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Peter Klingman: Good morning. I'm Peter Klingman, the director of the University of South Florida's [USF] Oral History Program. Our interview this morning is with somebody who I don't think needs any introduction to anybody in Tampa, USF, or indeed in the state of Florida. It is my very rare privilege and pleasure to have this opportunity to have Betty Castor here for an oral history interview at the university. Good morning, Betty.

Betty Castor: Good morning.

PK: We, in our previous conversation preparing for this, talked about the idea—and I think it's a great opportunity—where we could do a full-scale oral history with you, top to bottom, from early on through your entire career.

BC: Well, I'm delighted.

PK: With that concept, and considering so many of the achievements you've made, we're sort of looking at a first session, and then we'll do some other sessions until we get it all done. I doubt we'll be done until you're done with your career, and I suspect a great many of your fans and friends don't think you're done yet. You were born in Glassboro, New Jersey?

BC: Right. It was a very small town in the southern part of the Garden State [New Jersey] between Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] and Atlantic City [New Jersey]. It was about a town of 11,000 when I was growing up, and today it's probably about 10,005. So it's small, and probably shaped who I am to some extent because it was a small town. Everyone knew one another. We had one public school when I started elementary school that I attended. I then transferred to a college-based campus school and graduated from high school all in the same town. And then, on top of that, I went to college in the same town. So, truly, I

was from a small town environment where everyone knew us and my family. I had siblings. Looking back, [it was] rather idyllic, I think.

PK: Tell me about your mom and dad.

BC: My parents were both from the immediate area. We were a traditional family. My father had a small business in Glassboro. It was a small retail store and a newspaper delivery business. In addition, he was a small-town politician and public servant. He was the mayor of Glassboro for all of the years that I was growing up, all of those impressionable years. So, I grew up with the feeling that politics were wonderful. He was a part of helping to change our small town. He invited federal government funding for public housing projects and urban renewal projects. He was quite a role model for me and for my brothers and sister. I think it's easy to say that some of my interests in the public arena stem from his involvement in my early life.

PK: Did you have those family dinner table conversations about politics?

BC: There were always campaigns, and they were exciting. He was running at the same time that John F. Kennedy was elected president. It was an exciting time. Always a house filled with organization, organizing campaigns, and reacting. So there were a lot of friends around and a lot of excitement, the kind of excitement that is associated with political campaigns, but on a little smaller scale.

PK: How did your mom like that kind of a process?

BC: My mother was very involved and very supportive. My father, unfortunately, passed away as a rather young person. He was only fifty. My mother, at that point, took over the business. She was a strong and supportive person, and also enjoyed the political environment.

PK: When you were growing up in Glassboro, [were you a] good student?

BC: Yes, I was a good student. My older sister—I had a sister who was just a year and a half older, and she was a good student. I have a twin brother—and I think because I had a twin brother that it helped me to become a little more competitive—a younger brother, who is just eighteen months younger, and then a baby brother. We had a competitive family environment, but yes, I studied hard and, along with my sister, worked hard in our academic environment. There was never any question that I was going on to pursue a higher education, and that made us all work harder.

PK: Did you think back then about goals, and if so, what were your earliest goals about which you thought you might want to accomplish in life? Were you born to be a teacher, or did you think about other careers back then?

BC: I may have been born to be a teacher, but even in the early sixties [1960s], during the period that I was in college, careers for women were still somewhat limited. Education

was a traditional career path for women. Because we had a state college in our hometown, it was almost automatic. My family home was about two blocks from the college campus, so I literally walked to college and remained at home.

My earliest thoughts were of entering education. My teachers were tremendous role models for me. I can remember every one of them through my early years and right through high school. They were wonderful teachers.

The career for women at that time produced outstanding educators. Contrast that with today, when women have so many career paths, and we're struggling to find qualified people to go to into education. At that time, our teachers were just simply outstanding.

PK: Pick one of your most favorite teachers from that day, and describe why she was a role model for you, if you can, if you can remember a particular teacher and what impressed you about that.

BC: Well, I have several teachers who were simply outstanding. I can think back to my third grade experience with Mrs. Gooden, who asked me to make my very first oral book report. I remember that little sensation of having to get up in front of the class and talk about something that you had read. When I was through, I recall her saying, "Well, Betty, you did that very nicely. We're proud of you." It was the finest kind of reinforcement for young people, but somewhat authoritarian—not in the strictest sense, but a no-nonsense kind of classroom where discipline really didn't seem to be a big problem.

I went on to my fourth grade experience with Mrs. Nut. (laughs)

You can imagine the fun that all of us had with that name!

PK: Oh, no doubt!

BC: Mrs. Nicholson was my seventh grade teacher; Mrs. Switchell was my sixth grade teacher. Mrs. Downer was my fourth grade teacher. I remember all of them as caring teachers and caring people, but as educators who really wanted to see students progress. You knew when they were happy with your academic performance. You knew that; you felt that. You could see it in their body language, and in their eyes, and in the things that they announced. Of course, they knew us. They knew our families. In high school, some of my teachers taught my parents.

So, it was a different environment. [It was] kind of ideal, but I think it was a time, and I think that many of us had those ideal experiences in my generation.

PK: Going on to the state college; a different walker in a different direction than where you were walking previously. What did you decide to major in? [Was it] education right away?

BC: Yes. It was predominately at that time a teachers' college. It has since become a liberal arts university. Early I wanted to become a social studies teacher, so I majored in secondary social studies, everything from the areas that you are very familiar with, from history, geography, and sociology. [I] very much enjoyed that area.

I became absolutely captivated early in my college career by African studies, and became engaged in building a project, while I was an undergraduate, of sending supplies to African countries. Because that was a time when changes in African were occurring in many of the countries that formerly were colonies associated with European countries were becoming independent.

We thought a lot about where we could have the greatest impact and selected Uganda, of all places. I worked very hard on that project and became the student leader for our effort at sending educational supplies to Uganda. It had a long-term effect on me, because as soon as I graduated, I left and went to Africa and taught school in East Africa for several years. That's when my education really began.

PK: Yes, and we'll get there, but I want to back up just a little, back to Glassboro State [College]. Early 1960s, civil rights, social consciousness awareness, student protests, all of that: was it there at Glassboro?

BC: Yes. That was a little before the protests later, but there was certainly an interest. The schools in New Jersey were integrated as a consequence of the fifty-four [1954] Supreme Court decision.¹ I do remember the day when I was in fourth grade when our teacher announced that the formerly all-black elementary school in our town was going to be closed, and those students were coming to join us in our classroom. I was in an integrated school situation from the fourth grade on. For younger people, it occurred, and it occurred very well. I wasn't quite as aware of what was going on with the adult community at that time, as a fourth grader, but I had an opportunity to share classrooms and educational experiences with African American students from very early in my life. My higher education career was also one that was integrated.

PK: That's an important generational thing that we share, very different from today. It really is history and a long way from where you and I began. Somebody who grows up in a small town, lives in a small town, and goes to college in a small town—

BC: Wants to get away. (laughs)

PK: Wants to get away, or doesn't develop a world view, one or the other. You developed the want to get away and a world view. Did it surprise your parents? Did it surprise friends?

BC: Yes, it did. My parents were initially, I think, very disappointed when I said I really didn't want to teach school in Glassboro or any of the surrounding communities. I wanted to go off and do something very different. But, that was a period when there was a lot of

¹ Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.

interest, not only in civil rights, but in really voluntary sector when the Peace Corps was started in sixty-two [1962]. I was very interested in the Peace Corps. I had applied for that program as well as the program that I ultimately joined, which was called Teachers for East Africa. It was very similar to the Peace Corps, but just a little bit different.

But there was no doubt, in my early years in college, I began thinking about how far I could go in terms of geography and the attractiveness of traveling abroad to do some kind of voluntary service just captivated me. My parents tried very hard to talk me out of this, and they just couldn't understand why I would want to go to Africa of all places. There was so little valid information about Africa and what was happening there that they were somewhat frightened, I think, by the idea.

PK: I think that's very understandable.

BC: Among my friends—especially my female friends—when they got to the end of their college career, they were going to pursue the career path that was somewhat safer and more secure, I think. They thought in terms of family and that kind of security.

PK: This may strike you as a really silly question, but I want to ask it anyway. Do you ever regret not just doing the Glassboro environment?

BC: Settling down?

PK: The settling down thing.

BC: Not for a minute. (laughs) Not for a minute, I never. I have absolutely, totally no regrets. The opportunity to travel as a young person is such a wonderful educational experience. Every day it was a learning experience. Every day wasn't always a good learning experience, but it was a learning experience.

PK: Let's talk about East Africa and Uganda and doing it. How did you get to find out about the program, if you remember? What did it take in terms of training and background before you went?

BC: Well, as I indicated, I was really interested in doing the Peace Corps, but I wanted to go to sub-Saharan Africa. At the time, there was not an established program. I could've gone to Ethiopia, and I was accepted for the Peace Corps in Ethiopia. Then I learned about a program, the Teachers College that Columbia University had spawned. It was a joint program between the [United States] Agency for International Development and the British counterpart that selected teachers for Uganda, Kenya, and at the time, Tanganyika, now Tanzania. I applied for that program, as well, and was accepted. I went to Teachers College at Columbia for the summer immediately following my college graduation to do my preparation. That consisted of learning a little more about colonial history in Africa, but also serious cultural areas. I also studied Swahili.

PK: I was going to say, you must have had some exposure to language.

BC: Yeah. We studied Swahili, and we learned enough to get along. We taught in English. The secondary schools were in English, and most of the students from East Africa who pursued higher education studied in English. That was not a barrier. The somewhat unfortunate thing for me was that when I arrived in Uganda, I was outside of the capital city of Kampala where the language was Luganda, which is similar in some respects to Swahili, but different enough that we tried to use Swahili more often than Luganda.

PK: How old were you when you went?

BC: I was twenty-two. When I arrived at the school, I was the first American teacher—no, the second American teacher there; although they had several British teachers at the school. My students were all African. I was teaching in a Moslem school.

PK: Oh, my word!

BC: So, my students were drawn from all over East Africa. It was the only co-education school for Moslems. The only Moslem girls in secondary school had to travel to our school. The schools were supported by the government, but they were all religiously affiliated, so there were a few Anglican and Catholic students, but not many. It was predominately Moslem.

We practiced all of the Moslem traditions. On Fridays, it was the day for the mosque. It was a wonderful experience. My students were there not only by choice, but by major choice, and a great sacrifice to their families, because even the modest tuition that they paid was enormous by East African living standards. So they wanted to be there. And I could stand in front of the class in my—my headmaster said, “You get in front of that class, and you lecture for an hour.” I would get in front of the class, and anything I said, they made copious notes. Never a discipline problem. For a young teacher, it was almost unheard of. No one ever misbehaved. I mean that just never, never occurred.

I wound up teaching English, English literature, and East African history.

PK: East African history?

BC: Yes, which I learned as I taught it. (laugh)

PK: I’m sure. You learned as you went.

BC: Right.

PK: Where did you live? What were the living conditions like for you?

BC: I lived at the school, which is what teachers did. They lived at the school, or very close to the school. The school actually provided a temporary house for me when I first went there. Then we built our first women’s residence hall. I had a little residence,

because I was the housemother as well as a teacher. (laughs) I had a little flat in the girls' dormitory. Part of my job, of course, was making sure that things went well.

PK: Right. Everybody was where they were supposed to be.

BC: Right, and that "lights out" meant lights out. But you can imagine the circumstances. It was fun and I was there to be a teacher. I just had some great experiences while I was there. I also became the coach for the women's netball team, which is similar to women's basketball, and also learned something about netball as I coached these young women. We had a chance to take our women's team to the East African finals in Nairobi, which was the biggest championship that had ever occurred.

PK: Okay, coach. Did you win?

BC: No. It's not about winning. It's about how you play the game.

PK: I know. That's what we all say when we don't win, right? That's great. I would suspect, if it were a Moslem school, that most of the faculty were men.

BC: That's correct.

PK: Of course you've been through this so many times in your life, but how did it hit you? Were you breaking an early glass ceiling here, if you will?

BC: It is very interesting especially when parents would come by to pay their respects. You could always see a look of, "Is this real? Is my tall six-foot son really going to be taught by this rather short American woman? Does she have the knowledge to do this?" In the beginning, I think there was some awkwardness, but once you do what everybody else does, people soon get over that.

I was teaching for what is called the O-Level Exam. Under the British system, students study, but there is a syllabus that prepares them to take an examination. They either pass or fail that examination, and the rest of their life is contingent upon whether or not they pass. Our job was to get students through that exam. My students had to write the responses to their questions in English. Those test pamphlets were then collected and sent to the United Kingdom, where they were scored with all of the other students of the United Kingdom that took that exam. These were very competitive.

We even had sample questions that we used with our students to help them in writing responses. They were all written essay kind of responses. This was a somewhat archaic system of education of which I was a part.

Students did it, and they achieved, and many of our students went on to higher schools. We had a university; fortunately, the only university at that time in all of East Africa was in Kampala. That was Makerere University. Many of our students went on to Makerere. They went to higher school and then to Makerere, or they went to England.

PK: Was there a tech—well, it wouldn't be technical, but was a vocational or an occupational track for the kids who didn't do well?

BC: Not really. The education was very limited, although there was an agricultural program. The students completed their course of study. There was no graduation like we know here with the ceremony and the end of certain amount of credits. These students went on, took their classes and they were going to sit for an exam. That's what they did. The exam determined everything. At that point, students could go on to a teacher's college, a two-year program if they wanted to become instructors at an elementary level. They could pursue agricultural studies, but there really was not a technical program, as we know it here.

PK: You used the word "archaic" to describe it—"somewhat archaic" to describe it. Is that a modern judgment from your educational career, or was that just your judgment at the time?

BC: It was not my judgment at the time. We thought we were doing a good job in educating our students, but the idea of teaching students and preparing them to take an examination today seems rather not the best way.

PK: I grew up in New York State and took Regents exams.² I certainly remember the concept of teaching to an exam, and I guess that's probably what you spent a good bulk of your time doing in a very different context.

BC: I think the exams were useful, but the fact that they determined one's life path from that point on was really the unfortunate part.

PK: Absolutely. Exactly.

BC: We were teaching English as a second language to everyone, and the fact that they had to compete in English with students who grew up and had such an advantaged system was somewhat unfair, I believe. These students didn't believe that. They were working just as hard as they could, and many of them were very successful. And, of course, we were educating such a small percentage of the population at the time that these turned out to be very bright and successful people.

PK: [Are they] still connected to you in any way? Over the years did you make alliances and relationships in our modern-day term networking that you still have today?

BC: The history of Uganda has been a very unfortunate one. They have had presidents and tyrants and murders as their leaders, the worst being Idi Amin, who absolutely drove out all of the Asian population from the country and was just a murderous tyrant.³ Much

² Regents Examinations are aptitude exams given to high school students in the state of New York.

³ Idi Amin Dada (c. 1925-2003) was military dictator and president of Uganda from 1971 to 1979.

of this has been documented. Many of my contacts are gone. Many of the students that I educated probably were victims of these regimes.

I went back three years ago—two and a half years ago. The first time I had gone back with my husband and visited my former school and tried desperately to track down people that I had worked with or people that I had known. We weren't there a long time because I'm sure there are people around, but the devastation and the political—human capital that was expended was horrible. We couldn't find anyone.

PK: Oh, my.

BC: Because what Idi Amin did was to kill off the intelligentsia in the country.

PK: Right.

BC: There was also rampant tribalism that, unfortunately, as a young teacher, I didn't understand as well as I do now. I was in an area which was populated by the largest tribal sector, which was the Bagandan.⁴ They were the most educated people. The first president after independence was [Dr. Apollo Milton] Obote.⁵ He was from one of the northern tribes. As he built the military—very interesting; this happened in a number of African countries. As he built the army for Uganda, he filled it with people from those tribal areas in the north.

PK: Right.

BC: Idi Amin, who started a revolution, overthrew Obote, [and] likewise, used the army against the Bagandan people, who had a higher level of education and who were more involved in cultural aspects of Uganda. It was a very sorry history of the last twenty years—twenty-five years.

PK: Absolutely. [The history] is certainly not one only restricted to Uganda, though. That's a sad story in a number of places.

BC: In fact, Uganda is coming back now, economically.

PK: Yes.

BC: It has a leader who has been very successful in rebuilding the economy and in building relationships with people like the USA. In many respects it's coming back. In my estimation, as a traveler, I felt better there than I did in Kenya, which has had, in the past, a more stable economy.

⁴ The Baganda are the largest ethnic group in Uganda, living in the south central portion of the country near Lake Victoria.

⁵ Obote (1925-2005) was prime minister of Uganda from 1962-1966 and president of Uganda from 1966-1971. He was overthrown by military dictator Idi Amin Dada in 1971, but regained power in 1980 and was president until 1985, when he was once again deposed.

PK: That's interesting. [What were your] best and worst experiences while in Uganda [as a] twenty-two year old, and what did you do on a Saturday night for fun?

BC: Well, on a Saturday night for fun, we did what most people do. We would have dinner together with friends or we spent a lot of time traveling. My best experiences outside of teaching, which was absolutely marvelous, my best experiences were traveling. I had an opportunity to go all over East Africa. My very most exciting experience was climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

PK: Oh, wow!

BC: That was also related to my teaching, because I was invited to join a group from the Outward Bound Schools, which are mountain climbing schools primarily directed at young people. They also have adult programs. I was invited to join as an instructor, even though I didn't know a lot about mountain climbing. But, I was invited to join as an instructor in an experiment in which African school girls, British school girls, and Asian school girls were invited to collaborate and to build friendships through conquering Kilimanjaro.

There were about forty of us in a group. We took the first African woman that we know of to the summit. My instructional partner was an East African policewoman from Tanganyika. She and I had a group of ten Asian, African, and European schoolgirls. There were four groups. We trained for three weeks and tried to break down the barriers, which are tremendous—

PK: Sure.

BC: —in the cultures at the time. Then our goal was to climb to the summit of Kilimanjaro. We did it. We took every single young woman that was in the group—successfully made the climb. (laughs) Those of us who learned to be instructors on the spot made it, too.

PK: How long did it take, just because I'm curious?

BC: It took—on the final climb from our base camp of about eight thousand feet, it took two nights out and then one day down. So it took two and a half days, actually.

PK: Well, you've changed my entire impression of you: mountain climber, netball coach — (laughs)

BC: Well, those were things that you had an opportunity to engage in.

PK: That's great.

BC: This was a voluntary—the best of the voluntary roles, but a lot of fun in the process.

My not worst experience, but my more troubling experience, was that I was on my very first safari holiday with some friends. We went to the island of Zanzibar, and we're coming back to Tanganyika when the revolution started.⁶ We were fortunate that we knew so little. We got on a plane and left. Immediately after we left the island, the revolution started. It was a rather bloodless revolution, but Tanganyika and Zanzibar became Tanzania at that time.⁷ There was a short period when nobody knew where we were and where we couldn't communicate with our families or our friends, but we all returned safely, and we never felt that we were in any kind of harm—in harm's way. It was just an interesting period.

PK: I bet that would be just a tad unsettling, if not a whole lot unsettling, to know you were in the middle of a revolution, bloodless or otherwise. Communication when you were there, [was it] easy?

BC: No. I felt totally isolated.

PK: Did you?

BC: We did receive one newspaper. There really was no TV. They were trying to develop a television station, but it was very poor so there was no communication. We did receive the BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation. That's what we relied on primarily for news of the outside world. I was there during the time of the [President John F.] Kennedy assassination, in which you felt desperately like you wanted to get news of what was happening, but it just wasn't available.

That was a real downer, to be abroad at a time when the country was experiencing such trauma. That was a difficult period. Kennedy was loved by the Africans. He was loved by the Africans. It was interesting to see that people all over the world were moved by this experience. I remember that very well. I remember my students coming by to express their sympathy. He was truly an American hero to the rest of the world.

PK: Why, do you think?

BC: I think he was youthful. He was, in many ways, different from some of the more mature American presidents. It was a time of great hope for these young countries in Africa. We all were investing.

I had many friends who I taught with and from the Peace Corps. We'd all share these experiences and a feeling that the world would be a lot better, in part, because of what we were contributing. There was great hope and much investment in the idea that young Americans could make a difference and could make a change. I think that our host

⁶ The Zanzibar Revolution in January 1964, when the Sultan of Zanzibar and the Arab-dominated government were overthrown.

⁷ Tanganyika and Zanzibar were two separate states formerly ruled by the British Empire, which became independent in 1961 and 1963, respectively. On April 26, 1964, they merged and became the United Republic of Tanzania.

countries saw in Kennedy a lot of that spirit of interest, just interest, in international events and interest in other cultures. We lost some of that.

PK: Yes. While you were talking, I was thinking about a very good friend of mine who was an ambassador to Niger for a number of years in his career. He would make the claim that today we don't have that commitment, and haven't had that commitment for a number of years, to the welfare of Africa. Would you agree?

BC: I think that we went through some years following the Vietnam War when the perception of American from abroad became very negative. Even during my travels home, I took a long time to—not a long time, but several months to travel home, and even at that time, which was late sixty-five [1965], you were beginning to feel the strong anti-American feeling. Some of it started while I was still in Africa, and we tried to intervene in the Congo with a big parachute drop.⁸ It was just terrible. For those of us who were there, we thought it was just horrible. It wasn't the perception that we wanted in this country. I think that we had a lot of negative feelings towards this country as a result of heavy-handedness and trying to control events in other countries.

PK: So often people who travel point out that the general impression of Americans might be negative, but they, nonetheless, were treated extremely well. Was that your experience as those perceptions were changing, or did it translate into any kind of direct sense of anti-Americanism directed at you as that transition is happening?

BC: I never experienced any hostility personally, but you could sense that there was a certain immunity for teachers who were really volunteers, in many respects. But you could certainly sense that our foreign aid was—that people had the idea that it was not given freely. That there was always an attempt to control governments or control decisions, and people resented that.

PK: Speaking of volunteering, not being paid, how much were you paid?

BC: I was paid about three thousand dollars, I think, a year.

PK: Big bucks. What could you spend it on while you were there?

BC: Most of it was deposited here [in America] as some kind of a bonus for completing your contract, which was a two-year contract.

PK: What kind of money did it take to live on a month-to-month basis while you were—

BC: We lived very modestly. My quarters were provided. I was fortunate enough to have a little Volkswagen car to run around in. We didn't purchase anything to speak of. So we lived very modestly.

⁸ BC is referring to events during the 1960-1966 Congo Crisis in the country currently known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo-Kinshasa).

PK: The food you ate, [was it] local?

BC: The staple is something called matoke, which is a large banana-type plantain. That was very good, but I didn't eat a lot of it. (laughs) [It was served] with peanut sauce, which is very tasty and very adequate. We had everything normal—that would be required in a normal diet. Fruit. There was always fruit and coffee available. [There was] meat. We ate a lot of chicken, poultry. We had pretty much an American/European diet.

PK: Okay. (coughs) So you came back at the end of sixty-five [1965] or sixty-six [1966] to the States, after some extensive traveling to get there. [You were] not going back to Glassboro. Going to Miami [Florida].

BC: Right. I met my former husband, who was a Floridian, and was returning to Miami. I had two choices. I actually had a fellowship at Columbia that I was going to go back to. I couldn't decide whether or not to go back for a second tour. I went to Miami, following my former husband, and enrolled in graduate school at the University of Miami. Shortly after that, we married, and I became a teacher, got my master's degree and became a teacher in the Dade County school system.

PK: Teaching what grade?

BC: Oh! That was an exciting story, too, a good story for me. I assumed that, as I was working on my master's degree, I would take a while and teach, because I had not saved any money as a consequence of my travels. I went to get a job with the Dade County public schools, and they said, "We are beginning the integration of the Dade County school system, and if you would like to teach here, you must teach in a formerly all-black school." I said, "Sure, why not?"

I was dispatched to a sixth grade classroom in a formerly all-black school. That means that the school was still all black as far as the student enrollment, but they were trying to bring in white teachers. The same thing was happening to African American teachers who were going into—that's the way integration started in many of the counties in Florida. I taught sixth grade for a year in the Dade County school system in the heart of Liberty City.⁹ I had a very nice experience there. I learned a lot about Miami and Dade County, and I became extremely involved in the political landscape.

I joined the League of Women Voters and worked on the campaigns for people like Bob Graham, who was running for the House of Representatives at the time, a group of other legislators—Gerald Lewis, who you may remember, who was running for the House. It was a unique political period in Dade County, because all of the elections were countywide, so that when you voted, you could vote for fifteen representatives, a dozen judges. Everything was countywide voting. The elections were a real free-for-all in terms of the number of people we were electing to local government offices. Shortly after that, reapportionment took place, and we didn't vote on all of those members.

⁹ Liberty City is a predominantly African American neighborhood in Miami.

PK: Was [your husband] Donnie equally interested in politics back then?

BC: Yes.

PK: Miami [in the] early/mid-1960s was undergoing its Latinization process.

BC: It was the beginning of the immigration of the Cubans to Miami that was beginning to occur. Civil rights was a very big issue in Dade County, and, of course, integration. It was an exciting period, because there was a lot of very good leadership committed to making integration work in the schools. Much of Hillsborough County and Pinellas County had really very positive plans—although there were court orders here, unlike Dade County, where there was never a court order to integrate the schools, and that's part of the reason why they still have 100 percent black schools and 100 percent white schools, in my estimation.

Nevertheless, it was a period where I think the political leadership was very positive, and positive in wanting to make it work. At the same time, the Cuban immigration started, and not only Cuban immigration, but that was the primary immigration at the time. It was a time when it was becoming evident that Miami was going to be a lightning rod destination for many other people in the Latin-American countries.

PK: A couple thoughts. First question: you're doing this in 1966 after having finished a somewhat analogous stint in Africa. Compare the two environments.

BC: No comparison. There was just simply no comparison. I went from a situation where a teacher was revered, respected, and all you had to do was stand in front of the class, and when the class was over, students didn't want to leave. They sat in their class. They didn't even want to go back.

PK: I can't relate to that.

BC: No! No teacher here can. Students didn't want to leave their class. On Saturdays they go to their classroom, and they'd be in the little library, such as this. The day ended at 4:30 in the afternoon. Then they had sports. Everybody engaged in some kind of sports. Then they had their meal, and they went back to study. And of course, we were all kind of on duty, because we lived there and we walked around and helped students.

My situation in Dade County was that students came, and they left. Suddenly, I had all those discipline things that I had to deal with, and talking to parents about how their students behaved. That was shocking (laughs) after coming from a rather idyllic situation. Even though my students were good, and they learned and certainly achieved, you found yourself doing things that you just didn't do in a different setting where students so desperately hung on every word. Here, they naturally took their educational experience and education for granted, and it was kind of the thing they had to do. It was a routine part of life. So, it wasn't special the way it was for these other students that were so deprived.

PK: Did it change or alter your view of you as a teacher? Going from one to the other, and encountering these different students—in other words, I guess what I’m asking, if you can remember back—you must have believed you were a great teacher with all of that kind of time, attention, and reverence. Then you go to this environment in Miami, and kids don’t behave the same way. Did you ever analyze yourself in that process?

BC: Absolutely. I was pulling my hair out! (laughs)

PK: Sure! (laughs)

BC: How to keep them entertained? How to keep them busy? How to really interest them in assignments? You know, I thought I was the entertainment—that I had to do something to interest them. And, I think we still have that today. I think that the (inaudible) is so much on teachers to make teaching interesting and come alive, and entertaining, and keep students on track. We wish that there were more of an innate desire just to learn and to have a learning environment, which is better than the learning environment today. I think it’s a tough career for young people. It’s not easy.

pause in recording

PK: We’re going to obviously deal with all of that, because it’s a great bulk of your very distinguished career in wrestling with those problems from a very big perspective. But, I do want to skip up to that big perspective as Commissioner of Education. Going back to the Miami experience, what did it do for you in later years when you became Commissioner in the state?

BC: One thing that was apparent to me from day one, as I entered my Dade County school that had been formerly an all-black school, was that it was different. It was different from looking at the school, the environment, everything from the physical plant, the facility, the appearance of it, the supplies, the books, that something else was going on. That school did not have the same level of interest from the Board of Education. It did not receive the same attention as the schools in the suburbs. That has always stayed with me. Not a surprise. I think people who weren’t teachers were aware of this, too. Of course, it spawned civil rights movements.

As Commissioner of Education, I think I realized that it will take a long time for all of our populations to catch up, and it won’t be done overnight. I think there are a lot of people who think that today everything is rosy and everyone has the same level playing field. I’m not sure you can have the same level playing field in one generation or two generations, or even more than that. Today we talk about the digital divide, but you have to talk about the inequities that are inherent in families, neighborhoods, and schools. It may not be as fashionable to talk about that today, but not because it’s been cured.

We have to work constantly on issues of equity. The Florida school funding formula has been one that, as you know, is very, very complicated, but I think it has tried over time to

address the inequities. They're not just racial inequities, but they go to neighborhood inequities and the relative wealth of counties and larger population. That was a large part of what I concentrated on during the years when I served as Commissioner of Education.

It was also a time when we developed early childhood education programs, extending the state's mandate to kindergarten and then pre-kindergarten to preschool programs. We still lag behind other states in the percentage of students who have the ability to be educated in a preschool situation. Florida still, although we've made great strides, we still have a long way to go.

PK: That's an interesting description of a lot I agree with. Not that that's the pointed issue, but I understand the importance that we haven't left those problems. We may not talk about them the same way. We may not deal with them any longer in light of what we think of as other, more important issues.

BC: I also struggled as Commissioner of Education with the Florida Lottery, because the lottery was actually passed when I was on the ballot seeking election to the Office of Commissioner. I opposed the Lottery.

PK: I know you did.

BC: I've never bought a Lottery ticket. I was suspicious of it, because I knew that as soon as it passed, people in this state, particularly our senior citizens, would feel they had done their thing for education. We still live with some of that, but I think today people understand a little bit better that the money that comes from the Lottery, over the years, supplanted the sales tax revenue. As soon as those first few million dollars came into the state's coffers, what did the legislature do? They reduced the funding from the sales tax to Florida education.

PK: Nineteen sixty-six: you're teaching in Miami-Dade, and you've got an obviously more global understanding of the world. You've got a very strong growing professional commitment to what you're doing, both politically and in the classroom. Florida elects a rather interesting character as its governor, who would have a pretty significant impact in the late sixties [1966] on teachers, Claude Kirk.¹⁰ What do you remember about that from the point of view of the classroom experience?

BC: Well, I was teaching before the walkout.¹¹ But it was apparent that Governor Kirk was going to be a different kind of a governor, because he immediately had priorities on veto legislation that affected young children in programs for state sponsored daycare and

¹⁰ Claude Kirk (b. 1926) was governor of Florida from 1967 to 1971. He was the first Republican elected to the office since 1877.

¹¹ The "walkout" was a statewide teachers' strike in February and March of 1968. In 1967, the Florida Education Association (the teachers' union) lobbied the state legislature for higher salaries and more school funding, which was approved. However, Governor Kirk vetoed the proposed budget, causing spot strikes throughout the state. Kirk called for a special legislative session in January 1968, which raised taxes for school and teacher funding, a proposal the governor approved. Most teachers felt that the increases were not enough, and the FEA announced that it would support teachers if they went on strike.

things like that. That was an early signal that he was not going to be a proponent of those kinds of issues for whatever reason. I, fortunately, was out of the classroom at the time that the teachers walked out because of the lack of salary money.

PK: Did you campaign for Robert King High?¹²

BC: I liked Robert King High, yes. I was not involved directly in his campaign [for governor], but I thought it was very unfortunate that the rest of the state saw him as this wide-eyed liberal from Miami. I did notice, in moving from Miami to the west coast, the tremendous anti-Dade County [sentiment]. It was almost like there were two states here. One was Miami and Dade County, and one was the rest of the state. Any person running for statewide office coming from Dade County had a very tough job to overcome. People were not about to elect Robert King High.

PK: No, and I think that's absolutely correct. Did he come across in Miami back then—if you can remember, Betty, did he come across well in terms of was he popular?

BC: Yeah.

PK: I know he'd been mayor for quite a while. Was he a popular figure in South Florida?

BC: Yeah.

PK: Did you get a chance to personally meet him?

BC: Yes, I did.

PK: What do you remember about him as a person?

BC: I don't remember a lot, because I was never involved in his group. But he was certainly very well regarded.

PK: You came to Tampa from there?

BC: Right.

PK: Why? What prompted the move?

BC: Actually, I came with my husband, Don, who had an opportunity to become the Assistant Director of the Legal Services program here in Tampa. That was a new program at the time of providing legal services for the poor.

¹² Robert King High (1924-1967) was mayor of Miami from 1957 to his death in 1967, and in 1966 was the Democratic candidate for governor.

PK: Of which Reece Smith¹³—and Sam Gibbons¹⁴—

BC: Yes. Sam Gibbons was the congressman who was very interested in the poverty programs that came out of the [President] Lyndon Johnson administration. This was one of the best. That program was established here, and my former husband became the assistant director and then the director of the program.

PK: From that point on, your career becomes legendary.

BC: Perhaps. (laughs)

PK: I don't think there's much perhaps about it. County commission. First glass ceiling. What was it like to run for the county commission?

BC: It was fun! It was an absolutely fun race. I had nothing to lose at the time. I had only lived here for four years when I ran for the county commission, but it was a time when several things were happening. Number one, growth management became a very big issue, primarily because of issues affecting Tampa Bay, the quality of the bay, the housing along the bay, the great concentration of people who wanted to live on the shoreline, and really inadequate county plans to accommodate the growth that was coming. That was a popular issue.

It was also the very beginning of the women's movement when women were taking advantage of new opportunities, and women were beginning to run in larger numbers for public office. I certainly was the beneficiary of that interest in gender. It was also a time when there were some problems in county government. These were years when there were, in addition to a county commission, there was a budget commission, and then there was an election commission. There were voting machine scandals and things that gave county government a rather bad image.

PK: Just for purposes of clarification, we are talking about the early seventies [1970s]—that's before there is a charter—so we all understand where we are.

BC: Right. In fact, county commissioners were served in a legislative, administrative, and quasi-judicial role. They had everything.

PK: Four years into Hillsborough County—

BC: There were five commissioners. They had to run from residential districts. Frank Neff was the person. He was a very fine person, but we had an interest in running. I say we because I had a group of young people that I knew, so I announced for that office, and

¹³ William Reece Smith is a prominent Tampa Bay attorney, who was interim president of the University of South Florida from 1976 to 1977. He has also served as Tampa's City Attorney and as president of the American Bar Association.

¹⁴ Sam Gibbons was a U.S. Representative for various Hillsborough County districts from 1963 to 1997, and was chairman as the House Committee on Ways and Means. He also served in both houses of the Florida Legislature.

he subsequently said that he was not going to run again. We developed a campaign and campaigned all over the county, and because it became an open seat, there were fifteen candidates running for the office of county commissions for my district. Thirteen were running in the Democratic primary, and two in the Republican primary.

PK: I'm testing your memory. How many of them can you name?

BC: Not many.

PK: I'm sure. I'm only teasing. (laughs)

BC: I suppose if I thought for a while, the brain cells would come back.

PK: I am interested in who was in your campaign corner. Who were the people helping you, the women, the men who were pushing you along in this process?

BC: Frankly, young couples; my former husband's friends, because he had grown up in Hillsborough County, so his name was Castor, and people knew him from his years. They knew his family. His father was a pharmacist. There was some name recognition, and certain people in the Seminole Heights area, the old Hillsborough County area, knew him, so I benefited from that. I also benefited from a group associated with the University of South Florida, new faculty who had just moved here who were perhaps more interested in seeing change and willing to work for some change. It was a time when the Hillsborough Community College was just being organized. There were a group of relatively new people in that area.

I ran countywide, so I had to campaign from Plant City to Beach Park to Carrollwood. The area where I concentrated was really kind of a suburban area from Carrollwood to Forest Hills to Temple Terrace to Brandon because that was where new people were moving, and they were the people that were primarily concerned about some of the growth issues. In the first campaign, I was the top vote getter. I remember [I got] fourteen thousand votes. I had a runoff. With all those candidates, it was hard to get a majority. Then I had a very tough runoff, because all of the men who were defeated in my first campaign endorsed my opponent, with the exception of one. That was interesting, but I won the runoff and subsequently won the general election, which in those days, because the Democratic registration was so high, in many respects it was hard for a Republican to win.

PK: Yes, very different than where we are and where we're headed in this county, to be sure. Who was on the commission when you joined it?

BC: There were several people. Rudy Rodriguez was probably the senior person. Bob Curry was elected, and was a new member when I was elected. Carl Carpenter was a newly elected county commissioner, and Bob Lester, and myself. Five of us. We also had,

for a short time, a temporary appointment appointed by the governor, Bud Baach.¹⁵ The five of us served for two years together.

PK: I certainly have sat through my share of county commission meetings and watched them on TV, and all of that, when I was on county government. I have never wanted to sit there and do that job. It strikes me as a very difficult, very complex, and very laborious job. Was it?

BC: There are parts of it that are boring. There are parts of it that are routine. I served at a time of great change when we moved from the old style county commission to a charter form of government that was imposed by the legislature. Even though we had moved to adopt a county executive form of government, the legislature at the time said, no way; we want a charter. We had some important legislators. Terrell Sessums was the Speaker of the House.¹⁶ Paul Danahy was Chair of the Governmental Affairs Committee.¹⁷ They had the power, and they were in position where they could pass charter government that affected Hillsborough County, and they did. During that period, the county had voluntarily gone to a county administrator form of government, but the legislature came along and said, we're going to impose this anyway. We got there in two ways, but the charter has prevailed.

pause in recording

PK: I would be remiss if I didn't ask you to express your opinion. Whenever the subject comes up and people like Pam Iorio,¹⁸ Fred Karl,¹⁹ and Jim Shimberg,²⁰ and I did an interview with John Lawson on the subject of the charter.²¹ What do you think of the issue of whether or not we should have an elected mayor or not? Or county chairman, or whatever you want to call it under [County Charter Section] 128?

BC: I think that the system today is certainly a lot better. It has been strengthened over the years with a strong County Administrator. However, I think it is a better form of government to have an elected County Mayor where people would know who really is in charge and where there would be some accountability that the public could understand. Most people do understand an executive and legislative form. They understand the governor and the legislature. They understand the mayor in council. This county

¹⁵ Maurice "Bud" Baach was appointed by Governor Reubin Askew in 1972, to fill Rudy Rodriguez's seat. Rodriguez was suspended after being charged with conspiracy and bribery in a scandal involving equipment from the Shoup Voting Machine Company. Rodriguez was found not guilty and was later reinstated as county commissioner.

¹⁶ T. Terrell Sessums was Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives from 1972 to 1974. He was a member of the Florida House from 1963 to 1974.

¹⁷ Paul Danahy was a member of the Florida House of Representatives from 1966 to 1974.

¹⁸ As of 2009, Pam Iorio is the current Mayor of Tampa, having served in that office since 2003. She was also on the Hillsborough County Commission and the Hillsborough County Supervisor of Elections.

¹⁹ Fred Karl has held numerous political offices, serving in the Florida Senate, the Florida Supreme Court, Hillsborough County Attorney, and Tampa City Attorney.

²⁰ James Shimberg, Sr. (1923-2007) was a developer and philanthropist who was also chairman of the Hillsborough County Charter Review Board.

²¹ See Klingman's June 23, 2000 interview with John Lawson, DOI U11-00015.

administrator form is a hybrid where people really don't understand. In my estimation, nobody really has the accountability, the final say. I think it would be better and a clearer form of government for people in a county of this size.

PK: I served on the County Charter Review Board in ninety [1990]. We got close to getting something on the ballot. Do you think it will ever happen, that people will actually get to vote for a change?

BC: I think it's difficult. I have hoped over the years here in Hillsborough County, from the time that I left, that we would get to that point. Every time there seems to be a consensus growing, people become fearful. The commissioners who are in office generally oppose it. That's a tremendous impediment. Until we have a board that will step out and support it, it's probably not going to happen because they appoint the members to the charter review board.

PK: Let's go back to that time. Pick the two or three biggest issues as county commissioner you think you wrestled with.

BC: Well, of course, the county administrator form of government was the number one. That had the most significant change because it had been a far superior form of government than individuals playing all of the roles that we played as county commissioner. Secondly, the environmental areas were very important. We established the Environmental Protection Commission.²² That was legislatively adopted, and Roger Stewart was our director. We had the greatest controversy with my colleagues trying to fire Mr. Stewart. That became the subject of local publicity and a lot of excitement. He subsequently was hired back. I tried to defend him, and at the time, was chair of the Environmental Protection Commission. That was an interesting chapter as well

PK: We'll just pause here and point out that that same ritual has been attempted on a number of other occasions in Mr. Stewart's career. He survived them all.

BC: He has. He just retired from a wonderful, wonderful tenure with the county. The third area where there was no single event, certainly the area of greatest challenge was growth management. We had the responsibility at the time for every zoning decision. The Planning Commission made recommendations to the County Commission, but we actually approved or disapproved every spot zone, every commercial area, and it was not good.

PK: Couldn't have been.

BC: That is why Fowler Avenue and Fletcher Avenue—and Busch Boulevard, to some extent, although that was in the city—but it certainly is the reason why Fowler Avenue and Fletcher Avenue look the way they do today. If we had had good planning, if we

²² The Environmental Protection Commission (EPC) of Hillsborough County was created in 1967 by special act of the Florida Legislature to control and regulate activities which cause or may reasonably be expected to cause pollution, contamination, or excessive noise.

could've had our commercial areas with certain setback requirements [the area would be different]. The pressures for development were overwhelming, especially the pressures for commercial development and high-intensity housing; [they] were just too great.

PK: I talked to people about USF being out here in the middle of nowhere when John Allen founded the university.²³ I guess that is probably as typical an illustration of how fast growth can occur. You described Fowler Avenue and how one could stop that from happening in a period of time when growth for growth's sake, I guess for a better lack of saying, was the watchword of the day. It must have been very difficult to be—

BC: It was difficult then, and it's difficult now.

PK: —to be opposed to it. To be wanting to manage it. The pressure that you described must have been rather large: it's jobs and it's money, and it's—.

BC: For instance, in the original plan associated with the university, there was a buffer around the university. Over time, certain developers came forward and appealed to the county commissioner to the county commission to place some commercial venture within the buffer. So, if you go off Thirtieth Street today, you can see that some of those areas—there's been intervention in a number of those areas. Even during my tenure as president of the university, we had a developer who wanted to build a complex that I opposed as president, but we were not successful, and the county again, as recently as three years ago, approved a development on the north Thirtieth [Street] area. Once it was essentially rezoned, the developers sold it again.

This happens time and time again. There cannot be enough, in my estimation, restraints on something like providing a buffer area for a university.

PK: How did the rest of your commission colleagues feel about this development spurt? Were you in the minority or the majority?

BC: I was definitely in the minority.

PK: I figured.

BC: Many of the votes were four-to-one on planning and zoning issues. I was in a distinct minority.

PK: Lonely place?

BC: It was lonely at the time.

²³ John Allen (1907-1982) was the first president of the University of South Florida, serving from 1957 to 1970. He was also interim president of the University of Florida from 1953 to 1955.

PK: Only female, four-to-one on growth issues. It goes without saying it took a lot of guts. But, it also probably took a lot of frustrating hours of thought process of how to make it better.

BC: Right, because you don't want to be on the losing side of a lot of votes.

PK: It's not a good place to be if you want a political career, for sure.

BC: Effectiveness is associated with how you can bring people to consensus.

PK: Exactly.

BC: A lot of my early years on the commission were not years—I mean, I felt good about my votes, but I didn't feel like I was bringing the county commission to a new understanding of growth management. And, in part, at the end of four years, that had a lot to do with my decision to run for the Florida Legislature. There's so much you can do there. We were successful in moving to a county-manager form of government. I think we had raised the awareness of environmental and growth management issues.

PK: Baseline, was it the end of the first and only term, a decision you couldn't win this issue at this point in time? Was that part of it then? You've always had an impeccable sense of political timing, and is that one early illustration of it, I guess is really the question I'm asking.

BC: That was part of it. The county does deal, to begin with—to go back to where you began this discussion, the issues with which one deals at the county are not always exciting, glamorous issues. I had an interest in education. Although we coordinated some things with the school board, we really didn't get into that area. We did at the time, a lot of dogs and ditches and zoning.

At the end of four years of a full-time position, I had small children during that period. They were growing. I had an interest in what was happening legislatively and an interest in being more—moving more into a policy, policy development area. I couldn't do a lot of policy development on the county commission. I had a push and a pull when I decided to leave, although I enjoyed my years as a county commissioner. I very much enjoyed them. It was a learning experience. I think I contributed, but it wasn't a place where I wanted to stay.

PK: What do you think your greatest success was as a county commissioner, if you had one?

BC: Well, I think it was probably raising issues. I think it probably was representing an environmental point of view. I think it was, in part, being a role model for women. I think it was in part, voting those "no" votes on particular zoning issues.

PK: Fair enough. I think in light of the time, that we probably need to start the next session with your legislative career because that clearly goes to being commissioner of education and president of USF. I think there's too much to try to deal with in the time we have remaining. I sort of believe that your state legislative career has a lot to do with how you got to be commissioner of education.

BC: No doubt about it.

PK: I want to connect those two things and do that in some detail. I think this is probably a fair place to stop for our first session. It goes without saying I really appreciate the opportunity to do this with you. I have a special sense that a great many people will watch this interview over the years and will be as inspired by you, as you were inspired.

BC: You were very kind. Thank you.

PK: Thank you for coming. Appreciate it. Look forward to the second one.

end of interview

[Transcriber's Note: Although Klingman repeatedly mentions a second interview, none was ever held. As of 2009, this is the only interview he has conducted with Betty Castor.]