Abstract: This interview was conducted at the 2010 Black Alumni Weekend at the University of Florida. Kenya Ellis relates some of her family history that ranges from Florida to the Carolinas, and talks about her experiences with education in Orlando, Florida, including the teachers who most influenced her in K-12. She also served in the US Marine Corps after graduating from UF, and discusses life as a Marine as well as the relative scarcity of Black women serving as officers in the Marines. She then relates how she met her husband. Ms. Ellis transitions to describing what she likes the most about UF as an institution, and some of the places she intends to visit while she’s in Gainesville. She also relates some of her memories from her time at UF.

Keywords: [African American History; University of Florida; US Military Veterans]
W: This is Marna Weston with the Sam Proctor Oral History Program at Emerson Alumni Hall during Black Alumni weekend on September 3, 2010, and I’m interviewing Miss Kenya Ellis. Thank you very much for agreeing to the interview.

E: Thank you for having me.

W: Would you please state your full name?

E: Kenya McClain Ellis, but normally I go just by Kenya Ellis.

W: Okay and when and where were you born?

E: I was born in Aiken, South Carolina back in 1971.

W: And who are your mom and dad?

E: Mom and Dad are Betty Friday and Clifford McClain.

W: Okay, do you know their dates of birth?

E: My mom was born October 1947 and my father born in December 1947.

W: Okay, I’d like to talk a little bit about your extended family from there. On your mom’s side, who are your grandparents?

E: Grandparents are Naomi and Robert Friday, they’re deceased.

W: And on your dad’s side, who are your grandparents?

E: My dad’s side it’s Grandma Pearl and John McClain, and they’re also both deceased.

W: Okay are you familiar with your family past that? Can you talk about your great-grandparents on either side?

E: Great-grandparents on my mom’s side. My, how do you say it, mom on the—was Miss Essie and Robert Friday, because my grandfather is a junior. And let’s see.
My mom’s mom, her mother, I know she was Quattlebaums, I forget her first name, but they’re the Quattlebaums and the Fridays. My dad not so much. I know that my grandmother’s—my dad’s mom’ maiden name was Ruffin in the Seminole areas. So that’s as far as back I can say without probably being wrong.

W: Okay. These family ties, where are those extended family ties from on your mother’s family side and your dad’s family side, where are those people from?

E: On my mother’s family’s side, all in Aiken. Aiken, South Carolina, I think it’s in Wagner area all the way in the country. On my father’s side majority of Florida.

W: What part of Florida?

E: I would say, I’d have to mention the counties: Seminole County and part of Alachua County I would say.

W: Okay, terrific. I’d like to talk to you a little bit about your education.

E: Okay.

W: Where did your earliest education take place?

E: Down in Orlando, Florida in Catalina Elementary School. And then there was Memorial, at that time we called it Junior High, and then I went to Jones High School.

W: Okay, was Jones winning when you were there because they win now so were they winning when you were there?

E: We had—unfortunately my senior year—we had a losing season, but we beat Winter Park. And that was satisfying for us since we were just at that time, I don’t know if they increased, but a 3A school.
W: Yeah they’re bigger now. [Laughter] Who was your favorite teacher through elementary, middle and high school and why?

E: Elementary was Mr. Kite, he was the first male teacher that we had, and he really pushed us to think outside the box per se for at that time they had sixth grade and that was in elementary school. I would say junior high was Ms. Staples, because she could speak Spanish very well, and she had very high expectations of her students. She speaks Spanish as well. And many of us didn’t reach that mark unfortunately, but she was very memorable. And at Jones High, I would say Ms. Burns. She was a Black teacher that taught math, and that was hard to do because she also taught math; she taught Algebra, Algebra 2. And those of us who wanted to excel took her class and she was a matter-of-fact. She spoke as it is and she didn’t take jokes well, not at all, so she’s a very stern teacher so she was very memorable there at Jones High when I went there.

W: Did you try to tell some jokes? [Laughter]

E: No, but Jones High was—I think it was the birthplace of comedians, because every day you can laugh about something, and she curtailed that in her classroom. It was all about business. And she was thinking how you’re supposed to act, and she went more than just teaching mathematics or algebra. She’s like how you present yourself, how you’re supposed to speak properly when you speak. She always wanted to make sure that you dressed professionally or “appropriately” is what she would always say. So she was almost like a mother to us going to that school for me.
W: Okay could you talk about your kids for a little bit? What are their names and what are their ages?

E: I have three. I have two boys and a girl. My first one is Charles Ellis II, he is six years old. My middle is Robert Clifford Ellis, and he is four. And then my youngest, my princess, is Jordan Jean Ellis and she is two years old.

W: Okay you just lit up like a Christmas tree, you're just really bright. What do you like about being a mom so much so that puts that smile on your face?

E: Just I don't know, it's a joy. It is a joy being a mom and they are at a young age to where everything is very impressionable and things that they say as they're growing up, I'm thinking they're growing up fast, it's impressive. It's like, “Oh my God, these little people I'm in charge of.” And they take on the personality of their parents and they are definitely doing that and I'm very proud of them.

W: Are you married?

E: Yes.

W: And what is your husband's name?

E: His name is Charles Eric Ellis.

W: Where did you meet?

E: We met in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He was in the Marine Corps, and I was also in the Marine Corps at that time. And there was a gathering of maybe a celebration or some kind of football weekend, and that's where I met him. And I was up there on a business trip—actually I was up there on a business trip doing training and I was invited to a gathering, and then that's where I met him.
W: Okay fascinated about you being in the military so before we talk about your University of Florida experiences, I’d like to take you to your military experience. How did you end up being in the United States Marine Corps?

E: Wow. When I graduated from the University of Florida I started in the corporate world, actually working for Disney World, and at that time I was a little bit—It was ordinary. I wanted more of a challenge. I wanted something that would stretch me 180 degrees from where I came from. So I actually started searching around for maybe—and my father even said, “Maybe you wanna think of joining the military. That is a challenge for you. None of us are associated with the military on both sides of the family, why don’t you look into that?” So I did, and came across the recruiters. Went to all the recruiters; Air Force I went first, Navy and then Army, and then finally I went to the Marine Corps.

W: The Marines are so iconic in American society and just internationally the Marines, the songs, the toughness, the movies, is it kind of like that? I saw Full Metal Jacket, for example; I mean, I don’t know if you’ve seen that movie, but is it like that being a Marine?

E: Yes, and then some.

W: Okay. So like, right now, you’re sitting here, you’re not on active duty anymore I’m assuming, but you’re still a Marine?

E: Once a Marine, always a Marine.

W: So you could like snap my neck or whatever right now. [Laughter]

E: No, but I think in that environment it’s a culture and it’s imbedded in you from when you first as a recruit or when you go to—there’s two lunges, the enlisted
side and the officer side, and I went in the officer side. But no matter side you’re going, there is a culture that you are taught and it becomes you. “God, Country, Core, Family.” And it’s automatically. And I think it’s one of the best things that I’ve ever done, because it was the most challenging thing that I’ve done since—I would say next to motherhood.

W: Thinking about the comments you made about the Americanism of the Marine Corps, are there race issues in the Marine Corps that you experienced? Or if you’re a Marine you’re just a Marine. Or are you an African-American Marine? What is the dynamic there?

E: It depends on, from my experience, I can’t speak for others, from my experience, your credibility your word no matter what you look like, well your physique also matters. Can you pass the physical fitness? If so, are you great at it? Are you a stud? That builds your credibility. When you say that something is gonna be at a certain place, at a certain time, does that happen? So, it rests on your ability to perform, to execute, to do your job, to know your job. So once you build that up and that’s over time, that in you, build your career. They will take your word and what you do at face value over time once they know, once you passed the second lieutenant, first lieutenant and then become more senior; an officer. Then the expectation of you knowing what you’re supposed to be doing, know how to do it, if you don’t know where to get whatever it is that you need you know how to go about it legally to get it. The expectation of you knowing what you’re supposed to do it’s supposed to be automatically there, but that grows over time. So as far as race in the Marine—there is some, and there’s always gonna be a little there.
But once you’ve proven yourself on a big exercise or you put onto the field or a real world operation, it actually excels you and propels you so it doesn’t really matter what your race is. Because me being two things—being Black and being a woman—I had to really know my job and how other people job function works.

W: What was your job?

E: Working supply and logistics. So as far as food being laid on or equipment or gear or something like an air craft is supposed to be arriving at something, I am supposed to make sure that that takes place, and if something breaks down, how do we get it fixed? So you had to be very creative and thinking out of the box and be timely otherwise—it’s a critical, it’s very critical to ensure it, or you won’t get the opportunities to excel or be kept more responsibility or get promoted. So, it’s been really good for me.

W: Did you receive many promotions and what rank did you leave the Corps in?

E: Well actually I’m still in reservists. I took some time off being a mom so I earned the rank of a Major in Marine Corps. My husband, he’s now earned the rank of Lieutenant colonel, so we’re both up four promotion within a year or so.

W: Wow, you’re the first Major in the Marine Corps I’ve ever sat with.

E: [Laughter] When I first came in and we saw it, I looked at it statistically on the officer’s side for Black females. When I came in, I believe—I think in [19]96 there was less than a hundred of us Black females starting from warrant officer to the highest rank at that time was Lieutenant colonel on the opposite side. Now that I looked at it, we may have in three digits like a hundred and ten or a hundred and twelve, but it ebbs and flows around a hundred Black female officers. So not only
you, but those who are in the Marine Corps, they also have the same reaction, “Wow, there’s a Black female officer in my presence”.

W: As a reservist, you may not be able to answer this next question. It has to deal with our President and I know that for anyone in the service the answer, the Commander and Chief is that person’s held in the highest level of respect and that’s the end of it. But I’m curious if you can speak to the issue of President Obama being the first African-American as President. Do you think that affects how he deals with the different branches of the military service and the particular—the Marine Corps as you’re in that one and you might be able to speak to it?

E: That’s a good question. As Commander and Chief the expectations high, because you’re gonna put sons and daughters in harm’s way if necessary for the interest of the United Sates for national security. So, I don’t think it’s no difference than the expectations from President Obama, President Bush or any President of the United States. When you have young women and men to go and fight for your country that weighs heavily on anyone in charge as the Commander and Chief. So, no, I don’t think there’s any difference between President Obama or our former President Bush.

W: Have you ever been in a combat situation or fired your weapon in combat?

E: Luckily I have not. I have not. Not to say that if the call does come I’ll be willing, of course more than willing to do what I need to do as ordered, but no I have not.

W: What is the most serious order that you’ve ever issued as a Major in the Marine Corps?
E: Serious order?

W: Serious is a weird word so you interpret that as you choose to.

E: Serious order. I had to make a decision to either to report someone that was doing something immoral that was going against the uniform code, the military justice, and that person was a peer. So that was a hard decision to make, but because that person violated, and I’m not gonna go into details but person of course violated and it affected our unit, I had to take responsibility and take action; take the necessary action. And it was incumbent upon me to take that action, and report that person.

W: Where have you been stationed since you’ve been in the Marine Corps?

E: My career was a little short so…Quantico is where most officers go for OCS training so Quantico, Virginia.

W: And OCS could you say what that is?

E: It’s an officer candidate school. So it’s the initial getting in, just like recruits go to maybe Parris Island for their training—that’s the initial training on the Officer’s side in the Marine Corps. So I went to Quantico, Virginia. Then I was assigned down to…it’s been a while, to which is probably not as memorable because I was going through training, but down South Carolina, Beaufort, South Carolina, and I also went to Parris Island. And then I was able to have the opportunity to go overseas to do a short, actually an operation in Hungary. And then I went over to Japan, and then that’s when I met my husband, and got out and joined the reserves.
W: So exactly how did you meet? You said it was a kind of a football or something like that, but could you provide a little more detail?

E: There was an organization, there was a group of officers, some of us Black officers get together up there in Camp Lejeune and they invited—tried to, it’s like a mentorship that came together. So once a year there was a boat party and so it was—I think it’s Williamsburg—where they have this ferryboat that cruises along the river. And everybody was invited. And there was an invitation, and then that’s where I participated in that event, that activity, the boat party—we called it a boat party—and that’s where I met my husband.

W: Well I’m just curious, how would he approach you? With that equal training you both could like kill each other; you’re able to defend yourself from any untoward advance so, what approach did he use? What made it so that it was magic and you ended up carrying on a relationship and eventually being married, what happened?

E: First of all, he was tall, dark, and handsome. [Laughter] And I noticed him from afar and everybody was talking about, they all called him Chuck, so Chuck Ellis this, Chuck Ellis that and I was curious even when I was down away from him I was down at the time I was stationed at Parris Island, I was like hearing this Chuck Ellis fellow. I was like, “Who’s Chuck Ellis, who’s Chuck Ellis?” So when I did see him I was like, “Oh, so that’s Chuck Ellis.” And I actually sparked up a conversation and the rest is history.
W: Okay, alright let’s talk about the University of Florida. Here we are at Black Alumni weekend and it’s very exciting. What is it that brought you here this weekend?

E: I’ve scheduled this months in advance. Two folds, it’s the last vacation for us for the year and my family lives down in Orlando so, two birds with one stone. My kids get to spend time with their grandparents, and I get to come up and see my old school that I graduated from. So it’s really a win-win for me.

W: And you currently live in D.C, what are the differences in being a Gator in Washington D.C and being a Gator coming home for Black Alumni Weekend here on campus at the University of Florida?

E: Being a Gator up in D.C, if you’re wearing your Gator shirt or something to that effect, someone around the corner would say “Go Gators!” We are national, even when I lived in Texas, “Honk honk. Go Gators!” I mean as long as there’s either on my car or I’m wearing a shirt I have some kind of paraphernalia we are nationwide and that brings pride and a smile on my face that I went to the right school, because everyone can relate to the Gators which is great. And so even when I walk around, I try to wear something that has something with “Gators” on it and those would strike up a conversation. “When did you go there?” and, “Oh the football season, basketball season,” talk about sports. It’s really, but here, right here on campus, and it’s growing so much and especially in the area. It’s always nice to see things change, and things that haven’t changed. So it’s great.

W: What was your major and what year did you graduate?

E: I majored in social geography and I graduated in 1993.
W: What’s the biggest change that you’ve noticed on the campus of the University of Florida from your time here to today?

E: Well I haven’t actually gone in the campus yet so coming off of Archer, the buildup, I don’t know all the shops and commercial businesses—I wish I had them here; more of a choice. It’s welcoming I mean. It’s more, I would say, metropolitan-like here, so it’s great. It’s wonderful the variety of things that you can get into. I’m looking forward to going on campus. I can’t wait to see any changes there. I’m gonna see if the fries are still there, I don’t know if they still are.

W: You’re talking about the Alachua statue; also called the “French Fries” it’s still there.

E: It’s still there? Looking forward to see. We call it—what’s that wooden thing or whatever it is?

W: You talking about the rock? The potato?

E: The rock! Yeah the potato, I wanna see the potato! Definitely let’s see you there. I wanna see if the Hare Krishna’s are still singing their song.

W: They are. [Laughter]

E: I would love to do that.

W: When you were here as an undergraduate student at the University of Florida, what activities and organizations were you involved in?

E: Let’s see. Intramural sports, flag football, and also Student Government activities, part of the government parties trying to get elected for elections; participated in that, participated in the gospel choir—University Gospel choir—and basically
studying trying to graduate. And also, participate in some of the Greek organizations when they had activities, Black and White so I could experience all of that and whatever came up on the—I guess at that time it was a television station where you could see all the student activities and see what was going on for that week or coming up, or going to the games; basketball games, football games, so those were really enjoyable.

W: We’re recently celebrating in this early part of the semester the twentieth anniversary of the student murders here on campus. Do you have any memories of those times in 1990 and what are those memories?

E: I remember way back before I think it was Tiffany Sessions that was lost, she was gone. Nobody knew and there was a big billboard. I think I was there when there was the murders for, is that weird to talk about? Yes, in fact it means so much that my roommate, she left UF and I had a whole semester by myself in the dorms. So, yeah, that took a real effect. So everybody was wondering, but over time we healed, and moved on; moved forward.

W: Couple of names you give me your reaction to those names. John Lombardi.

E: Great! Wonderful! Got a chance to meet him personally and I thought he was the best President that, I don’t know how many I went through but, I think he was the best at that time, and very personable, very friendly, and exuberant. I think he supported everything as long as you presented and had justified it. He supported everything that we, especially those in the Black Student Union, wanted to do and...full support. Great, great as a president of the University of Florida.

W: Betty Stewart Dowdell.
E: Don't know or don't recall who that is.

W: Okay, the late Dr. James Scott.

E: Nope, don't recall.

W: Willie Robinson.

E: He sounds familiar but don't know, don't have any interaction with him or something.

W: Okay, Student Government-wise, what type of activities do you recall from your student government experience at UF?

E: Well, I had supported a party that was against the big party, I forget what it was, but went out there, wore T-shirts, tried to get out the vote. And that was a good experience for me, because I didn't know how hard it is to organize, to actually—this student body was so big, and you're trying to reach out to everyone to insist that they vote for your particular party, so that was a good experience. It didn't go well, we didn't win, but it was a good experience for us.

W: What was an example of how you campaigned? Because students today still campaign about people following them around or trying to put "I voted" stickers on them, so what was your experience giving information to your fellow students and trying to motivate them about how important it was to vote and to vote for your party, what was that like?

E: I think it was more haphazard for me because I was okay, we didn't have much money, so a lot of it was verbal. Standing at the door as they walk out of a building or dorm, especially the day of the election, to motivate them to vote and devote for that particular party, wearing their shirts. If you had those flyers, to
give them flyers and give it in their hand if they take it. So those were things that we did. It wasn’t, I don’t think, well thought out, but I did it anyway because we needed a person to do it.

W: To provide some balance of experiences, can you tell me about a really positive experience that you had as a student of the University of Florida and then maybe one that wasn’t so positive?

E: The opportunity to see all kinds of people here. Those coming from the Midwest, coming from East Coast, West Coast, those who have different religious backgrounds you can interact with them; the different thought process. Culturally those who coming from Miami I learned that when the hurricane came through the year I went to—you learn about Hialeah.

W: You’re talking about Andrew.

E: Yeah Hurricane Andrew when he came through. You learned about Hialeah, North Miami and South Miami Beach. I mean those are the things that affected them and difficult to interact with on a daily basis. If you go out there and experience being a Gator it’s just a conglomerate of all kinds of people from everywhere come to UF which is great.

W: And how about that not-as-positive experience?

E: Let’s see, not as positive. Well I would say, I think the lack of initiation on my part to even fellowship with other people when I first got here as a freshman. I was more reclusive and wanted to stay in my own little group and not until someone brought me to an event or something to that effect, how much fun I had. It was great. The experience I have and unfortunately that didn’t happen until almost the
end of my sophomore year. I was like, “I missed a whole year. I missed out on doing other things.” So that’s the only thing that I regret, that I didn’t actually step out there and experience all that UF had to offer my freshman year.

W: Do you think that some of that might have been experiencing UF as a person of color, you know a Black student in such a large more predominantly White university, what effect did that have on your socializing or reaching out and meeting people? Did you identify as a Black student, or were you a UF student? How did you reconcile your existence here on campus as a student?

E: Initially I identified myself as a Black student, and tried to associate myself around Black activities and Black. And then, until I went to that other event, I limited myself. So I didn’t get the full range. I was actually nervous and afraid at first, what my peers would say or if I’d be accepted or I’d be shunned away at some of those activities. But when I was not, I was like, “I missed out on that opportunity,” because coming from a small school, Jones High, being predominantly Black, I’m thinking I’m supposed to stay within my own, but here at UF you have an opportunity to branch out and discover other cultures, other activities. You wanna join Greek, whether it be a Black fraternity or sorority or even on the other sororities that are non-Black, or any other activities. That’s the opportunity you have here at UF, and you develop bonds, which can last for a long time.

W: Thinking about the students that are here now and contrasting them to when you went to school here and also adding in maybe this year’s theme which is, “Building up on our Strong Foundation for the Gator Nation” or even last year’s
“Invest in the Legacy,” what are your hopes for University of Florida students now based on the experience that you’ve had?

E: That they have as much pride in saying that they are a Gator. Once a graduate—well they graduated or associated being a Gator, I know those who are in the area. I get feedback all the time. I was in the wild recently and someone was like “I love Gators!” and it makes me even have more incentive to say, “Hey, I went to the University of Florida. I am an alumni.” And they’re like “Go Gators! You went to the University of Florida?” “Yes I went to the University.” So I hope that continues for the students that once they graduate, they still have that pride of being a Gator.

W: Kenya McClain Ellis, thank you so much for your interview. On behalf of the Sam Proctor Oral History Program I would like to thank you for your comments during Black Alumni weekend, and it’s just incredible, they’re gonna be in our archives so fifty or a hundred years from now, maybe someone will be listening to this. Just thank you for taking the time. I like to conclude all of my interviews by offering the person I’ve spoken with the chance to make final comments. Final privilege on your behalf whether it’s something about the interview, or something that was left unsaid or any final comment. And at the conclusion of those remarks, that’ll conclude the interview, and again our thanks for participating.

E: Thank you for giving me the opportunity and I look forward in the future. Maybe my children, hearing what has said, because this lasts forever. This is great. Thank you.

[End of Interview]