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Interviewee: Risa Lange-Navarro

Interviewer: Clark Grant

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Risa Lange-Navarro: Hello, my name is Risa Lange-Navarro. I graduated in 1981 with a degree in forestry with kind of a minor in fire science.

Clark Grant: What got you interested in that?

RL: Well actually, that's what I was thinking about talking about. My dad was the dendrology professor here from 1962 to 1979. I basically kind of grew up here on the campus and up here at Lubrecht [Experiment Forest near Missoula, Montana]. The other thing that got me interested—and I went into fire management—is on my very first birthday, I had my birthday candle, and every time my folks blew it out I got mad. But then they lit it again and I was just hypnotized by that flame. The ironic thing was the fire professor here, Bob Steele, was one of my dad's good friends when they were going to college at Colorado A&M [now Colorado State University] back there in the '30s and early '40s.

CG: So you've been fascinated with fire from the very beginning?

RL: Oh, yes. I live and breathe fire when I'm out hiking around. I look, and say, "Ok, if a fire starts there, what would it do on that?"

CG: You said you wanted to talk about your dad?

RL: Yes, I figured that would be a good memoir. He passed away in 2003 and just some things that I remember most about him. One of the earliest memories I have about him and learning what he did here—because, you know, when you're a little kid, you don't know what your dad really does, or your mom—but we were backpacking up in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and my dad grabbed this branch from this tree as we were hiking along. He brought it down and he pointed it at me, and he said, "Cigar-shaped buds. *Pseudotsuga menziesii*. It's Douglas fir, Risa."

I remember looking up at him and going, "Dad, I'm only six." That was the first time I had an inkling what my dad did.

The other memories I have of my dad was, with him being in dendrology, he had to get up species. What we'd do in the fall and in the winter is I'd hold a bag, mom and I would go out with him, and we'd go twigging. We would go around to all the deciduous trees and he would pick examples of the twigs that he would use in his winter class of dendrology for the deciduous trees. I remember holding the bags, waiting for him to clip them, put them together with a

rubber band, and drop them. We walked all over Missoula, and especially around on the campus here, picking up the twigs and putting them in the bags. Then I'd help him sort them out and put them together. We'd have all the oaks together and all the elms together and, you know, whatever else he had, out on the living-room floor, looking at them. We had to keep the dog away because the dog was kind of grabbing some of the twigs and taking them away. So we had to say, "No, Taco. You got to—here, have your bone instead."

The other memory of my dad was that he helped out and also was one of the directors for spring camp up in Lubrecht. When I was a little kid and not in school in the springtime, my mom and I would spend springs up there with them. We'd be in one of the cabins, usually the first one if you're walking down toward the mess hall, the first one on the left. I'd have a separate room; my folks would be in the other. Around Easter, my dad, somehow, or maybe just the students did it on themselves, would hide Easter eggs in the snowbanks for me when I was a little kid. I remember my dad thinking that was pretty cool that his students did that. I remember walking around with my dad. I'd follow him around when he was working with the students up there at the camp and doing measurements or whatever he was teaching at the time. Then Professor Steele—again, Bob Steele, who was my dad's friend at Colorado, also a professor—he became my godfather, so to speak. I'd follow him around and watch what he was doing with fire. I remember my dad was getting a little bit nervous because I was more interested in what Doc Steel was doing rather than what he was doing as a dad.

One of the funniest times I remember, being up there at camp, was before they had the field and everything around the pump house and the volleyball court, that was all swamp. Kind of a swamp. It was not very deep, and it was just—I mean you did not—it smelled so bad. It was just like this muck out there. It wasn't a one that had fish in it and stuff. It was just really mucky. Every spring, at the end of spring camp, the students would grab all the professors and drag them out and throw them into this mess. I happened to be old enough, so I was talking, I sort of understood things, and I remember my dad and Dr. Steele were in the back room of one of the classrooms, kind of hidden. My dad says, "Well, why don't you go find your mom?"

I said, "Okay." So I went out and some of the students stopped me

They said, "Risa, where's your dad?"

I go, "Oh, he's just in here!" and pointed out where he was. (laughs) Then they all went in there and dragged him out. He looks over and he goes, "You are going to get it when I get out of here," and they just dumped him into just the deepest, muddy—oh it was just mucky stuff. The frogs were hopping all around. He had just fond times of being up there and seeing the wildflowers and everything up there at Lubrecht. Then later on, when I was in school and kind of tied up with school and things, I didn't get to go up to camp on the weekends. I still went up there for Easter and remember the pasque flowers in the field being really pretty up there and picking one and taking it home.

As I got older, I'd start helping him correct his dendro [dendrology] slips. When he did his dendro class here in the field, he had these little pads that said, "family-genus-species" and a common name on there, maybe about an inch and a half by about three or four inches. I'd help him correct those because he'd have hundreds of them. He'd have maybe 20 trees for each student. If you have 30 students in there, you'd have, you know, what? 60 or so—600 or whatever. I used to help him correct that when I was in high school and then also help him do stuff, still did twigging, every time. As I got older, I knew I was going to go into forestry. I knew I was going to go into fire science. The first year I went away to a different school to get some basics and give my folks a break from me. Then I came back and had my dad for dendro class. A couple of the times I remember are—my grandpa had passed away that fall. One of the TAs was teaching my dad's dendro class and it was conifers we were going over. I can't remember his name off the hand. He came in and he goes, "Well, you know Professor Lange is da-da-da like this and he's very strict and very da-da-da-da like that." I remember Mike Degrovsky (?) was in the class and he nudges me.

He raises his hand, he goes, "Well, you know that Professor Lange's daughter is in this class?"

And he goes, "Where? Where is she? Where is she?"

I raise my hand. I go, "And I heard every word you said about my dad." (laughs) He just kind of had this look on his face.

I had my dad for dendrology because I wanted to have him because he was retiring the next year. In this spring class, which was traditionally the deciduous trees, he kept this course moving. There's no time to stop. So he's up on the board and he's writing about—it was about oaks, it was about *quercus*—he was going on and on. I raised my hand—I was sitting in the front row—and I go, "Could you please slow down?"

He comes over to me, and he goes, "*You want me to slow down?*"

Mike Degrovsky (?) happened to be sitting right next to me. He goes, "You're going to get it." (laughs) Because I'd spend Sunday nights having dinner with him. It was so fun. He was trying to let me be my own person, but still I was Professor Lange's daughter. If I got a B on a quiz or a test, he'd show it to me at Sunday dinner, saying, "You got a B."

I went, "Yes, I got a B. What about it?"

He goes, "No *you* got a B."

It's like, "I'm trying dad. I'm just not you." (laughs)

I just remember he was very, very passionate about having the students learn things and he did things way ahead of traditional kind of teachers. He did story problems for the dendrology

quizzes and the finals. One of his favorite ones was the mythical Hoop Snake. I think it was in Arkansas, you know, the mythical Hoop Snake down there. He says, "As you're walking through a plot, you all of a sudden hear this noise, and the mythical Hoop Snake whips by you. You chase after it. As you trip and fall, you land at the base of this tree that has this kind of bark, this kind of cones, or these kind of needles or something like- he'd bring that in. A lot of his students were smokejumpers. He'd say, "As you get your chute hung up in a tree and you're hanging there, waiting for the wind or your let-down rope, you notice the branches off to your left—" He was well ahead of his time than what was traditionally the way people gave you—it was basically just the information and fill in the blank and stuff. He was very passionate about what was going on and having people learn. He was a very nice professor. I'm not just saying that because he was my dad. He was very understanding about the students, and he really cared about them, and tried to help them as much as he could.

He was just kind of an overall nice guy and a great dad. Even to the day—right before he passed away, he was in the hospice room out at Community [Community Medical Center, Missoula, Montana], and they have a little courtyard. He looked out and he goes, "Risa, what's that tree over there?"

I go, "What tree?"

He goes, "That one, right there."

I say, "Oh it's a Blue Spruce."

He goes, "No, what's the Latin name on that?"

I said, "Okay dad, it's *Picea pungens*."

He goes, "Okay, good, good." Then he asked my husband, who was in forestry, and then switched out. He goes, "Tony, what's that tree over there?"

He goes, "Bob, that's a live tree."

And he goes, "Good, good." It was like, wait a second, how come I have to give the Latin name, and my husband has to say "Live tree or a dead tree?"

He had a lot of good things. I was lucky enough—actually I don't know whether I was, but I could've been—maybe the youngest person to attend to the Forester's Ball, because my folks didn't have enough money to get babysitters, so I'd come with them when they were chaperones at the Forester's Ball. I'd sit up in the upstairs, where the running track was, and sit up there with Mrs. Evers. Then my folks went down and they'd trade off coming up. I'd stay there the whole night. My dad and mom had to be chaperones and then went home. I got to, you know, be part of the Forester's Ball even from being a little kid. Then later on, when I was

here at Forestry School, helping out on that thing. It was just kind of neat to see—to be able to grow up here on campus and at Lubrecht at the same time.

CG: Seems like his decision to include you in it all from such an early age greatly affected your whole life.

RL: It did. It really did. I mean, I knew that I wanted to be out. My dad, as well as my mom too—because they were both outdoors people—they really wanted to make sure that I appreciated the outdoors and knew that it was our privilege to live here. But it was also our privilege to help take care of the outdoors. I do remember, the one thing, he was always trying to get me into the timber side of forestry. Doc Steele was—we were always talking fire, and my dad would start to talk to timber, and then Doc Steele and I would talk about fire. He just said, “Well, why do you want to go into fire?”

I said, “Dad, if you cut all the trees down and all the shrubs down, you don’t have anything else to cut down and send off to the sawmill, but there’ll always be fire.”

Then I remember him looking at Bob, and going, “I’ve lost her to you. I just lost her.” (laughs)

CG: Maybe real briefly here at the end, I’m just curious about the work you do?

RL: Currently, right now, I’m the Fire Use Fuels Management Training Specialist for the Northern Rockies. Basically we’re inter-agency. I teach primarily the prescribed fire classes, fire behavior classes, and fuels management type classes for all the agencies. We have—predominately from all the agencies—from North Idaho—the border of Idaho and Washington—all the way over to North Dakota—the border between that and Minnesota. For the geographic area that encompasses all the wildland agencies. But we have also people from other areas from around the country, and outside the country. We’ve had folks from Macedonia, Australia, Israel, Russia, Siberia, and all that coming into our classes.

When I started out putting myself through school, it was in fire. The first year I was on the saw crew, in the Superior District on the Lolo National Forest. I was one of the first women on the crew. That was quite the experience because there weren’t a whole lot of women, even in the mid-’70s when I was there, that were in that kind of work because women just “weren’t expected to be able to do that stuff.” I tried to stay as much as I could in fire, so I worked in Idaho, then went to Wyoming and worked on fire. Met my future husband there on what we called the IR crew, which was a predecessor of what we call now Inter-Agency Hotshot Crews. It had 20 people, pretty well set and they maybe have a little bit more training than regular fire folks. I then worked in Helitack for four or five years, and then moved into a fuels position on the Deschutes. That was my permanent position. I got that in ’85, no, ’84 because that’s when we got married. Then moved through to Suppression Specialist, Assistant Fire Management Officer, to my last job with an agency that’s tied to the ground was at the Nine Mile District. I was the Fire Management Officer there for the Lolo. It was very interesting. One of the bright

sides of being in fire, and actually meeting my husband on fire, was that we got married at Lubrecht because I thought, That's the way—where I want to get married. My dad was so excited that I decided to get married up there and stuff, so—but that's kind of what I do.

CG: I bet he's very proud of you.

RL: Oh yes. He was definitely looking over my shoulder today when we were taking the dendro tour. Probably saying, "You know this. You can't get this wrong." It's just like pressure. Dad would kill me if I can't remember what this tree is. It's got a cup, it's got a red edge, it's got to be a red oak. (laughs) I had my book with me and I was almost tempted to look at it. I was like, "No, I can't do that. That would not be good." It brought a tear to my eye, thinking about it.

CG: Oh me too.

RL: (Laughs)

CG: Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to record?

RL: I think this forestry school and where it's at—you know there are a lot of forestry schools around the country, but I think, just with all the forestry background that's around in this area of Montana, with the northern region being the first one for the Forest Service, especially in the Forest Service side, with the first ranger station being down off of the West Fork [of the Bitterroot River] there in the Bitterroots, and the smokejumpers and the air tankers and things. It was a great experience. Just living around here, you kind of got the sense of that's what you should be doing. We lived up the Rattlesnake [neighborhood in Missoula, Montana] and I remember my dad and I would go out and lie on a hill, which was really dangerous because there was lightning storms. We'd go out there and watch the lightning and see the lightning fires start up in the upper Rattlesnake. Then air tanker planes would come out—they were called retardant planes back then—retardant planes fly over our house. Then we'd see the jumpers go out there. You were just kind of surrounded in all this forestry, with all the mills we used to have in town here, and things. It was a great way to grow up. I didn't plan on moving back to my home town of Missoula, but I knew it was close and I knew the area, so that was nice. Being able to go to Lubrecht is always good.

CG: Anything else?

RL: Oh gosh (Both laugh). I can't remember. I'm trying to think of other things that happened. Not necessarily forestry-wise, but just remembering the different buildings and things that used to be here. I remember really little going to a football game at where the library is right now, the stadium used to be. I mean, I was really little, because I remember couldn't see out to see the football game. My dad and mom and Doc Steele and Chris Kelkey (?), who was one of my dad's fraternity brothers—he also taught here. Anyway, I just remember all the adults were up there and us kids would just sit there and pick the paint—the green paint, I remember that—off the bleachers. We'd have a big patch by at the end of the game because everybody would

stand up and then they'd sit down. We could kind of see over their shoulders and then they'd stand up again, so we'd start picking paint off of there. I'm just trying to think of other things about the area here that I remember. It's just kind of nice to see that the tradition is still going on, even though how forestry is taught is a lot different because we had teletypes and cards. We didn't have computers. I mean, we just got calculators and they were just expensive. But I did learn from my dad how to use a slide rule. So and that's always been things, because calculators and iPhones and all things, those run out of batteries, but slide rule—it's always there. (laughs)

CG: Thank you very much.

RL: Well, thank you very much. I hope it didn't go too long.

CG: No, it didn't.

RL: (Laughs) All right.

CG: You did perfectly.

RL: All right. Thanks, Clark.

CG: Yes, I enjoyed it.

RL: All right. I got through it. I thought I was going cry. It's like, okay, I can get through this now.

CG: Only a little bit.

RL: I wish you could've met my dad.

[End of Interview]