much good fish in there, must be something down there!' So, they went and dove, and they come up and here's the guys on the boat, 'Well, what do you got? What did you see?' And they go, 'Man, it looks just like a flower garden down there, it's so beautiful. You wouldn't believe it, we don't have this any place on the Texas coast, and we came out of here from Galveston and now we have a flower garden. It's all beautiful corals, different colors, some sponges that come and, you know, be part of a reef. So, um, this is how, maybe, it got its name?' So then they said, 'You know what? We got to quick dragging anchors over this, we're tearing up all this precious coral when we leave here.'" So then NOAA came out, the National Oceanographic people, with their ships, and they put permanent buoys, and they've got anchors and chains, and big floating buoys, you come to the buoys, you hook onto [21:10] the buoy, you dive, you fish, you have fun, you unhook, and you go home. Your anchor never gets wet. You do not use an anchor out there because you're going to hurt something. So now, NOAA has, uh, got this to become a national marine sanctuary, thankfully it's protected. There's fishing limits, there's diving, you can dive all you want, there's no anchors. They're out there every day, I tell people, they're out there every day with their big ship, unless there's a storm coming, doing fish counts, doing scientific experiments on water quality, the lionfish count, how much are they spreading. Let's go shoot a bunch of lionfish and get them off of this reef because they're literally eating everything that wiggles. Lionfish are not particular; they will eat anything. And then we have a whole nice little lionfish exhibit at the aquarium, and I stand there in front of people from Minnesota, from Florida, well not even from Florida, they would know—interior United States, they have never heard of the lionfish. They have no kind of a problem we're having in the waters. And I have a whole little, if you will, lecture that I give there and then I tell them, "If you ever see it on the menu, please have some" (Brown laughs). That's my finishing line (laughter), and then I tell, "Well, are they good to eat?" And I said, "Well you know what? We had a lionfish dinner at the aquarium to give everybody a chance that could come and taste it." And I said, "Because I am standing here talking to you guys, I went home and did my homework and I Googled 'Restaurants serving lionfish USA.'" I found fifty restaurants registered on the internet that have lionfish, and in Florida alone, there's fifteen restaurants that have them on the daily menu because they are available to them. They can go and spear them, get them from the spear gun guys, and have lionfish every day. So, I can't wait for my next Florida trip so I can eat lionfish for four or five days (laughter), you know? I go out to Groomer's Seafood here in Corpus Christi, Charlie is one of the main guys on the floor that runs the store over there, and I go, "Charlie, where are my lionfish?" He goes, "Man, we just, we don't have every kind of," —if you've ever been to Groomer's, they have every fish in the world out there for sale on ice in front of the big window, and you just pick out what you want, but there's no lionfish [23:32]. We need to be eating them because of the destructive nature. So, I had went to HEB to the fish counter and I got the manager of the HEB fish counter, and I ask her, I said, "How come you guys don't have any lionfish for sale?" And she goes, "Lionfish, I don't know." I said, "Look, go home on your computer, go to YouTube, the search box is long and narrow, and I said put in one word, 'lionfish,' one word. Look at the videos, see what a plague they are, what's problem, what's going on in our Caribbean, in our—in thirty-five years, there wasn't any here, any they have taken over the entire Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. They're all the way down in Venezuela, they're in the ABC islands, they're all over the place. What are they doing?

They're eating everything. They just eat everything." And I went in the store another week or ten days later, and she was at the counter, I said, "Well, what did you think? Did you get to see it?" And she goes, "Oh my god, I had no idea how bad this is." And I said, "Yes, I'm so glad you did." Another visit to her a couple weeks later, maybe a month later, she said she went to a meeting in San Antonio and brought it up to them because she's a fish manager. And they told her that, "Because of the difficulty to catch lionfish, they couldn't easily—the cost-effective thing was not there." To be—because if we could see them here in Corpus Christi with our visibility problem, if we could see them and go down and spear them, we could have them in our fish markets. We could have them in our restaurants everywhere. [25:11] You go to Florida, Guy Harvey, the famous artist in Florida, the Guy Harvey t-shirt guy—

JB: —Yeah.

DB: He has a resort on the southwestern coast of Florida very close to the Keys and he sends divers out every week and they just spear lionfish all day and bring them in. And then he'll post on Facebook him sitting on a boat with a lionfish on the end of a spear. Because of their venomous spines, you can't literally catch them on a fishing rod. I always tell my guests that are listening to me, I go, "You can't go, 'Honey, look what I caught!' and grab this thing and take it off the hook because now you're going to have venom injected, a neurotoxin, into your hands, you're going to have all this pain like you got hit by a stingray, you might swell, fever, everything, so you can't take them off the hook, so we've got to go down with spear guns." Excuse me. And there is a guy in Venezuela that invented, if you will, it's a very simple thing, it's called the "ZooKeeper." It's a big, wide PVC tube with a big handle on it, says, "ZooKeeper," got a garbage disposal mouth on one end of it, so now they take it down with them spearing, and they spear, stick the fish in there, pull it out, it cleans it off the spear, they can spear another one. So, it's very, very quick, very rapid. You can put twenty-five lionfish in the ZooKeeper before you have to go back to the boat, dump it in the cooler, and go back for more.

JB: Hm.

DB: So, I would be all about it, I'd have my ZooKeeper and my spear (laughs) if we could see them here, you know.

JB: I saw some guy out on Packery Channel Jetty the other day with a spear, but—

DB: —Did you?

JB: I didn't see him, I wasn't long enough there to see if he had gotten anything.

DB: The visibility on the Packery is very, very, very limited, you know. Was it on the inside, the outside?

JB: The outside.

DB: The outside, yeah. There are, um, big sheepshead there, there are redfish of course, I don't know what the State of Texas allows you to spear redfish. You know, there is a limit if you are

using a hook and line, [27:13] but I don't know what it is on a spear, what you can do there. But occasionally they catch lionfish off the Bob Hall Pier and the Caldwell Pier in Port A, you know, they will be out there trying to catch something and "Oh, what's this thing?" Oh my gosh, they got a lionfish. They're there, but we can't see them to harvest them. So, it's really a shame.

JB: Hm, so it sounds like a lot of your work is kind of educating the public on various environmental issues—

DB: —Yes—

JB: —but storytelling is a big part of that.

DB: Yes.

JB: So how, I mean, what does it take to be a good volunteer, and then how did you learn the art of storytelling?

DB: You know, I'm not sure, I always give my dad a lot of credit, he was a salesman. He was a speaker type of person, and as a young guy, and the oldest of the siblings, um, I credit him for a lot of my ability to talk. I have no stage fright. I've come out here to the university and I've talked to the nursing classes when I was working for Spohn as an educator. I would come out here, and go to the auditorium, and it's just all these nursing students. And I would just step up there and talk to them about becoming a nurse, and what you're going to face, and what your fears are, and what you should not fear, and what you should accept and work through and become a great nurse, and suddenly you'll be here in my place. You know? And, um, when I'm at the aquarium, I am just in my own element, when I—like at the Flower Gardens. I'm staying in front of that window and we'll have a bunch of people waiting for the feeding show if I'm going to talk before the diver comes in the water, for example. And I'll just walk in there, and I'll say, "Hey, is anybody hungry?" And they all raise their hands, you know. And then I go, "Not you guys, I mean these fish in here" (Brown laughs). You know, so I just create stories and I have no, uh, perspiration, no palpitation, or anything to talk to them. To me, it's [29:10] pure entertainment to entertain them. And I just love to do it, so I'm not sure where it comes from, it's spontaneous. I can't get enough of it, I go over on my duty thing is three hours and I'll be there four to five hours after my given stations are done, I'll go where there isn't a volunteer and just talk to people. And when you get a group of people together and they come to you and they go, "Oh, thank you so much," you know, I've got people shaking my hand after I get done talking to them, and they tell us, they tell me, "Thank you, we would have never known that had you not been here, we wouldn't have learned all this stuff" (laughs). I tell them, "That pays all the bills. That buys my gas over here, just you learning something, you know, the appreciation that you have that someone's here." And sometimes I wish I can double or triple myself because there's days when I am over here and there's three spots with nobody, and I know what these guys are missing, but I'm here now until, you know, the next hour clocks by, then I get to go over there and continue teaching. So, I'm not sure, um, I think maybe that's why I got picked to be a nursing educator, um, after I finished an interim management job at Memorial. They were looking for some new managers, and I told them, "I do not want to be a nursing manager." They said, "Well, how about doing interim for us, come over, and when we get a manager, you can

slide out, you know, and whatever.” And I said, “Okay, I was real happy doing what I was doing, but okay.” So, I went to Memorial and became an interim manager. Six months later, they found someone, interviewed somebody they were going to hire, and so I am a free agent, if you will, again, loose, what can I do? And they come to me and ask me if I would do that again one more time, there is another manager leaving another floor down, and I said, “Uh, okay, one more time.” And my staff would come and say, “We want you to stay, won’t you interview for the job?” And I go, “No, no,” I said, “I would write a check to get out of here” (laughter). “This management thing is not for me. You know, I need to be teaching or taking care of patients.” So, um, once they hired the second manager, then human resources called me and she, I got to her office, and she said, “I have jobs everywhere. Tell me what you want to do, you can work any place because you’ve got the experience.” And I said, “Well, I’ve been looking around, I wasn’t sure how quick this job was going to end, you know.” She said, “Well, the education department has a job open and their leader would like to talk to you.” And I said, “Well, I’ll go in there.” So, here’s my chance to get into an education factor as a nurse again. So then I was teaching my classes, teaching CPR, teaching people how to deescalate people that are becoming violent, how to suppress the violence, how to get it, pick it up before it becomes violent, non-crisis, non-violent crisis intervention, and I had to go to a class to get certified to be an instructor for that, too. [32:17] So, it just kept evolving, you know, and for me, it’s just me, I guess it’s hard to put your thumb on it when it’s you personally. But when I go to the aquarium, I’m just in a beautiful place. I mean, I can’t wait to give information to people that want to hear it. I don’t badger anybody, but I’ll feel them out with a couple of questions and if they go “No, tell us about that,” and then I tell them, and then they go, “Oh man, we would have never known.” So that, it just becomes great. I mean, I just can’t wait to get over there, you know.

JB: I was actually going to ask you, um, how your career as an RN helped you become a good volunteer, but it sounds like you just enjoy working with people and teaching people?

DB: Yeah, pretty much. And then, um, I am sitting home after being at the aquarium twenty-three years [33:08] in June, I’ve been there twenty-four years as a volunteer and I’m watching the news in there telling us about the cold stunned turtles here in the winter. The water gets real cold, and I understand how that works. They’re reptiles, uh, the water gets to be fifty degrees or colder, which it does, which is another thing that goes into why we don’t have coral, and, um, I’m going, “I need to be doing that, too. I need to be volunteering.” So, when I want to do something like I did in nursing, I went to the hospital, I went to a manager’s office, told them, “This is what I want to do, I haven’t got the experience, but help me help you. Let me try this out, let me get into this.” Well, the national seashore [Padre Island National Seashore] has these classes you go and meet for the class, you have to sign federal papers so you can handle the turtles and be legal, you know. So, I went to the first class when I found out when it was, and then it’s just like, “Okay, when am I going to hear from somebody?” You know, so I drove all the way out to the seashore, I drove up to the turtle lab, I walked in and met Lucy Gannon and Dimitra, the head of the volunteers thing, and I said, “Hi,” you know, I said, “I took the class,” I said, “I just want you guys to know that I am here genuinely wanting to work with you. There’s a hundred people that come in, get their little paper, and listen to the thing, and sign the paper, but I want you to know you can call me this afternoon or tomorrow morning, and if there’s something to do, call me because I am one of your volunteers that’s going to show up. So, they start doing that. I mean, they called me all the time and then now I’m on the boat crew, if we

have a cold stunning, there's only one volunteer that gets to go with the rangers on the airboat. That's me, I'm on the boat crew now because I told them, you know, "Well you have boating experience?" I said, "I have boating experience you wouldn't believe" (laughter). I've had six boats, each one was bigger than the last one, and I've boated the Mississippi, the Great Lakes, the Gulf of Mexico, I said, "I can go out and drive whatever you have if you needed a driver, if you need an experienced boater, you got it," you know. [35:13] So, um, they call me whenever we're going to take the airboat out and look for cold stunned turtles. So—

JB: —You just go along the beach?

DB: We go down, yeah, we go past the intercoastal. The shallow water gets colder faster, obviously, than the gulf does, and the gulf is churned up and stirred up, so if there's any warm water left, the gulf will stay much warmer because it's constantly being turned over where the Little Laguna fifty percent, seventy-five percent of the Laguna is three feet deep, you know. The center channel is deeper, but the shore is miles of shore is just like this. That's why we take an airboat so we can fly across. We actually have a propeller-driven boat that we use but it's not as easy. So, we go down there, and then we got big glasses, and once you've done turtle rescue, you get an eye for that little dome shell. You don't mistake it for weeds or a rock. You know there's a turtle, then you tell the guy up here driving, "There's a turtle" (laughs). You know, so we whoosh, slow it down, and we jump overboard in our waders, and we'd go and pick up the turtles. And, um, in 2014, we rescued seven hundred turtles out here on the Texas coast, um, that were cold stunned. And if you need an explanation of cold stunning, again, it's a reptile, fifty degrees or colder water they become the water temperature, they cannot swim, they can't eat, some of them drown because they're down, there so cold they can't even come up for air, and then we're out there on the beach and, I mean, there were turtles. We saw turtles all over the place out there that were just helpless on the sand flats and we got on the boat, Lucy and I started walking around, and all the sudden in the mist out there, we could not see them but they were just close enough out of visible range. The coyotes were howling, and barking, and squealing at us trying to scare us off because, "Don't take our turtles. That's our chow, you know." So we take a can of florescent orange spray paint, and we go down the beach, and every one that they have killed, the empty shells or the half mutilated turtles, they get sprayed bright orange because the next boat coming by looking for them will see the orange paint, and that they don't waste time going up there and checking where we've already checked. And each turtle when they're placed back in the ocean are given a pit tag, a little chip in their flipper, so we can scan. We scan every turtle we pick up, we scan them for a chip, so we find, "Yeah, we got you last year, you know," [37:50] and we take a GPS reading and a photograph so we know exactly where that turtle was picked up right from the satellite, you know, markings. And we can tell, "Okay, we got you last year. Were you in the same place, or did we pick you up ten miles away? Or where, what," that whole story. So, the statistics they have on file out there on the local turtles is just incredible. I mean, it just goes on and on knowing here's a turtle we got last year, and there's where we got him before, that kind of thing. So, we pick them up and put them in the boat after we will photograph them. And then we take them back to the turtle lab, and we measure them three different ways. Um, if they don't have a tag, they get a tag, they get a chip before we put them back in the water, and once they're all worked up if, you will, then they are sent to the ARK in the Port Aransas to Tony Amos' Animal Rehabilitation Keep. He keeps them, and warms them, and it's a slow warming. We even tell volunteers, "Do not turn the heat on in your

car when we pick turtles.” If we get them ourselves like on our walking tours that we go on to find the turtles, I’ll be out there and if I find one, I’ll put in the back of my truck, and I’ve got a nice four wheel drive truck out there, and, uh, you don’t run the heat because you don’t want to warm them. Like, you and I would get in a car freezing cold and we’d say, “Well, turn the heat on,” you know, and “we want to warm up,” and we don’t do that to the turtles. It’s very slow. So when we get them to the turtle lab, we put them in plastic kiddie pools, we lay a towel on their back just to keep whatever heat’s available in their body, and add some heat—but, nothing is given to them where they’re in front of a little stove, you know. So, once the Gulf of Mexico warms back up again, then we announce public releases. This is a release where we have time to announce to the people, “It’s Monday morning, Thursday we’re putting them back in the ocean, everybody come out and see,” and sometimes we will have fifteen hundred to a thousand people out there at Malaquite Beach. We rope off a big section, that’s a part of the job, putting out all the cones and the tape to keep people away, and then we will carry the turtles in front of the whole crowd, let them photograph and let them see turtle right close in front, and then we give the victory sign, we raise them up if we can. We had two that were one hundred pounds this last release in January. Whew, took me, a ranger, (Brown laughs) Tom, to pick up these two hundred pounders and take them out the surf. Oh my gosh, they were so heavy. I mean one hundred pounds, I mean, if you can even lift one hundred pounds in a barbell, you may be able to, but when you’ve got this big, broad turtle and its flapping wanting to go in the water that’s a hundred and fifty pounds.

[40:42]

JB: Yeah.

DB: He gains fifty pounds just in flight. But then we set them in the ocean, we literally walk into the surf, and set them in the water and there’s underwater cameras out there, everybody films them as they’re swimming off, you know. And, uh, it’s a fun release because we’re putting them back in the ocean. This is in contrast to the baby hatchlings, that are put way back on the sand, so they can imprint the beach. And science, I love to look into everything I can, and the reasons why and all the descriptions, science has yet to determine exactly what they imprint, but not knowing, we have to give them the best chance we can, so we set them on the sand, let the smell the Padre Island sand, we do it only at sunrise so they look into the rising sun. They head out into the light and then they’re protected by all the birds that want to dive and eat them. That’s another big part of the volunteer section is to go out there and help fend off the birds. Once they hit the water, there’s nothing we can do, and we know what’s going on out there in the waves, you know, it’s a sad count. The estimation is one in one thousand baby turtles will ever come back in ten years and lay eggs. That’s not a big number. When we put four thousand, five thousand babies in the ocean every year, five of those will come back maybe. So, it has to be done. You know, I had people last weekend ask me, “Well how come you guys all do that? I mean, do you just stand around and you just kind of guard the eggs?” And I said, “No, we would have to sleep by every nest” (laughter). I said, “We can’t, we take them out of the sand, we put them in a Styrofoam cooler with our beach sand, again, so they can smell our beach, take them to the incubation house, and then baby turtles do a strange thing. And I explain it to people by saying, “Look how small the baby turtle is. In that body there’s only so much stored energy. They don’t have food, they’re not eating, you know, power bars, or Hersey bars, or any sugar, or anything.

There's nothing that going to give them any more energy than they have built up from nature." When they break out of that egg, what do they do? They come up to the surface and they go to the beach. Well, we have them in a little incubation house, and Dr. Shaver is out there, and she, we call her mother turtle, she gets up in the middle of the night [43:05] and looks and sees if her babies are going to be born. The minute they start cracking out of that egg, they have to announce a public release if they're going to have one. It's a very quick notice because the turtles go into something called a frenzy which means they are flailing trying to get to the water. So, if you let them hatch and then set them down like little pet store turtles, they're going to frenzy, then when you take them to the beach and set them down, they're done. They don't have an ounce of energy left, they've frenzied. They've done all their little flapping and now they're on the beach, "Are you kidding me? That's too far, I can't get to that water." So, they're exhausted and we don't want that to happen. We want them to naturally get to the water. So as soon as they crack, let's announce a thing. We may have one day before they go into frenzy. Sometimes there's actually a public release announced, and it has to be canceled because they've frenzied in the night. They were beginning to frenzy and they are rushed to the ocean. That's why the incubation house is just a hundred yards from the water. Uh, if they start to frenzy, they are picked up and taken right to the ocean. "Oh I'm sorry, this morning we were going to have a public release, but that's over now because they're in the water. So, this is a lot of things that the public don't know. They just go, "Oh why didn't you guys give us more time?" You know, we can't (laughter). We got to go when they're ready, you know.

JB: I'm sure you have some interesting stories about dealing with the public?

DB: Yeah, you know, a lot of times you'll meet people that—the thing about dealing with the public is that you have to be very diplomatic when they tell you wrong information. This is the thing that I've learned to deal with the best at the aquarium, at the turtle releases, people will tell you, they'll say stuff, and they believe it, and I'm almost—and depending on who they are, I'll say, "Now where did you ever hear that?" And I will tell them emphatically when I know that is totally incorrect, and here is really how it works. And I try to be diplomatic and—there was a little boy in there this past weekend, we have this thing down in our dolphin room where you can touch the screen, and you can touch a whale, and that whale will come big on the screen. You can hear the sound of that whale. You'll see his voice pattern, all about where they swim, where they, you know, calf, where—the whole thing. And the little boy goes, "Which is biggest whale?" You know, and I said, "It's the blue whale." And I said, "Not only is the blue whale the biggest whale," I said, "It is the largest animal that ever lived on the earth." And kids love their dinosaurs, and I said, "You know those huge, huge, dinosaurs that you know about? All these brachiosaurs and all these giant things? The blue whale [46:00] is bigger than any one of those. There is nothing ever been that has ever been as large as a whale on the earth." And I said, "The next time your friends tell you, or ask you 'What's the biggest animal ever?' tell them the blue whale." And I could see on his face like he went, "That is really cool, I have the answer," you know?"

JB: (laughs) I bet he told his friends.

DB: Yeah, and I said, "You never have to doubt that because no one will ever challenge you that there that that's wrong. That is the answer." So, he was so excited to take that information.

JB: Um-hm. Do you have any memorable, uh, experiences as a volunteer?

DB: In the, uh, you know, I have one. Yes, I do, if you have time for this story, I have time to tell you. I was diving in the big offshore tank one day. This is one of my prime stories this is, um, almost an emotional one for me because it made me so tickled to my heart when this happened. Um, I'm in the water, I'm cleaning, I'm vacuuming, and I look up in the window and there are three adorable little girls. And they're, you know, this big, this big, this big, and you're just assuming the way they're acting, they're little sisters. And I could look back, and I could see their mom. She was kind of waving back there in the background. She was just letting them come to the window. So, I got to back up a second. Before I went in there, I was walking through the exhibit before I went and got my wetsuit on, and they were there. I'm sorry, I forgot the beginning part of the story. They were there with their mom and I said, "Hey, how are you guys?" You know, and I said, "Oh yeah, we are just here to see the fish, you know." I said, well I am going to go in there in a few minutes and dive, and I'll come up wave at you through the window. And they go, "You're going in there?" And I go, "Yeah," I said, "Stick around and watch." You know, and then mom was trying to show them the aquarium [47:48] and stuff and I said, "Okay," so it takes a while for me to get in the back, get dressed, get all my gear, it was probably half an hour, forty minutes, and I'm thinking, "Oh, I don't know if they're going to be there." You know, they were just three little cuties anyway, just little dolls, and they were so interested. There's the typical kid that comes running through and just slaps the window and runs, and screams, and jumps, and then they're running off to the next. These three little girls were all there to see what was in that window. So, when I came down in the water and I started my vacuum and I'm doing my thing down there I look around, and they're not there. And I'm going, "Yeah, yeah, that's about right." I mean I had—all the sudden here they come. They come running up in front of the window, and they're going "Hi," (Brown laughs) because they knew me already, see. They're waving at me and they go, "Yes." And then I told them about the teeth, that I'm going to pick up teeth, and I'm kind of waving at them in the window, and all of a sudden, the oldest one is pointing over my shoulder. She's going—and she's pointing at the floor, and I turn around, and there's a big white tooth down there. So, I go over and I get it, and I pick it up, and I bring it back up to the window, and show her, and I said, "Look at that." Then I put it in my hand like this and bring it up so they can see it on the black glove on this white tooth. And I show it to them and I said, "That's great," you know. So, now they've seen, yes, I do find teeth there, right? So, I put it inside my glove, I'd probably collected three or four more teeth. I've always carried out in my truck right now outside and I have a little bag [49:11] of shark's teeth from our sharks. Always have them, everybody knows that if Dennis is here, he's got a bag of shark teeth (Brown laughs) because I give them out. And I give them out in discretion to the kids that really show interest that I know this will make their day to have a shark tooth, and it's not from the gift shop, it's from those two big sharks in there, right? The sand tigers. So anyway, uh, I got my dive done and then I see mom and I'm out of air. We're going to up and shower and stuff. So, I'm like this, I wave to their mother. She's sitting back on the bench on her phone while the kids are having fun. She comes up and I go, it's all sign language, so I told her, "I am going up to shower and then I am coming back here. Will you be here?" You know, and she goes, "Yeah, I'll be there, okay." So I go up and instead of doing my normal thing, rinsing my gear, hanging everything up, I went up there, hung, took my stuff off, took my fastest shower I could, I know I'm going to come back and service my gear later, I wanted to get

out there. I've got this big tooth that she pointed to, I've got these little teeth I my glove that I saved and rinsed off, got in my clothes, and then I come back out and I'm entering the room, and I hear, "Here he comes." They're already so excited, "Here he comes, he's coming back." You know, and I'm like, oh my God, my little heart goes like this. So, and they're the little ones this big, this big, and this big, so I got down on my knees so I could talk to them instead of me standing up staring down at these little kids. I knelt down on the floor, they came up and gave me this big hug. They're all hugging me, mom's there with a girlfriend that showed up, I guess, and they're taking pictures of me with the little kids, and I'm just having the day of my life, you know. And then I said to the big girl, I said, "Would you like to have the tooth that you found?" She goes, "Oh man, would I?" Oh, she was so excited, and I said, "Well here, this is the tooth that you showed me on the floor." So, she got the one she found and then I gave her little sisters some more teeth. They were so excited when I stood up, they were hugging my legs, and mom goes, "Thank you so much." And I said, "No problem" (laughter). I mean, I was just so emotional, I thought about that the whole next day. I thought how wonderful that was that that worked out that I met them, they saw me, they found a tooth through the window, I came out, I gave them a tooth, had a chat, and it was a quiet time there. There wasn't, you know, if there would have been five hundred people walking through there, it wouldn't have been that easy for me to kneel down to them and talk to them and show them the teeth, oh gosh. I have never been a dad, I have no children, I have a bunch of nieces that now have all grown, I used to be Uncle Den, and all my little nieces, you know. And now they're big kids, they're having babies, and so I've never had kids, and to have these little darlings be so excited, whew, I couldn't tell you.

JB: Wow, that's an amazing story.

DB: It was a wonderful story. [52:17] That was one of my very best days. Another really cool story when I was in the water, there was a night show, and we used to have a big black grouper in there, a Warsaw grouper, a big bass, they're a dark, dark color. And I came in, and for an evening camping, and I never know who the audience is going to be when I come down into the water to feed, I just from—I don't know if it's Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, mixed group of kids, I don't know who it is. So, I come down and it happens to be all these little Girl Scouts, and they're all waving, "Hi," at the diver, you know. And I look in the background, and I know some of the chaperones. They're people that I know that came with the Girl Scouts, they're like, "Hey," (Brown laughs) you know, I take my regulator off, they see who you are. So, during the feeding, I'm feeding the food out, all the fish were all over my face, they're covering me, I'm shaking out this jar of all this stuff, and all the sudden, boom. Something hits me in the chest, just hits me, just like that like somebody slapped me, and I love to tell this story in front of the tank while I'm out there talking. And people look at me like, "Ooh," and I said, "Yeah, I thought somebody snuck in here and came down the ladder, and came over my shoulder, and slapped me on the chest from behind, that's how hard it hit me." And when the fish, when the slap happened, all the fish spread out, and right in front of me is this great, big grouper with these big bass lips, and he's just looking at me like, "Where's my fish?" (Brown laughs). You know, if he could talk, he'd be saying, "Give me some," you know (laughter). So, I give him a little caper, he snaps that up, I give him a—he took four fish before he was happy and swam off (Brown laughs). So, I tell that story when I'm out in front of the tank, too, I say, "You see that grouper right there?" (laughter) I said, "He hit me in the chest so hard, I thought 'Who is this?' And they don't have

arms or legs, so how did he hit me? He rammed me with his head hard enough to get my attention because he wanted some food,” (Brown laughs) so that’s a funny story.

JB: Huh, that’s interesting. [54:21]

DB: Mm-hm.

JB: Um, let’s see why do you think it’s important for people to interact with animals and marine life and learn about the Gulf of Mexico?

DB: You know, the thing that occurs to you if you, when you meet a lot of people that don’t know about the ocean and things, and have all this pent up fear of everything, everything is going to bite you, sting you, kill you, poison you. Uh, in fact, I had a little boy one day looking in the lionfish tank going, “Yeah, you can’t eat those, they poison you.” And I said, “Oh lord, here we go,” you know. I said, “First of all, poisoning is different. If they had poison, the meat it would be poisoned, and it would kill you. Venom is delivered by all means.” I said, “These have venom, they’re not poisonous.” So, you know, you remove that. The important thing is that to educate and make people aware. That’s why we have things, you know, there’s the group that hates anything in captivity. And then I tell them, “It’s because of our exhibits that people learn to respect and love nature instead of just driving down the road with a gun their hand and “There goes a bird,” boom, and they try to shoot something because they don’t know about that beautiful bird, how rare it might be, a family it might have. Why are you blasting it because you’re just a hair brain with a gun? You know, and it’s the same thing, if we can educate people to appreciate and, uh, want to on their own be conservationists, say things. And in fact, now, you know, it really has gotten a big thing. We have the Sharkathon here now. When I came back to Corpus Christi, in fact, when I first lived here, shark fishing was a big deal. You could go to Port Aransas and a shark hunter boat was over there and they’d come cruising through the port in Port Aransas with a big shark hanging up there and everybody would be up there cheering a screaming because they got this big old shark out of the ocean. And now, Sharkathon is catch, photograph, release only. You cannot be caught with a shark in your truck. You, you know, you photograph them, and you better make sure film that they got in alive, that you got them back in the water. So, the more we can educate, the more we can make people aware of the beauty of nature and the fragility of it, how, um susceptible they are (laughs). You know, we think we have a bad day when the refineries flare, right? “Oh, my goodness.” It makes the news, they’re flaring. Well, imagine if you were surrounded by this pollution and you could not swim away from it, it’s in your face. Or its out in the brush, you know, you’re an animal, you don’t have the intelligence to dig a borough or build a house and slam the doors and shut the windows. You are just exposed to it. So, we as this intelligent group of beings are responsible for helping these animals that can’t help themselves. And if we cause more damage to them purposefully, or, you know, just not caring, not knowing what we’re [57:29] doing, it’s even worse. So, I think being a volunteer at the aquarium, just every day, I teach people about stuff and you wouldn’t believe how many I teach that moray eels aren’t going to come out of a cave and take your hand off and that a barracuda isn’t going to charge you and bite your ear off. You know, there’s all, every— Hollywood has made monsters out of things we don’t know a lot about. So, in my, I call it my job, is to teach people all that monster stuff is just for the movies. These are not bad or threatening animals. They are to be enjoyed, the beauty of them, you know. The green moray,

why is it green? It's actually got almost a bluish skin. I talk to little kids and I go, "Hey when you guys are coloring, and you're painting, and you need green, but you don't have green," I said, "what do you mix together to make green?" And real smart ones that know, "Oh yeah, blue and yellow." "Yep that's right you, you are right. You are the only one hundred that knows," and I tell them, "Well, congratulations" (Brown laughs). And then I said, "That eel has got blue skin, it secretes a yellow layer of lotion, if you will, slime, whatever you want to call it, on their skin to protect their skin from parasites, from damage, whatever. So, when you put their yellow secretions on their bluish skin, you see green." And I said, "That's the only reason they are green and that's the only eel that is the color of a mix of things that makes that happen." Well, then all the sudden, they're all, "Don't they attack, don't they bite?" And I go, "No," I said, "they sit in a little hole. If a fish comes by and they're hungry, they go out and grab the fish. That's what they do. Don't you go to the store and shop?" You know (laughter), I said, I tell them another story and I always prefaced that all of my stories are true. I said, "I have snorkeled in Cozumel, Mexico, for example, out in a reef when I wasn't diving, I was just going offshore, and I snorkeled over this whole reef just full of eels." I said, "I looked down and all I saw [59:35] was eel faces looking up at me going, 'What is that weird looking guy with that snorkel?' You know, not one of those eels ever came up out of that hole to attack me, to harass me." I said, "I'm not on their menu (laughs). They're going 'What is that?'" You know, so, the more—and then the barracuda is the same way. And then, we have an exhibit right now called "Saving Sharks." We need sharks, you know, the statistic still are that, in the world, we slaughter a hundred million sharks. That's a number that is not comprehensible, but wow, these kids go "One hundred million, what does that mean?" A year we slaughter for shark fin soup, and just long line fishing, and whatever a hundred million sharks are estimated to be killed very year. The shark population is being measured as dropping, and I tell these people all the time that, "If we lose the sharks that you all have fear of wrongly," and let me talk to you about that in a minute, um, "the things that they eat are going to start eating below the chain deeper and deeper and all of the seafood that you want to eat is going to vanish because now the predators below the sharks are consuming all these foods that we want to eat later. So, the seal—the sharks eat the seals that are eating the abalone and eating the clams and eating all of this other stuff. And, uh, we need our sharks." So, and then I tell them, "You know what? Because I come in and talk to you guys all the time," I said, "I do a lot of little research at home and I Googled there's a company that keeps track of how many human beings are killed by what animals every year, the number of [1:01:19] humans that die by cow, horse, snake, you know, jackrabbit," you know (laughter)? I tell them, "And you know what? The sharks are at almost the very bottom of that list." I said, "Last year in the entire world, think of the beaches in the world." Then I'll tell them, you know, "Just visualize Africa, Australia, the Gulf of Mexico, Florida, Venezuela, all the tropical islands, think of all those beaches. And they're full of sharks because that's where they live. There's thousands of them right here on Padre Island." And I said, "Three people lost their lives." I said, "Do you know how many people that were killed by taking a selfie last year?" (Brown laughs) And that's also registered, thirteen people died taking a selfie. It was crazy, a lady fell off a cliff in Machu Picchu, trying to get Machu Picchu and her face in the picture. She backed right off the cliff. So, I said, "You know, give the sharks a little bit of slack." They go, "Aren't you afraid to go in there?" And I go, "No, I'm not on their menu. The last thing they want to do is bite neoprene rubber wetsuits. Yes, divers and surfers get bitten by sharks. They look like food. The shark's brain hasn't got enough intelligence. We cannot train sharks, they're hunting for food, they are not eating all the time, our sharks eat once a day. They're happy, but when they're are hunting, if

you happen to be a surfer on a surfboard and look like a turtle and I feed from the bottom, I'm going to race up and bite that turtle, and oops, it's a diver (laughs). Now I've injured this guy, he has been hurt, maybe critically, I have my reputation [1:03:02] further enhanced as a mean killer, but I did not want to eat that surfer. I was really looking for a turtle. Fiberglass and wetsuits just aren't on my list," you know, speaking of the shark side of things. So, I have actually taken some people that stay on there long enough to listen to me to totally remove the silly fear they have about sharks. I tell them, "You know what? I have lived in Corpus Christi thirty-five years," I said, "there are hundreds and thousands of people out here that surf all summer long, playing, and surfing, and enjoying themselves." And I said, "My neighbor flies with the U.S. Coast Guard in the helicopter, and they go on the beach, and he tells me how many thousands of sharks they see from the helicopter." I said, "That's just full of sharks," and then I'll say, "Are you guys local?" "Yeah, we've lived here." I said, "When was the last 'shark attack,' in quotation marks, that you've heard of?" "Hm, I don't think I remember any. I know somebody that was bit by one." "Well what were they doing?" "Well," and then I tell them my true stories. I said, "I have been here for all these years and one guy was surf fishing, and every time he caught a fish, he'd tie it on a stringer on his pants and he's out there waist deep in the water. And the fish are hanging off of his leg, and a shark swims up, and bit him in the thigh because he was offering free lunch." And then I said, "Now, was that a shark attack?" No. "Was the man stupid?" Yes (laughs), you know? So we've got that down, right? I said, "I've talked to a little girl personally in Port Aransas that was surfing. She's coming down a wave and she was falling off of her board and saw a little shark in the water. She slammed it with her elbow, it retaliated by biting her in the elbow, because it had been clubbed in the head, and then it swam off." Was she attacked by a shark? No, no I guess not, no (laughs). She hit it, it barked back (Brown laughs) that's all it did. So, I said, "You know, guys, just go out there and enjoy. Your chances of getting bit by a shark are so small." "Well, we, I know (murmurs)" "Well you're just,"—everything creates the fear for you, that's the fun. That's how they make monsters in movies. You know, when *Jaws* came out, that ruined everything for so long. And then more sharks were slaughtered when that movie came out in what '76 or '77, something like that. The people were on a war path for the shark. Well, we didn't need that either and we don't need it today, see. So, the education part of it in doing these things is getting the world a few people at a time to recognize the beauty of nature and how it's our responsibility. If we as the smartest thing on the planet don't help them, don't take care of them, and cause their demise, where do they stand a chance, you know? So, it just makes it a no brainer for me. You've got to do it, and I enjoy doing it, and I try to do it in a way that they can relate to instead of just hitting them with cold, hard facts, you know.

JB: Mm-hm. [1:06:04]

DB: Giving my story (laughs) tide to it.

JB: That's a great place I think to conclude unless—

DB: —Yeah—

JB: —is there anything else that you wanted to share or, um, do you have a final ending story for us?

DB: I often feel like, I just, maybe I am so long winded I shouldn't stop (laughs). No, I appreciate the change to do this is probably—

JB: —Okay, well thank you (both speaking at once)—

DB: —I'm honored to be asked to come over and talk with you and I hope some of the material is helpful.

JB: Oh, definitely, yeah.

DB: And I'm always open for more questions. Whenever I leave the aquarium, I tell either guests I'm talking to, uh, if they know me, or once a great while, I'll get into a card exchange, and I might pull a card out and say, "You know, if you have anything else," some people left the aquarium and went back to their home in Austin and got a hold of me through the aquarium because they had more questions. They were really delighted at what I told them, and they just wanted to know more from me, which was another honor to have that happen, you know. But, uh, I leave them at the aquarium, and yourself, if there's anything more, never hesitate. I tell my guests at the aquarium, "Ask me anything. Challenge me, I love it. And if I don't know the answer, I will not make it up." I said, "I will get you the answer, I will find you here in the aquarium today. [1:07:31] If you can find something I can't tell you, I'll be interested in learning at the same time." Somebody was asking me about the life cycle of stingrays. You know, I can tell you all about stingrays, and again not to fear stingrays, and I tell people, "If I had a saltwater pool in my backyard, I would have at least three cownose stingrays to swim with every day in my pool. They are wonderful, lovely animals. Yes, Steve Irwin the crocodile hunter got killed by a stingray. But you know what? He killed himself by a stingray. His lack of knowledge about the animal, his approach, swimming right over the top of a great big stingray to pose for the camera and give it his hugging bear hug as he did with all the animals he could, he scared that stingray and it stung him in fear for its life in self-defense, a natural reaction was to whip its tail up. I said, "If he got stung anyplace else, neck shoulder, arms, or legs, he would still be here. It wouldn't have killed him. It hit him in the heart, freakishly, it hit him in the heart, and, um, the story goes that he pulled the barb out, which has backward facing snags on it. That allowed him to bleed to death. That stingray would have never killed me because I would have swam to the side of it, admired the beautiful stingray, and waved at the cameraman that were filming me and the stingray and it would have never touched me." I said, "I will walk through a pool of five hundred stingrays barefoot and they would never ever hurt me." I try to really heavily instill that in them to get over so many fears. I said, "When you go out of the beach, swish your feet." I said, "If your foot comes anywhere near a stingray, it is going to go in the opposite direction as fast as it can. They're little skittish scaredy cats. That stinger is to save their life only, they have no arms and legs. They can't push you off their back, they sting you to get you off their back right?" So, I said, "Don't fear stingrays, they are stuck with the name 'sting' because they have one. That's the shame of it, I'd like to call it something else (laughter). That is a 'brown floppy fish,' (Brown laughs) it happens to have a stinger, you know (laughter)?" Yeah, so that's, you know, it's just one more story, but it's one more cure to eliminate the fear and get them to enjoy the animal, you know. When I hang out at Stingray Lagoon, I tell them, "Man, they're just like little teddy bears." I said, "When I do a feeding show and I'm in the water with the stingrays, I take out a little silver fish called a capelin, I hold it up, and when they come over to me, they're

ready to eat.” And I said, “I even set one right on my head just to make the show more fun. I’ll lay the fish right up here, and they come and sit up here on my head and give me a big stingray bonnet while they are eating” (laughter). I said, “They’re not going to hurt you, please give me some slack,” you know?

JB: Yeah.

DB: So, anyway—

JB: —All right, great, (both talking at once) thank you, let me turn this off.

[end of recording]