

“What is he going to do about Ellie?”

A conversation with Ellie Towns, Retired Southwest Regional Forester

Margaret Hangan, Forest Archeologist, Kaibab N.F.

Scott Francis, Forester, Kaibab N.F.



Because I am an archaeologist and the Chair of the Regional Civil Rights Committee, I like to take advantage of African American History Month to highlight the contributions of African Americans in relationship to the history of the Forest Service.

In the past, Erin Woodard, currently an archaeologist on the Deschutes National Forest, and I created a poster about the African American foresters, loggers, and mill workers who migrated from Louisiana to work at the mill in the town of McNary, AZ near the Apache/Sitgreaves N.F. In 2012, Erin wrote a paper on the Triple Nickels, a World War II African American parachute troop who were instrumental in the development of the field of smoke jumping. In 2013, I thought that I would seek out Eleanor “Ellie” Towns and see if she would agree to be interviewed. For those who are not familiar with Mrs. Towns, she was the first African American woman to serve as a Regional Forester in the Forest Service (1998-2002). The first African American Regional Forester honor goes to Chip Callaghan (1994-1997) whom she replaced in the Southwest Region. This region also had the first Hispanic Regional Forester, Sotero Muniz (1985-1988). I had the honor of hearing Mrs. Towns speak in 2004 at a New Employee Orientation in Sacramento, Ca. and quickly realized why she has a successful post-Forest Service career as a motivational speaker. With a feeling of both excitement and a little trepidation, I contacted her via her web site and was ecstatic and relieved when she graciously agreed to speak to me.



Interviewing Ellie Towns was both a thought provoking and inspiring experience for me. She shared her history, some of her life stories, and many well-earned life lessons. They were made up of an equal part of seriousness, humor, and wisdom; and all were embedded with life lessons that demonstrated her incredible insightfulness about the human psyche, politics, and the systemic socio-culture concoction that characterizes a large organization like the Forest Service. The interview lasted about an hour and a half and is chock full of interesting bits of history, social commentary, and inspiration. Scott Francis, Kaibab Forester, prepared questions, but she clearly anticipated most of them and eventually, in her own way, addressed them all. I had originally planned to summarize her life in the Forest Service, but after the interview I quickly realized that would be a disservice to her and to others who might find what she had to say inspirational. Consequently the remainder of this article is the highlights of the interview either summarized, or, in most cases, transcribed word for word. Though it was my intent to highlight Mrs. Towns’ unique place in African American and Forest Service history, I think everyone will find something to relate to and will be inspired by the life and astute wisdom of Mrs. Eleanor “Ellie” Towns.

MH – Margaret Hangan

ET – Eleanor Towns

MH: I see from the information on your website that you have a strong background in law. How and why did you choose to steer your career into Forest Service land management?

ET: I grew up in Rockford Illinois. It is Important to know I went to an integrated schools all of my life. I got my B.A. from the University of Illinois and entered college in 1961, long before affirmative action; Graduated 12th in my class of 570 or so, of which about 40 of whom were black. Most of us who attended Pilgrim Baptist Church where the village mentored, reared us, and taught us that we could be anything we wanted to be. Once, I had a high school senior girl's counselor who once told me that I could go to trade school.... I didn't believe her because my church and my family told me that I could be anything I wanted to work hard enough to be.

ET: People believe that we, women or people of color, are there because somebody wants numbers. As opposed to us being there because we have good sense. Most people in positions of management have not put their nose in a school of any sort since they graduated with a BA. That means their stuff is not current anyhow. I was in the Regional Office (RO) in Denver. When in school I always ran with the kids who were going somewhere, black, white, blue or purple. I watched and emulated them.

ET: I had a sense about what it would take to move up in the Forest Service (FS). I came into the FS through Civil Rights (CR). My first job was Director of CR. I was the first Director of CR in Region 2 (R2), also the first woman and first black CR Director in the Forest Service. I came from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). I was an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) specialist at the BLM Service Center. My credentials at that time were a Bachelor of Arts Degree in teaching speech from the University of Illinois. I actually remember seeing the school of Forestry on campus when I was there. I waved at it as I walked by. Also a Master of Arts Degree in counseling and guidance. It fit going into EEO at that time.

ET: While Director of CR, I was always grinning at somebody asking how I could move up. They decided to put me on a Washington Office Evaluation Team. They only put the "comers" or the people whom they were trying to give exposure to on those teams. One of the Deputy Chiefs at the time asked the R2, Regional Forester "what he was going to do about Ellie?" The Regional Forester later called me in and asked me what I wanted to do in the Forest Service. Being true to my nature, I had an answer for that. I had by then a law degree and I felt that I could learn whatever they do in lands. I was later plopped into lands, much to the consternation for some, including my new boss, whom was determined to sit on me. But they also made me a group leader. At that time, the people who got into lands where the "retread foresters" that needed to be placed. I decided that I was in charge of my life and that I needed to watch out for my own long term interests. The Regional Forester (RF) had done what he promised to do and if I was going to make it, it was squarely on my shoulders. By then a new RF had been brought in. Whenever I had an opportunity I made myself visible to the new Regional Forester. These are tips on how you guide your own life. Because of my exposure to the Regional Forester, when the Director of

Lands position was open, I was promoted as the new Director of Lands, despite the objections of my newly retired boss.

To summarize the rest of her discussion on the development of her career, she said the road to her own Regional Forester positions was covered in water. In other words, take on an issue that nobody else wants to touch, like water out west, and learn what there is to know about it. That is what she did and that is how she came to the attention of the Assistant Secretary. Also, Republican Senator Hank Brown of Colorado, who served one term from 1991 to 1996, was going to make his career over in-stream flow issues. Ellie was giving speeches on the subject at public forums and contradicted Brown, who eventually lost on the in-stream flow issues. Senator Brown got so mad that at a lunch with the current Forest Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas, he claimed that Ellie and another employee lied. Chief Thomas got up, said that his employees “do not lie”, and declared the lunch over. Chief Thomas later called Ellie and asked “well, now do you?” She said that they laughed about that much later. As a result of all of that she was asked to staff a high profile Senate energy task force on in-stream flows and they went around holding public hearings. That is where she got her exposure. She also got to testify before senate energy committee several times. That was how she got to a certain level of visibility. The issue, however, that got her the Regional Forester job was Civil Rights again.

In the mid-1990s, R3 was a hot bed of Civil Rights controversy. There were lots of issues and some people were running up to the Washington Office initiating public hearings. They thought that her background in CR made her qualified for the Regional Forester position.

At that time there were two issues in R3 on the table. One was grazing and the other one was Civil Rights. Both required people skills, which she had vast experience in. Ellie says, “It didn’t matter if I ever was a trained forester or not. You just needed to be smart enough to know what you did not know and have very little pride about asking for help.”

When she stepped into the Regional Forester job, she found that all of the Civil Rights issues were being caused by roughly less than 1% of the work force. To address the CR issues she chose to broaden her scope and be more inclusive rather than just focusing on the 1%.

When asked how she went about setting priorities her answer was, “You may not necessarily be able to stick to a priority. You go out with a set of ostensible priorities and then the ground shifts and you adapt.” While she was the Regional Forester, the ground shifted to tribal issues with Sandia Pueblo and then the ground shifted again with lands issues.

In her opinion, one of the best decisions she ever made was the Tusayan Land Exchange. As proposed, it was a very elaborate deal. Then there was a change of administration, and politics started getting involved. Consequently, what started out as an elaborate proposal that included several parties, in the end boiled down to an exchange between the National Park Service and the Forest Service. As a result of the project, the community of Tusayan cleaned up the town and it helped the community to focus on building a true gateway to the park. “Things do not always go the way you want them to go, but as they say in church, they are right on time.”

The next career defining issue became fire. Fire Scientists had predicted drought and were beginning to see larger fires. Additionally, a firefighter was lost Ruidoso. Then the Los Alamos Fire broke out. It was



an interesting time in the history of the Forest Service in that part of the country and for Civil Rights. The Forest Service lead was Ellie, the lead for BLM was Michelle Chavez, the Governor of Arizona at the time was Jane Hull; Regional Director of the Southwest Region of the U. S. Fish and Wild Life service was Nancy Kauffman; the Attorney General for Arizona was Janet Napolitano; the head of the Park Service was Karen Wade, and the head of Lands in Minerals in New Mexico was a woman who's name Ellie could not recall. Los Alamos was a prescribed burn done by the Park Service that got out of hand. When it

got bad, Karen Wade had been on the job for six weeks. In an initial meeting with all of the above mentioned personnel, all of whom happened to be women, all agreed that they were all scared to death and hoped nobody would die. "Thanks god for the Type 1 Incident Commanders, they know what they are doing and if you are smart you stay out of their way."

MH: Did you feel that you had to work harder than your counterparts in order to gain respect and move up? What kinds of obstacles did you encounter and how did you deal with them?

ET: Yes for a lot of reasons, and I certainly hope much has changed. At the time, in Forest Supervisor groups and Regional groups, there was a whole lot of licking your fingers and holding it up in the air before you spoke because you really did not want to say something stupid in public, even when you were right. If you were not a historically acknowledged leader, folks would wait until the boss gave a signal about how he received what you said. She used to say at the New Employee Orientation, a new person comes to their first staff meeting and wants to be heard and say something important. That person steps into the fray and says something important and they are met with complete silence. Then sometime later someone else would say the same thing and the group would say, "Oh it's the second coming." It was that kind of dynamic that I was facing. Did I have to work harder? Let me talk to you about some of the dynamics at the Forest Supervisor level. As you go up the ladder you will see groups that include people who have been there too long. Or, people who are self-appointed informal leaders who tug at the reigns of the official leaders, and there are people, because of years of association, be it school or other less formal reasons, who 'kowtow' to that self-appointed leader. Yeah, some of that was happening. I had an individual who fit that profile on my staff, whom I referred to simply as "nemesis." I do not know that I ever overcame that problem. I either never got or never took a moment to smack down that person on the Regional Leadership Team (RLT). The Forest Service Chief had offered to move the person out. But, I stupidly said no, thinking that I could charm a snake and that I didn't want to appear as if I couldn't handle the situation. I realized later that the Chief was being wise and that I should have listened because that would have eliminated or dismantle some of that substructure.

To sum the rest of her answer, Ellie stated that she had to work harder to be accepted and over time establish credentials. However, respect came with analyzing the whole diversity issue and not being

afraid to walk into the middle of that, even though it wasn't the center of the FS world. "The fire thing (Los Alamos) eventually helped," she said.

MH: When you became the First African American woman Regional Forester, did you come across any resentment, or adverse attitudes towards you, and if you did, how did you handle it?

ET: I will give an example by way of story. This is a good lesson for aspiring leaders. At my second Regional Leadership Team meeting my seat was, as was thought to be appropriate then, located at one or the other end of the table i.e. the position of power. "Nemesis" was the facilitator, which prompts another lesson. Don't give them public power. During the meeting they were on a topic and I said something related to the topic. "Nemesis" turned around and said "You do not know what you are talking about and you should be quiet until you do." Now, what did I do? I sat there and tried to reason through that. I later came to realize that my reaction to the situation never should have happened.

ET: One of the things I missed having not been a District Ranger or Forest Supervisor, is have experienced situations like this much sooner in my career and would have known what to do. What I should have done was stood up facing him and matched his body language, because he was in the 'alpha wolf' position at the end of the table. I should have said that the meeting is temporarily over and everyone leave except "Nemesis" and then told "Nemesis" to go get in your car and go home and send someone from your forest so that your forest does not miss out. Then reconvene the meeting without "Nemesis" and say nothing about the incident and the meeting should have gone on. I thought about that and said to myself that if that ever happens again I am going to say this... this...and that. I never got the chance, but now I tell it as a story. I do not think I ever recovered from that and it happened early in my tenure as Regional Forester. I mean, I gained respect from the individual, but that person maintained some elements of power.

MH: Was this person threatened by you personally or your position?

ET: No, it was not the position. They had been running Regional Foresters for years. No, I was just a particular challenge. I had grown up around people like "Nemesis" and we were close to the same age. I did not meet any stereotypes that he had in his limited view of the world or ever encountered or thought he'd ever encounter with a person of color. So yeah he was threatened, but would he ever say that or use that word? No. It got to the point where he didn't want to retire because he did not want me replacing him. We did eventually replace him with a woman.

ET: The problem was far more, because I was black than I was a woman. Even though the world had not changed completely in regards to women, about half of the Regional Foresters now are women. It was far more about his view of blacks and me not living up to his stereotypes. What I did on other fronts stood for me.

MH: What else helped to overcome it?

ET: I would say the eventual handling of how we get beyond Los Alamos in terms of getting money to the region and tracking the work, setting priorities there and the whole thing with the Sandia Pueblo. It

started out badly, because I had to make a decision to go forward with the appeal about two weeks of arrival in the Region. I eventually sat with the tribe and began to understand their issues and there was a bringing together of that whole metro community around that issues. Those things spoke more highly of me and my abilities.

MH: What do you see as your biggest challenges and accomplishments as the Regional Forester? You mentioned that Grazing was a big issue.

ET: I felt I made headway there because I did not shy away from the “belly of the beast”. The Tusayan Land Exchange was a major, wonderful victory even though we did not get all that we wanted; the ability to handle that lands situation and understand the facts. It brought about another lesson. Never sign anything unless you have read it. I would hide out a Northern Arizona University reading the EIS then ask regular person’s questions.

MH: You crashed through the glass ceiling and broke it to pieces, do you think the glass has been replaced. Or, do you feel that it is easier for minorities to move up than when you made your ascent?

ET: I believe it is *absolutely* easier. I have known Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief, National Forest System in the Washington Office, since she was an intern and she went to Stevensville, MI. I am so proud of her. I was in Washington D.C. with her for a time. She has such grace and knowledge. Also I knew Randy Moore, Regional Forester for Region 5, when he was a CO-OP student in R4 (the same as a SCEP or now Pathways Intern), when I was in Civil Rights. He has taken his positions and made a difference. When he went to R5, with all of his fire experience and the fact that he is in the state with the largest number of delegates in the service, is preparing him for more than regional Forester, I think.

MH: As you know, recruitment and retention of African Americans in the Forest Service is still very low. Can you identify any barriers that are preventing a more diversified workplace?

ET: Young people are willing to pay the dues, but it’s whether or not the FS has been able to appeal to young people as a viable employer. Some of it is still in people’s heads in terms of misperceptions about certain locations. I brought people out from the Washington Office to Albuquerque, some of whom were black and pointed out there are two military bases and 10 black churches in Albuquerque. However, I clearly recognize that there are isolated places that can be difficult for some people, especially because of lingering issues that we have not concurred such as sexual harassment.

MH: What about your legacy with the FS?

ET: To a point, everybody wants to worry about what legacy you leave and you want to go out under your own steam. So there are always people who are talking and don’t know, and the ones who do know and are not saying, in terms of why are you leaving when I did finally decided to retire. Chief Dombeck had offered her a position in Region 2, when the Regional Forester position became open there. It



would have been nice, because my husband had stayed in R2 with my kids who were in high school at the time, but I said that I appreciated the offer and turned it down. I was getting to a place where I was tired and didn't want to have to start all over again by having to establish new relationships with politicians and community groups and the issues were different, so I stayed in Region 3. Then later, after Bush took over for Clinton, I gave Chief Bosworth a year's notice, because I wanted to go out under my own steam. At the end of the year, the Chief asked me to stay but I turned him down.

ET: Just before I retired I had gotten a call from the White House asking if I wanted to be on the short list for consideration for the position of Director of the Bureau of Land Management, but after a week I gracefully turned the offer down. Being married to an ecologist, I knew that as Director of BLM under the Bush Administration I would be in a position where I might have to allow actions that would be disrupt her household. Then a friend in the Department of Interior asked if I wanted him to make a recommendation as a candidate for Chief of the Forest Service. Though flattered that he had offered, I knew that I did not have the political backing or, at that time, I did not come from the right region to be a serious contender for the position. I want to make it clear that I knew that I would never have been a serious contender for the position of Chief, but it's a great example of how I was perceived as a person who was not just warming a chair.

ET: I was recognized at the Forest Service Centennial celebration with an award and two young black employees came up to me in the hall and said "we know that you have been through some stuff and we just wanted to say thank you for hanging in there and carrying yourself such that you propped the door open for the rest of us."

In summation, I think Ellie didn't just prop the door open, she kicked it down not only for African Americans, but women as well. I believe that she would agree that it is up to us, the generation behind her, to make sure that the door never closes again and to not be afraid to ask for what for what we want out of life and our careers. Moreover actively learn to understand and work within, if need be, the status quo, while still challenging it at every turn.

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