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Helen Sheffield : USF 25th (1985) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Milly St. Julien

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Milly St. Julien

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HELEN SHEFFIELD

St. Julien: Today I am interviewing Helen Sheffield, Personnel Technician III on the St. Petersburg campus of USF, for the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. What was your first contact with USF and what were some of your first impressions of the campus?

Sheffield: When I started here it was not USF. It was FICUS, the Florida Institute for Continuing University Studies. I came here in March 9, 1964, and I had applied for a temporary or part-time job in a clerical field. I was offered the job provided that I would take it on a full-time basis which I did. FICUS was the off-campus arm of the state university system at that time. FICUS was abolished by the legislature in 1965. In July the 1st of 1965 this campus became a part of the University of South Florida by virtue of our geographical location. The closest state university was given jurisdiction of each of these branches. Then we became USF. I don't recall any particular impressions. Of course, we had been here for over a year and a half. So it wasn't anything new.

St. Julien: When you started working for USF, was this before they had the upper level classes or was this while they were still doing the continuing education program?

Sheffield: As I recall we had upper level classes at that time. We did bring in one year freshmen-in-residence here because they had an overflow from the Tampa campus. They had committed themselves for a certain number of freshmen students and couldn't accommodate them so they put the overflow over here. So we had freshmen students which was a unique experience for our campus. At that time we also had a cafeteria which was a training

school operated by the county for cooks and bakers. So that served as the cafeteria for our freshman students.

St. Julien: Was that all over in the old building or in the barracks as they called them?

Sheffield: That was in the big concrete structure that is now Marine Sciences. Actually the cafeteria was located upstairs in the north end of that building which is now all labs for marine science. At that time it was a cafeteria.

St. Julien: Once they came under the structure that they have now, just the upper level classes, what was the size of the administration on this campus and the relationship between the faculty, the administration, and the students? Was it any different than it is now being such a small campus?

Sheffield: In my mind there is still a close relationship between faculty and students on this campus because we are still comparatively small. Back then I don't know if there was a lot of difference in that respect. However, as far as our administration goes, we had no student affairs office, and we had no academic affairs office. At any rate, I was secretary to the administrator when we started out with USF, and I took care of the student affairs functions and academic affairs functions until they brought in a dean of Academic Affairs which was Les Tuttle. So whatever had to be done, we did it because we were the only administrative group operating here at that time.

St. Julien: Tell us something about Student Affairs. That must have been interesting considering they have their own department now. How did you operate?

Sheffield: It's kind of interesting. We took care of Student Financial Aid just like they do now. Sudsy Tschiderer was a student and we got out the Crow's nest like we do now, only she was doing that as a student. She just evolved after graduation and continued to do these things and much more. Needless to say, we didn't have the activities and the organization and all that Sudsy has developed. I didn't get involved in a lot of student organizations, it was just the essential administration that went across my desk or through our office. Mr. Bramis was the central administrator, and I'm sure that he has told you that he lived upstairs. At night, for a period of time, they cut back on our staffing, which was small enough to begin with, and we had no security officers at that time. At that time there were just security guards. They cut those off completely from us. So at night he was the only one on campus. Then they reestablished a police office.

St. Julien: Were there any ever any problems? I know lots of times that living in an urban area, especially right downtown, there were maybe some sort of problems. Do you ever recall any situations that came up that involved maybe someone off campus or on campus or was it pretty secure?

Sheffield: I don't think that we really had the fears and the problems that one would expect to have now. Nothing stands out in my mind as any outstanding problem or that you might expect today.

St. Julien: Comparing the early curriculum of the school to what it is now, is it basically the same or was it done in a different direction?

Sheffield: I really never got involved in the curriculum. I was more involved in administrative affairs and marine science. That probably has been the greatest change. That has become a major part of this campus. Then the Florida Institute of Oceanography was brought in. So the emphasis on oceanography or marine science was probably the biggest change from what we first started with.

St. Julien: What about the Business Department? Do you think that is something that developed . . . From talking to people, I get the feeling that the Business College has really grown alot and that it has almost gotten as big as the liberal arts section. With the growth of the community, do you see that as something that has affected the curriculum of the school?

Sheffield: I'm sure it probably has, but since I am not that knowledgeable about our curriculum and where the growth has taken place, I am not aware of much of that. I'm sure that the needs of the community would be reflected in that because they try to respond to those needs, and where the demand is is where the most growth is probably reflected. I'm really not that much aware of the academic area.

St. Julien: What about working with administration. Has there been any kind of tension between the union, administration, or faculty?

Sheffield: I don't think our campus has really been touched much by that. I don't think that has been a factor or an influence that I am aware of.

St. Julien: Would that apply to the student protests during the Vietnam period?

Sheffield: We pretty well have been free of anything like that. One thing is probably the fact that our students are probably a little more mature and the

fact that we have not had freshman and sophomores. I think that probably has had some bearing on that. We really haven't had demonstrations and things like that.

St. Julien: What about this community? There is the tourist industry and St. Petersburg has always been known as the retirement community. Do you feel that that has made this college different than the Tampa campus because of the area that it is located in?

Sheffield: I think not the location as much as the median age of our students has probably contributed more to the type of campus and all that we have. I don't think the fact that it is located in downtown St. Petersburg has had . . . Maybe it has had more bearing that I am aware of. I haven't thought about it that much. I think alot of our students are students who have either started their education where it was interrupted either by family or one thing or another, or they are coming back to complete their education. Often times that is the case. Some of them are people who are in jobs here who are trying to advance or expand their education. I think that has had more influence than the location. I think the campus has been very well received by the community. I think it's a source of pride, and I think the community is very pleased to have it here. It encourages growth.

St. Julien: What kind of interaction do you feel has taken place between the community and the college? Do you feel that the people in this community are as aware of this University? In my opinion when I go to the lecture series, I always seem to think that there is alot of community support and there are alot of people from the community that are out there. I have talked to other people, and they have said that they are not so sure that the

larger community is as aware of the University as the people that live around the downtown area.

Sheffield: I think that the community as a whole is very aware of the University. I think that those people are evident at lectures and are people who may live around the area who have the time. I think most of the people you find are retirees and who take the advantage of the opportunity of having the campus in their area and who enjoy coming in and taking classes or sitting in on the lectures. There is more and more evidence of these people who are enjoying the advantages that the University offers, not just for the students, but for the surrounding community. The reason is because it is more accessible to them. When you have a one-hour lecture, people may be in northern Pinellas County and it would not be as attractive for them to drive clear down here for that. We certainly fill the room up, not that the room is all that spacious. I think they draw a good crowd. I don't know how far away those people come, but I think it has become more popular.

St. Julien: I have heard people complain about the lack of recognition between the Tampa campus and the branch campuses being a problem financially at times and also the relationship between the University of Florida and Florida State competing with this area and being established before the campus in this area. Working in administration, how do you see those relationships or the interaction between those schools? Has it caused this campus any kind of problem? Has it made it more creative?

Sheffield: I am not aware of any effect. I saw more evidence of competition back when I was with FICUS when I first started. I was really amazed then at the level of competition I was involved in in the science and engineering

part of it. The gentleman I worked for was coordinator of science and engineering for the state of Florida and happen to be based on this campus. That was a revelation to me. I saw alot more serious competition because everybody wanted . . . the engineering students and the programs and . . . Probably because I haven't been that close to it. I have not seen the competition for the dollars, programs, or the students. It probably still exists, but I just haven't been aware of it.

St. Julien: What about the political support from the local city council, county commission, and even the support from the business community? As an employee of this University, do you feel that they are strong supporters of this University?

Sheffield: Yes I do. It seems to me like the city of St. Petersburg has been very supportive of our campus. I think they are pleased to have it here, and I think that they have made every effort to offer dollars and support to encourage its growth.

St. Julien: I can remember that there was a time when they were considering expanding the University. There was some debate of whether to keep it in St. Petersburg or to move it further north to Largo. Do you remember any of that?

Sheffield: I don't know whether that was ever a serious consideration or not. I guess I heard of rumors to that effect. I never read anything or heard anything concrete. So I don't know of anything, whether that was ever really on any planning board or whether it was just a rumor. I think the only problem growth-wise is the attempt to expand towards the Albert Witter Airport and that seems to have been stymied, and they are going to

take an alternate route and build north on the land that is acquired over there. I really don't get into the internal politics that much to know that exactly . . . I know more of what I read in the paper and as you would read in the paper.

St. Julien: Let me ask you some questions about working in personnel. I realize that every school now has quotas with affirmative action in hiring. Do you feel that this University, especially this campus, has made an effort to recruit minorities as employees of the University and what kind of difficulties have they encountered?

Sheffield: I know we have made efforts. The guidelines of the University, recruiting and staffing, are geared for this, and we have certainly conscientiously followed those. I think we have made strides too. I believe that we have. I think our record would indicate that. Sometimes we encounter difficulties finding people to meet the qualifications, and that would be the only problem that I can think of. I'm thinking in terms of the Career Service level of clerical and that type of thing. Even so, we have placed minorities in pretty responsible positions.

St. Julien: Do ever recall any problems on the campus with race relations? If you recall, there were some problems in the early '60s in the community. Did that affect this campus at all?

Sheffield: I can't recall any racial problems that we have had. Nothing stands out in my mind. When you listen to this it sounds as though we have been trouble free, and I'm sure that is not the case. It is probably because we have been a small campus, and I'm sure those kinds of problems are

compounded when you get a larger group. That probably has a lot to do with it.

St. Julien: What about the recruitment or the role of women in the development of the administration or faculty? Were there any problems that were encountered by women as a working group in this University?

Sheffield: I haven't seen any problems there. Maybe someone else you talk to would say that we have. I don't know what the ratio is in our faculty with men and women, but it seems to me that we have a good representation of female professors. As far as the rest of our campus goes we have women in administrative posts, and I don't feel like we have a discrimination problem there.

St. Julien: Since you have been here the University has had about three different presidents and three interim presidents. In the administration side, did you ever notice a different trend or development coming from one administration to the other? Did it go in any different direction?

Sheffield: Probably by the time it filtered down to this level, it really didn't have that much of an impact as far as changing our policies and procedures. I know that certainly we have had presidents who impacted the community in a different manner. I would really have to say that I don't feel like it has determined the operation of this office that much one way or the other.

St. Julien: Do you remember any kind of incident that is unique that has happened to this campus since you have been here? I remember Mr. Bodie said someone referred to this campus as rustic when it first started out.

Sheffield: I guess that was a nice word. It really was rough in the beginning. We were all over in what was called the "A" building which is now the MSL building. They enclosed a stairwell and built part of the library under the stairwell and back into the wing of that building. There was no carpeting, drapes, or anything. This all came in and they really did wonders with that old maritime base. I hadn't heard rustic, but that is a pretty kind term to use. Off the top of my head I'm sure there were incidences . . .

St. Julien: Was there any effort . . . Bad weather . . . Being right there on the bay . . . hurricanes or any kind of storms that came through that . . .

Sheffield: We have had times that we were evacuated and could not work because the water level was coming up so fast. In fact, that happened a couple of years ago. I was in the midst of testing for personnel, and the police sent the word over to get out immediately. I had to stop right in the middle of the exam, and I had to send people home. By that time, everybody else had gone home. It was a quick flash flood that came up. So we had to evacuate. One time we had seven water spouts that we could see from over the sea wall all at one time. That was kind of exciting.

St. Julien: Do you remember when hurricane Donna come up the coast in the early '60s?

Sheffield: I can't remember which one that was.

St. Julien: There was one that hit this area.

Sheffield: I live on the water, and so I have had occasions where I could not get out to get here. We have had skeleton crews operating here with the few who

could manage to get here and operate. We have had periods of times when classes have been cancelled in the storm times or the hurricane times when we have had to cancel classes and send out word by the media or to alert people not to come to classes that night. We have had . . . But it never any bad repercussions.

St. Julien: Do you remember the building before air conditioning, or did they always have air conditioning? I know they always had wall units. I was just wondering if they had . . .

Sheffield: I think we always had air conditioning. Sometimes they didn't work in the summer. Many times they didn't work in the summer. We did have windows that we could open and so we had it over the buildings. Now you don't even have a window to open. The heating and air conditioning sometimes were kind of uncertain in the old building. I liked that old building, and I liked the views that we had. It had something to say for it.

St. Julien: If you look back over the times that you have been here, what would you say were some of the best or some of the worst developments that have happened here at the University? Is there something you would like to see improved?

Sheffield: I think that these buildings that have just been added in the last few years that have completed this circuit around the water have been a delightful addition. All of the run-down businesses and buildings that were along here were replaced by these lovely buildings. I think it has really enhanced the appearance of the whole area here tied in with the Dali Museum. I get alot of satisfaction out it, seeing this come to pass. I think that one of the nicer things as far as . . . There was kind of a

junk yard next door that DNR had over here by the pool area. Now it is all gone and now we have a nice building around that. I think that this whole area is one of the nicest things that has happened in the last twenty years. I think it is exciting. I think it is such a nice addition to the whole community.

St. Julien: Can you think of anything that you think that they could have done differently or better?

Sheffield: I am not real thrilled with the architecture. I think it is a shame to build right on the water and not have windows. In the library it is lovely. They certainly didn't spare windows to look out of. I think it is a shame to have a building without windows that you can take advantage of. I don't quite understand why they made it necessary to go outside to go someplace else. I guess that they think in Florida that is never a problem, but that is not always the case, to have to go from part of the building to another and have to go outside in order to get there. At any rate, they didn't ask me and I guess that is not a major problem, but that would be my criticism.

St. Julien: Helen, I would like to thank you. This has been very interesting.