

11-5-2003

David R. Kenerson : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Lucy D. Jones

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David R. Kenerson

Lucy D. Jones

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UUSF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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Date of Interview: November 5, 2003
Audit Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date Audit Edit Completed: June 22, 2004

Interviewer: Lucy Jones (J)
Location of Interview: Kenerson
Residence, St. Petersburg
Transcriber: University of Florida
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TRANSCRIPTION

J: Today is November 5, 2003. My name is Lucy Jones, graduate assistant for the Florida Studies Center. This is a continuation of a series of interviews with USF faculty, students, staff and alumni, commemorating fifty years of university history. Today I'm here with David Kenerson in his home in St. Petersburg. Mr. Kenerson was hired by USF St. Petersburg in 1966 to teach business courses and he stayed to have a lengthy and varied career at the campus. Good morning, and thank you for agreeing to do this interview.

K: I look forward to it. I hope it comes out all right. It's interesting that you talk about fifty years. Fifty years takes us back to when?

J: Back to 1956?

K: [It takes us to] 1956? I guess so. But not 1966?

J: Did you start in 1956? Did I get that wrong?

K: I came to the city in 1956. I didn't join the faculty until I came here as administrator of Mound Park Hospital. I left the management of the hospital in 1960. In 1966 the dean of business on the St. Petersburg campus accepted the resignation of a faculty member who taught the required course for all graduating seniors. I don't remember the name of the

course, but I would call it a business policy course. That's all he'd ever taught there. There were three sections. This was in July or early August [of 1966], and Dean Klein, who was the new dean of business on that campus and hadn't really come over yet, was going to be the new dean of business on the campus. He, at the moment, was an assistant dean at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Preceding all of that, I had been a graduate student at the University of Florida in the college of business and was now a candidate for a Ph.D. degree, provided I wrote a dissertation. Here was this guy, poor Dean, [he] hadn't arrived to report for duty yet, but he knew he had to do something. Every senior graduating had to have this course. I, for the previous three years, had been a graduate student at Gainesville, and had impressed the faculty there because all of my papers related to hospital administration and management. They were delighted to have an older student talk about the real world instead of books. I apparently made a favorable impression on the faculty there, including the chairman of the head of the business research unit, as well as the department chairs at the university there. When the poor assistant dean at Gainesville learned that he didn't have somebody to teach that required course, he asked what they knew about Kenerson. I had written to one of the faculty up there and said, how can I get into teaching? They said, you can't here, but the new dean down there needs somebody. I met this new dean in the library at the bay campus. [I] had a twenty-minute interview with him, [we] shook hands, and I had a job beginning three weeks later. I've had two careers: one in hospital management, and one as a college professor. Of the two, I'm a much better college professor than I ever was a hospital administrator. Also, my life as a college professor is much more predictable, much more interesting, and I've loved every minute of it. Having said all of that, that's how I got

here and why I got here. I've played a variety of roles at [the] USF campus here at St. Petersburg. In the beginning, I was to be the advisor to the business students so they could transfer their credits over to the college of business where they would finish their degrees in business. I was an advisor and a helper to those students. I had the usual, customary responsibilities with teaching courses. In the beginning, I taught that first year of teaching beginning in 1966. I taught that required course. That got the dean out of the box. By then, he had time to recruit additional faculty. They began to share that teaching job for that particular course among other faculty who were willing to do it. I think, eventually, that particular course and its title was abolished from the required curriculum and wasn't a factor anymore. Meanwhile, I was placed in the management department. He got a new chairman of the management department who was the perfect man for the job, I swear. He was a behavioral-type guy. He had all of the managerial series under his belt. He was a fascinating lecturer and an enthusiastic one. He took me under his wing and let me teach every course in the management curriculum as long as it didn't have numbers in it. I was constantly in a learning mode all the time. It was wonderful to be able to have a class on a subject that I had never taught before, but I had read the material and so on. I got a lot out of it. Another thing that I introduced the very first semester I taught was an appraisal of the professor's job, how he performed in the classroom, done by the students. I used the university's questionnaire that they recommended. When I got it and tallied the results, I walked down to the dean's office and said, here, I want you to see this. I've never taught before, Dean, but this is what they said. I didn't have anything to do with it.

J: So it was good?

K: He was flabbergasted. Never had any faculty member ever done that. They didn't even do it up in Gainesville. I'll show you the plaque that I got from my first class that I ever taught.

J: They gave you a plaque?

K: Well, he did at my retirement party. That was some years there. I finished that semester, [I] did the questionnaire with the students again, and walked down to the dean's office and showed him the results and how it compared with the first semester. Thank the Lord it improved a little bit. He was delighted. I didn't have a terminal degree. It wasn't going to be too long before the question of tenure is going to come up. They don't tenure people without degrees without terminal degrees particularly. He was aware of that, much more so than I was. He started making it possible for me to establish a good resume. He nominated me for outstanding teacher of the year award with some outside organization. I became one of those. He sent me up to a conference in North Carolina. [It was a] labor relations conference. I had a lovely time there because I could sit on the porch there and look across at the mountains and sit with the president of the university. I don't know how those things happened. The dean knew how to make me visible and in the right quarters. It was interesting, because my wife, Nada, while we were students at Gainesville, got to playing bridge with a group of people. One was the wife of the head of the Bureau of Business and Research where I was the graduate assistant. Also, the vice president's wife [was in that group], who became the president down here, John Allen. Everything in my whole career in education just fell into place. I had a dean who was praying that I could take over and bail him out, who also was delighted because I was a good teacher and a good influence in the faculty. Whether I was fully respected or

not, I don't know. But it worked. When the tenure came up, and John Allen was president of USF, we got a new president, Mr. McKee, who was gung-ho on economics. He was a standard professorial president; maintained high standards. Everybody's got to have a Ph.D. and so forth, so on. That was touch-and-go. Between the support I got from the dean, from the head of the department, from other department heads among campus, the president agreed that I should be tenured. That was fortunate. It was fortunate, but it was also well planned. My role at the Bay campus has fundamentally, most-of-all been as a teacher. I didn't profess to be a researcher, and I wasn't asked or expected to do that. I was expected to do a good job and make the students loyal alumni, if you will. I succeeded, I think. I was fortunate, too, to report to the dean of the campus, who was out of the college of education, and who was really an unusual man. [He was] bright, forthcoming, and he and I enjoyed each other. We saw eye-to-eye. He was twenty years younger than I was. He took care of me, and I helped him whenever I could and in any way that he wanted. I had no special roles at the Bay campus until they opened up the place in Sarasota and the one further south of us in Ft. Myers. When the Ft. Myers opened, he really had to get out of St. Petersburg and be down there most of the time. He asked me to serve as acting dean of the campus. I had a whole year of that, which was kind of interesting. I had to go over to Tampa frequently, not to the other colleges, but I sat in on the meeting with the dean of business and his department heads, so if any problems came up I could deal with them and they could work through me. I got to know all of the faculty on St. Petersburg from a slightly different point of view. I knew all of the faculty here. I really didn't try to make any waves that year. I was just trying to hold things steady and to take care of any particular individual problems that

came up. When we started there, we had this one building which was an old training barracks for the Navy. We had an auditorium; we had classrooms. Some of them were minimal facilities, but they were satisfactory. All of us had offices on the second floor. You could look out and see the harbor or the bay. I loved the location. I liked being five minutes from living there. I lived on Dragbar, so I could get here quickly. The number of students began to increase as we provided more faculty and more offerings and brought a diversification across disciplines so that they could get some of their non-business courses right on our campus. We had English; we had history; we had all the other kinds of things that a student needs for variety or to start his major in. They could be transferred to Tampa and be prepared for the work over there. On a whole, it worked pretty well. I didn't have any particular thing to do about recruiting students. They just came here. It was convenient for a great many of them. I got my experience in dealing with faculty from the campus [and] the problems they had with tenure, the problems of evaluating their work. Of course, I had a very biased view. I didn't have a very high regard for research, per say, and especially the kind that goes into dissertations. Sometimes you've got a really brilliant guy and it's probably worth it. The average young faculty member who's just gotten his degree and tries to teach and also earn the credits he needs for tenure, he's in a terrible bind between being able to deal with students and also to serve his own needs to get tenure. I'm not sure I like the emphasis on tenure. I think some places you'll go to hell real fast if you didn't have that protection. I was always in favor of granting tenure to whoever it was, whether they liked his research or whether they didn't. If he was a good teacher and if he cared about his students [I was in favor of tenure]. To me, that was fundamental. I don't have a lot

of comments to make about the faculty, per say. We were constantly adding to it and replacing people who leave. I didn't participate greatly in all those searches and so on. The curriculum didn't seem to vary, certainly not in the business school. I became quite comfortable with the curriculum, and I could teach those courses that I liked to teach. One of the things that was possible for me to do was to create a course that didn't exist. I called it personnel interviewing. I wanted to provide the kids with some kind of concrete, specific training in dealing with interviews for jobs. It was a very popular thing. I had to limit to some extent. I couldn't deal with a large class. We did have a first-class department who ran the duplicating of the recording equipment. It was good service; [it was] right there. They would set it up for me. I set it up so that the students had to do some reading. They had three interviews that they had to run. [They had to] do three different interviews. They had to deal with an interview about a problem employee, they had to deal with; I don't know. There were three different kinds. It included a problem employee, maybe a promotion, I don't know. Whatever it was. There were three different ones. We videotaped them. They had to take that videotape home and write their own critique.

J: That's hard.

K: Yes, of course it is. But boy, do they learn.

J: I'm sure they do.

K: Some students were afraid of it, but those who had guts took it. It was called Personnel Interviewing. That was always a pain in the side to a lot of us straight now guys on the faculty. One of my colleagues in the department said, Dave, we need a different name for that. How about the Theory and Practice of Management. Suddenly, I got legitimate.

Is that absolutely ridiculous? Call a spade a shovel and you get shot. That's what it became and it also got into the catalogue. I don't know whether they're doing it anymore, but I think that having to do an interview and critiquing yourself is really good. They got my critique right at the time, an oral one, and not necessarily very long. The only other topic here that I haven't touched on especially is the administration of the campus. That is still in the process of being evaluated, revised, subject to change with each new president of the university that comes along. The basic departments like the chairman of a department in Tampa doesn't want any off-campus outfit making decisions that he considers his decisions. That is a conflict that I don't know how you resolve except that if people like each other and cooperate and work together, it can be handled. If they hate the S.O.B. and it ends up in conflict it's unresolved. That conflict goes now in between departmental chairs over there versus this campus, but also between the man who's head of this campus and whoever he's supposed to report to over there. Then he's in bad shape because he's got how many different chairmen over there. It takes a skilled diplomat to be the head of this campus and to maintain good feelings and good relationships for the whole campus. It's a fact of life and some people are better than others. On the whole, we've had good results in the last ten years or so with Bill Cullen. We get a woman president over there and she doesn't fit or he doesn't fit, so she's uneasy. Why and wherefore? He's no longer there. He's back to teaching, his first love. It's too bad. It's a fact of life. I have better knowledge about current relationships and whether there is peace or harmony or not. Thirty miles [of] distance takes care of most problems.

J: There is something to be said for distance.

K: It's only a quarter till eleven. If you have any questions...

J: I was wondering if you remembered how the faculty got along with each other. Did you interact with each other outside of campus or on campus or departmental parties?

K: I think some faculty were friends across departments and socialized one way or another. There was no particular attempt to create social occasions. We all gathered together at graduation time when degrees were being handed out. We sat in the audience, and most faculty showed up. I don't recall too much about that. I know that I had good relations basically with the faculty in business over in the other campus and with the dean of business. I kept in touch with him. We went through two or three deans of business and the last one I thought was pretty good. The one before him I didn't think was good. He was just an old hand and wasn't very flexible and didn't have much respect unless you had a degree. I think the faculty in this campus was really unified and cohesive. I don't think there's a lot of in-fighting between them. Fighting, if any, is between here and Tampa. Ray is a good man to ask that question, too. What's his evaluation of the faculty's relations between here and there?

J: I haven't asked him specifically yet. I'm sure he has an opinion.

K: He's a very level-headed, reasonable person, I think. [He's] smart, too. It helps to be smart.

J: What year did you retire? Do you remember?

K: [I retired in] 1987.

J: So you were there for twenty-one years? [You were there from] 1966 to 1987. [That's] twenty-one [years].

K: Yes. I retired, but I continued teaching one course. Maybe [I taught] two [courses]. I

really turned it off in 1993.

J: You said, that's enough.

K: You should really see. You want to view the tape they made at my retirement party.

J: They videotaped your retirement party?

K: Yes. It's a good one. One of the remarks one of the speakers made was the man who was the head of this campus speaking. He said, I'm glad to be able to report to you all that David's going to not leave us or retire. He's going to continue teaching. Further than that, he's going to keep an office. You know something? I got a big thank-you from his wife. That was a nice party. Let me show you the thing that the students... my first year, it was the second semester of my first year of teaching that I made this impression on this kid. He sent me this one at my retirement party. He got his degree in 1967. He went on to Gainesville [The University of Florida] and got his MBA up there. Then he got a job with this company that operates these portraits and is in department stores. In a few short years he was treasurer of that outfit. I think less than ten years out he sent a \$10,000 check to the campus fundraiser, which I thought was quite remarkable. I think he's out of that now. He's got his own business, a legal plans. Would you believe that his marketing strategy is by telephone? And he does it himself. He's got more persistence and more gall and yet being a perfect gentleman at all times. All he needs is about two or three, yes, you can come talk to me, a week and he makes money hand over fist. Lucy, I hope this works for you.

J: I think it will. Thank you.

End of Interview