

50th Anniversary of the John C. Stennis Space Center

**An Oral History
with
The Kellar Family
Jeanne Kellar
Timothy Clay Kellar
Susan Kellar Fendley
Steven Kellar
Rhonda Kellar**

**John C. Stennis Space Center
History Project**

Interviewer: Daphne Alford

2011

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This is an oral history interview with the Kellar family – mother Jeanne, son Clay, daughter Susan Fendley, son Steve and daughter-in-law Rhonda – which is being conducted on June 14, 2011, in conjunction with the John C. Stennis Space Center's 50th anniversary celebration. The interviewer is Daphne Alford.

Daphne Alford: Ms. Jeanne, this oral history focuses on family ties. Please tell me how many children you have and how many work here at Stennis?

Jeanne Kellar: I have six children and all six of them at one time or another, have worked at Stennis. I have four with Rhonda, who is still [here] and she is my daughter, works at Stennis. So, I have five that's working now at Stennis.

Daphne Alford: How did it all begin for the Kellar family being employed here at Stennis? I know it starts with you, but can you please take us back 50 years ago with NASA's announcement to build a test facility here?

Jeanne Kellar: I remember reading in the *Picayune Item* that John Stennis had come to talk to all the people down in Hancock County and asking them to give up their land for a space program. He also told the people that, I guarantee, I'll make you a promise that your children and grandchildren will have a place to work and won't have to leave the area. He kept his promise, because all my children have worked here at one time or another. I was working in Picayune at the time, and my sister was down here. She set up the clinic. And she said, "you got to come with us down there," and I said, what can I do? I can't test engines? She said, "There too much other work. So, I came, applied, and they put me in Central Engineering Files, where all the drawings and the construction was. And I said, 'Why I have never seen a blue print in my life. Why would you put me there?' I had accounting experience, purchasing experience, and they said, no you're going to like it. Well I have never wanted to leave CEF, never, because you see everybody on site at one time or another. You help everyone on site at one time or another, because we're a customer organization. And you really know everything going on. And I really, I guess I'm really curious, might say I'm nosy, and to know everything that's happening at Stennis. And I really, all my children at one time or another, they were raised with the space program with me. And I talked about it quite often, every day exactly. And it made them want to be a part of this space program, because we really, this is NASA. This is the American future to me. And we really need to try and keep it up.

Daphne Alford: Can you go back and state your husband's name and where was he from? Was he from this area, too?

Jeanne Kellar: His family was from this area. The Kellars were all outside the north gate. His grandfather donated Turtle Skin Graveyard. All the Kellar-residence people lived in this area. And they were moved out, the majority of them was. And they all moved to either Nicholson or Picayune. And some moved to Pearl River and Slidell, but they were born and raised in this area from like the 1800s, the Kellars were.

Daphne Alford: Can you give me his name and the community he was from? Was he from Logtown, Gainesville? Do you . . .?

Jeanne Kellar: Santa Rosa.

Daphne Alford: Santa Rosa?

Jeanne Kellar: Santa Rosa. His name was Absalom Alexander Kellar, and he was from the Santa Rosa area.

Daphne Alford: And how many years were you married to him?

Jeanne Kellar: Fifty years and two days.

Daphne Alford: Now being a working mother with seven children?

Jeanne Kellar: 6.

Daphne Alford: Six children. How did you manage work and raising a family? And how supportive were your employers? And what role did they help you to manage both?

Jeanne Kellar: I started out with General Electric, and they were very supportive because they said that family was very important. I was very fortunate to have a lady in our church that had no children. And she asked me could she babysit mine. She was at my house every morning. And she made sure that they got on the bus. And when they came in from school she took care of them. Even when Steve was the last one to start school, and she insisted, she was coming to the house to help them get off the bus. They were really her adopted children, too. I was very blessed. And my husband, he was very supportive in whatever we done because with six kids, and they all playing ball and involved in school, you would take this two and go this way, and he would take two and go that way, or whatever, but he was very supportive of the whole family. And my children were fortunate to have a father as good as they had.

Daphne Alford: Has Stennis helped you to provide a quality life for your family?

Jeanne Kellar: Oh yes, yes. When I was working, I was working in Picayune making \$35 a week, and on a Friday I terminated and come down here Monday morning. The next Friday I made \$70 a week. It doubled my salary. It helped the quality of life down here and that was in 1965.

Daphne Alford: Did you encourage your children to seek professions that would lead to employment at Stennis?

Jeanne Kellar: I kind of pushed them in that direction. [Laughter] I let them make their own decisions, but I had it before them every day because I really knew that this was a career. And it would be one of the best places they could work to make a living to support their family. And you know it's not easy to get on out here. You have to have the skills.

Daphne Alford: Very good. You have worked with both the Apollo and Space Shuttle Main Engine programs and now you are still here. What are your thoughts about the future of Stennis as well as future generations of the Kellar family?

Jeanne Kellar: Well, I want to see Stennis advance and with us being a multi-agencies out here, that is going to help us survive this economy right now because with ah, they still have money for their work. And it's going to help us at Stennis until we get back into the space program, and testing our engines. And we really need the space program in my estimation.

Daphne Alford: Very good, thank you. Now I have one question for each of you children, and I just would like to know who or what inspired you to work here at Stennis? We'll start with Clay.

Clay Kellar: My mother inspired me to work here. I have been trying to get on a long, long time, because growing up since early elementary school that was the talk around the supper table. 'What they're doing out here,' and 'How much she loved it,' and I just wanted to be a part of that

Daphne Alford: Susan?

Susan Fendley: My mother also inspired me to come to Stennis, uh. I thought everything like my brother Clay said, at the dinner table we'd, we'd listen to things she had talked about at work, and I thought it was very interesting and I wanted to follow in her footsteps.

Daphne Alford: Steve?

Steven Kellar: Yeah, from early age I like to mechanic and tinker on things. I always said, 'I wanted to be able to fix everything from a tricycle to a rocket when I got grown.' I said that a lot. And as I grew up, I kinda worked on cars and made my way toward that. I chose a career path that would lead me to this. I was hoping, and when I got out of the service from working on helicopters, they were looking for military aircraft experience, and I had it. And my mother kinda helped me in that direction, and I worked that was and been here ever since.

Daphne Alford: Rhonda, what can you say about Daniel? Did you meet or were you married to Daniel before you started here?

Rhonda Kellar: Dan and I were together as a couple. And he was working out here, and I was going to college at the time. And Ms. Jeanne told me about the Navy's stay-in-school program, and helped me to apply for that position.

Daphne Alford: I have a few questions, and it is not directed to anyone, so just feel free to answer if you feel like you want to. Any of you have children who work here at Stennis? No we're not there yet.

Steven Kellar: Not yet.

Daphne Alford: Who would like to tell me about your Mom's loyalty to Stennis Space Center?

Steven Kellar: I can remember when I was young, they were in the Butler Building, and I was very young, I'd say 8 years old probably. They wanted her to work on a Saturday and she didn't have anybody to stay with me, so she brought me to work with her. And I think about how we work today, what we have today computers and everything, and all their stuff back then was old drawings and punch cards, little key cards. I can remember those from being that young and coming to work with her.

Daphne Alford: What are some of your special memories that you have of your own career?

Steven Kellar: Oh, there are a lot of them. I've had some good ones. I got to see, I don't know, the first shuttle engine. I said earlier probably. First shuttle test I ever saw. I knew the engine was big and it was powerful, but I had no idea what it was when we started working on it. How it was going to be or what it was going to do, and I could see one today and it would still amaze me like it did the first time I saw it.

Daphne Alford: Can you describe that moment?

Steven Kellar: It was almost like test stand blew up when it went off. It was so, so powerful. I mean, I worked on cars. I always liked race cars and building stuff for a lot of power, but there's, there's nothing you can imagine that has that much power until you actually see one. It's just, it's an amazing thing.

Susan Fendley: It is. You want to hold your breath for a second, until it goes, and you're like wow. And you are so proud that you are a part of this, and to be there from the start of a program. At E-Complex we do research and development and to be there from the start of a program where you have to fabricate everything and to see the engine actually fire is a great thing to see. It's a great feeling of accomplishment.

Daphne Alford: So have you all witnessed a launch?

Susan Fendley: No mam, I haven't.

Jeanne Kellar: I've witnessed a launch, and it was great. But what we have here to me is more awesome. I mean you see, you feel the ground shake, you see the steam, you see the when it ignites, and I mean, you even see the rain clouds get wet sometimes, but it, this is to me more awesome.

Daphne Alford: For the children, how has Stennis helped provide a quality of life for you and your family?

Clay Kellar: Similar to what my mother said earlier, it has literally doubled my paycheck working, since I've been working out here, and I can provide better for me and mine.

Susan Fendley: When my children were younger, I was a single mother. And when I went back to college, I was struggling. I was working a couple of jobs, and my brother was helping me with my children, and umm, when I got through with college, and I received my degree and got back on out here, my children were really, really, proud of me. And that made me feel really good.

Steven Kellar: Kept me, I was away, I was working for a contractor, and I was kinda working out of Birmingham when this job became available, and I wanted to get back home. I would stay gone two weeks and come home. And I was married at the time. And it was kinda hard on us, we were newly wed's, but I worked there and came back and when I got the job here it gave us, I had been here a couple of years, we decided to start a family, and from them, I believe if I wouldn't have got the job here I would have never started a family. So I was, I was real proud of that.

Daphne Alford: The last question. Stennis' anniversary theme was 50 Years of Powering Dreams. How has Stennis fulfilled your dream or dreams?

Jeanne Kellar: I've had a career that I have really enjoyed. I must enjoy it because I don't want to leave it. And I could retire any day I wanted to. And I have no plans to retire. It has filled everything I've, and I have had worked in a lot of different jobs 'cause I was 32 when I came out here. And I mean, I have had a lot of different jobs, but this one has fulfilled everything I've ever wanted to do.

Susan Fendley: She's giving that age away now. [Laughter]

Daphne Alford: I think I forgot to ask one question, let me re-track. Any more dreams before I ask this other question? During family gatherings are there discussions about work?

Susan Fendley: Oh yes! Oh yes! [Laughter]

Steven Kellar: Yes, during a family gathering that's our discussion. Four of five of us talk about Stennis and what's going on at Stennis. What are they building over here. What's this new building there. And the members of our family that don't work out here at Stennis, they all just

bang their heads and look ‘here they go. Here they go again.’ They know we’re going to talk about it.

Daphne Alford: What about holidays, anything special? Would you like to talk about your Mom’s headstone, Susan?

Susan Fendley: I would. We lost our father 10 years ago. And my mother went ahead and got a double headstone. And my dad, he loved to hunt and fish, anything. If he didn’t catch it, kill it or grow it, we didn’t eat it. And, so when she got the headstone, she got the hunting symbols on his, like a turkey and a deer hunter and things. While on my mother’s side of the headstone she has a shuttle.

Jeanne Kellar: A space shuttle engine.

Susan Fendley: She does.

Jeanne Kellar: Going up.

Susan Fendley: And she, she asked me, she said do you think that’s silly? And I said no. I don’t think it’s silly. That’s what her whole life’s been centered around. Of course, besides her family, but she loves what she does.

Daphne Alford: Any other special memories, family memories?

Clay Kellar: He thinks he’s too young, but I will never forget. We’re outside in the yard playing, and this is 1969 and on our old RCA black-and-white TV, she called us all inside. Get in the house now and set us down in front of the TV so we could watch man land on the moon. And she was just jumping for joy and said, ‘That’s what we do out at Stennis. That’s what we do.’

Daphne Alford: Great! Anymore?

Steven Kellar: I can remember the old engines they tested during the Apollo when I was young how they’d rattle everything in our house. My house is 11 miles from where I work. It’s 11 miles here and it, I can still, when we test a shuttle engine, I can feel it rumble, but it didn’t rumble like the Apollo days did.

Susan Fendley: They used to break panes.

Jeanne Kellar: Oh yes, yes.

Susan Fendley: Mom, did you want to tell them that story about that lady that refused to get off her back porch when they were pulling it?

Jeanne Kellar: I saw that.

Daphne Alford: Oh really?

Jeanne Kellar: I mean I was sitting on my front porch when they were bringing her house, Aunt Blue's house by moving her out of the buffer zone, 'cause we had moved to Nicholson then. And she was sitting in her rocking chair on that porch. And she moved maybe a half a mile from where we lived, but she was, she would not get out of her rocking chair. They moved the house with her in it.

Susan Fendley: Was she the last house to be moved out?

Jeanne Kellar: Yes, yes, she was the last house, I think. I'm not sure, but I remember so well, oh my God, she's going to fall off that porch in that rocking chair, you know. [Laughter.]

Susan Fendley: I always remembered that story.

Daphne Alford: Anything else, you would like to share about 50 years of Stennis?

Steven Kellar: I hope we have 50 more.

Susan Fendley: Or maybe more.

Steven Kellar: I got another generation of mechanics coming.

Jeanne Kellar: Yes, we got to make sure that Stennis stays open, whatever it takes.

Daphne Alford: I think ...

Jennifer Melton: I have a question umm, and the [inaudible] like you were about the kids. Do you think you're children are going to possibly were going into engineering and want to work out here because y'all have worked out here?

Susan Fendley: I'm hoping for grandchildren or mine.

Steven Kellar: Yeah. I have an 11-year-old granddaughter and a 10-year-old grandson that live with me. And my granddaughter tells me she's going to be an engineer. She wants to do what I do. She's going to work where I work. So, that's, that's the one I'm pushing for, for her to take my place.

Rhonda Kellar: I have a 6-year-old son who wants to be an astronaut.

Susan Fendley: I have 11 grandkids, and I'm pushing every one of them this way.

Steven Kellar: I have 10.

Clay Kellar: And I'm the oldest?

Susan Fendley: And he's the oldest.

Daphne Alford: Alright, I guess that's the end of the interview.

Susan Fendley: Thank you.

Daphne Alford: And thank you.

Jeanne Kellar: Thank you.

Clay Kellar: Thank you.

Steven Kellar: Thank you.

Rhonda Kellar: Thank you.