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**Yael Greenberg:** Today is Thursday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews in our studio here in the Tampa Campus Library with USF faculty, students, and alumni, in order to commemorate 50 years of university history. Today we will be interviewing Vicki Ahrens, who came to USF in 1969. First as a student, later she became a staff member of the university in 1974, and left the university in June of 1994. Good morning, Vicki, how are you?

**Vicki Ahrens:** Good morning. I'm doing well, thanks.

**YG:** Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa; and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida?

**VA:** It's sort of interesting. I've been thinking about these things and at that time back in the late '60s there weren't as many choices of universities in Florida as there are now. There were really only three state—four state universities: Florida, Florida State, FAMU, and USF, which was the new kid on the block. Being the first kid in my family to ever think about going to college, I decided to do something completely different and selected the University of South Florida. Nobody else I knew was coming here and I just kind of set out from my family home in Miami and said, "I'll try USF and see what happens."

**YG:** What did the University of South Florida look like in 1969?

VA: Well, it looked a lot different than it does now. In fact, I'm struck every time I return to the campus since I've been gone at the drastic and dramatic physical changes to the campus. But Fowler Avenue was two-laned, there was a single restaurant seated where the University Mall currently is; there was a single hotel on the corner of Fowler and 30<sup>th</sup> Street, and the university, and that was it. That was all there was on Fowler Avenue. Now, it was paved then. There are some people who went to school here when Fowler Avenue wasn't paved, but it was a paved road then. Fletcher was also a two-lane road with very little there. In fact, the first fast food restaurants that we had in the area were over on 56<sup>th</sup> street in that Temple Terrace area and it took a long time before the fast food era made it over to Fowler and Fletcher.

YG: When you first came here as a student, were there a lot of students coming to USF in 1969?

VA: USF was really very small then. It had much of a small school atmosphere. I think that's one of the things that made USF special to me. It was an environment where you could really, really make a difference in what was going on; help shape the tradition, help shape the university. There were—we had just opened the Andros dorms. They, what is that, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, that group. I was among the first group that lived in Kappa Hall. Dorm government was big. And the on-campus community was very, very close. There was a lot of relationships between faculty and staff and students; a lot of expectation among faculty and staff that they would interact with students.

And so it was very much a collegial environment. It was a very small feeling and acting, and yet USF was getting bigger and bigger, primarily through the commuter students that were living in the Tampa Bay area. So, you had sort of a small school within a large school, giving students really the opportunity on both sides of the coin. The small school experience where really everybody knew you, you could make a difference. You could get heavily involved in student life, and at the same time, the breadth and depth of career choices, major choices that only a larger school can offer. So, it was really a very nice compromise.

YG: Were there a lot of other women attending college along with you?

VA: It's interesting that you should ask the women question. In fact, when I was thinking through my early years at USF as an undergraduate student, I was remembering the whole issue of visitation in the resident halls. I was living in the residence halls at the time that there was that big to-do about men being able visit and go into women's residence halls and one of the local dignitaries referred to on-campus dormitories as,

“taxpayers whorehouses.” And there was a great hue and cry among the female students. And in fact, demonstrations if you will, about our interest in being able to maintain the opportunity to have guests in our residence halls, be they male or female.

I was a member of a social sorority and thinking back virtually everyone in the sorority was an education major. We had very, very few people doing anything other than education, that traditional route for women. And I think that, that time, the years that I was an undergraduate from '69 to '73, really was the time when we began to see the opportunities for women open up. And so it was just a fascinating time to be on a college campus; one that was growing like USF. We had the women's issues coming to the forefront.

Of course it was the Vietnam War era and a lot of student activism with regard to what was going on in Vietnam. All of the guys that we were in school with were registered for the draft. There was the whole lottery thing, and, you know, when you graduated, what was your lottery number and how quickly were you going to be drafted, and so it was just kind of a fascinating time and something that, really, I think shaped a generation. And it just that little period of time from the mid '60s to the mid '70s really made a difference for women, for people, for political activism, and what young people can do to change the world. And I think there was just a lot of that stuff going on that our students today don't see in the same way and don't have the same opportunities to express themselves in many cases.

YG: I want to go back to a couple of things that you said. You said that you were one of the first people in your family to go to college. Were you of traditional age to go to college?

VA: Yes. I came to USF right out of high school. I graduated in Miami and went to school. Graduated in the traditional four years. Like I said, I was involved in a social sorority, in dorm government, and student government. So, I just did the real traditional college experience in a very nontraditional setting, which was kind of fun.

YG: Well, in terms of diversity in those early days, were—when you talked about women, were there African Americans or Hispanics that were going to school with you?

VA: Relatively little diversity on the campus at that time. Probably a handful of African Americans. Hispanics, because I grew up in Miami, I've never been real sensitive to the presence of Hispanics. I don't know how to say that exactly, I don't consider them to be a minority, so it doesn't—I don't have the same recollection of the Hispanic population

because it's just part of what I grew up with. But there were very few African Americans on campus at that time.

And again, one of the things that, as I moved through my undergraduate career and got involved in working with new students, which is how I started as a professional at USF, one of the first things that happened when we established this new office called "New Student Relations," which was responsible for recruitment of students. USF had really, never done a lot of active recruitment of students. And at that point we needed—it was obvious that USF had the opportunity out there.

So, the university put together an office called the Office of New Student Relations. And there were three primary staff members there. One to recruit traditional aged freshmen, one to recruit minority students with an emphasis on African American students, and one to work with students over the traditional age. And so that was in 1973 when that office was developed. And so it was really the first time that USF took a real comprehensive look at the makeup of the student body and said, Here are the areas where we need to make the commitment, we need to look at what we're doing here.

Because of the nature of the state university, USF has always been heavily loaded at the junior, senior level because of the influx of students from the Florida public community colleges. And so, this was really the first emphasis on the traditional age freshman, on the freshmen minority student, on reaching out to the community over the traditional age; and so that we can look at broadening that base of participation at USF.

YG: In terms of a major and a field of study, when you first came here in 1969, what kind of course were you taking?

VA: I just laugh about this because I came here as a math major. I thought that I would be a math teacher, one of my role models in high school. And so, but I had—the education thing was sort of secondary because everybody said, Oh no, you could go off and be an insurance actuary or something that uses this mathematics. And so I got into math. I was taking, of course, your general education courses, your freshman English and social studies courses. And then I hit my first semester of calculus.

And actually, back then we were on the quarter system, so it was my first quarter of calculus. It was the second quarter of my freshman year. I can remember so vividly, the instructor was a graduate assistant, and he would start on a board over here on this side of the classroom and I mean, before you knew it, these chalkboards—back then, chalkboards, not whiteboards, chalkboards—were just full of this stuff all the way over

here, and I had—I remember just sitting there, thinking, This is way too theoretical for me. You know, it had gotten to the point where I wasn't relating to this math stuff. So, I backed off that and chose a different area eventually.

But I was one of those people that changed their major a bunch of times before I actually settled in. And of course I'm not doing anything now that remotely relates to what I did academically. But the classes were relatively small then. We didn't have the lecture halls that exist now because the buildings simply weren't there. There was one over in the College of Fine Arts, and there were those rooms over in the physics building. But there were just weren't a lot of large classrooms. So, as a result there weren't a lot of large classes. All of the freshmen classes were—a lot of them were taught by teaching assistants, which people don't realize that this has been pretty much a standard in higher education for years.

And even as a young institution, USF was establishing graduate programs. And my freshman English course, my freshman math courses were all taught by TA's and graduate students who were pursuing higher degrees. And so that—people think that that's a big deal and it's been like that forever and it doesn't seem to have damaged any of the quality of the education. But I know that that's one of the things that you sometimes hear students talking about, is that they don't want teaching assistants.

And I've always been of course, of the opinion that sometimes a graduate assistant may do a better job of instruction than a full faculty member who is very interested in research and higher level pursuits and isn't really interested in 18 year olds who are trying to figure out how to get themselves out of bed to go to class for the first time in their lives. And so, you know it's just that I found my academic experience was really, really quite good. Although I don't have a lot to compare it to because USF is the only place I've ever gone to school.

YG: You mentioned that in those early days there was a lot of interaction between students and faculty and students and staff. Can you talk about the kinds of interactions that you had?

VA: All student organizations back then regardless of fraternities, sororities, interest groups, whatever they were, dorm government, were required to have an advisor from the faculty or the staff. You had to have that person, who was basically your link to the university administration. So, always student organizations were looking for faculty and staff who would participate, who had interest in what they were doing—their particular organization. And so, and that person who was asked to be that faculty or staff adviser

typically took that role very seriously. They became a mentor to that student organization and to those student groups. So that there was always that kind of relationship with a single faculty or staff person.

There were also a fair number of freshmen mixers, or student mixers, or dances or whatever you want to call them, where there were faculty and staff who would chaperone. They would bring their spouses and it was very community oriented. It's something I know now that a lot of schools are going back to as they're looking at learning communities and establishing learning communities that create those relationships with faculty and staff. We had that from the beginning.

In fact, we had, you know, a dean of men and a dean of women and that whole structure. The university acted in loco parentis, in place of parents. The university staff were very involved in the wellbeing of the students. They considered it their personal obligation to not only deal with the academic education but with the social and personal development of students. So it was just—and when I became a member of the staff in 1974, that, again, was part of the expectation, that I would participate in student life and student activities.

And when there was the flea market kind of thing on a Wednesday or if there was a new student social or whatever, that I would be there meeting the new students, welcoming to the university and supporting their efforts in education. And back then the leadership for that came out of the division of student affairs and it was very, very student oriented. Very much, you know, that students were the center of the institution. And the undergraduate student was the center of the institution. And so there was a great deal of warm and fuzziness. And a lot of close relationships between faculty and staff and it was just a very pleasant, it was very nice to walk into a classroom building and say hello to a lot of faculty that you knew not only perhaps because you were in their class but because they were advisors for a student organization or they had been a chaperone at a student activity. It just created a real nice sense of community.

YG: You mentioned dorm life, and I believed you had mentioned Kappa. Can you tell me what Kappa looked like in those early years?

VA: It looked like a concrete block. Small rooms. The lobby had Danish modern furniture in it that was burnt orange and it had this shag carpet, very '60s. The first year that I lived on campus in '69, '70, we were still under a sign in/sign out process in the residence halls. And so, in the lobby of the dorm was a metal card slot with a punch card, if you will, for every resident of the building. And as you left you clocked out and when you came in you clocked in. And there was a person on-duty in the residence hall lobby 24

hours a day, and when you came in you had to show your ID, you had to punch in, you had to punch out, so that it was not the kind of open environment.

Guests had to be escorted into the bedroom areas. So, they would call you from the lobby and say you had a visitor and then you'd come down stairs and you'd get your visitor and go upstairs. And so it was all very controlled. And at certain times of the evening there would be a check on the cards on who was still out. And we didn't have hours, per se, but people were always aware of who was out, who wasn't in yet, asking roommates and just making sure that everyone was okay in a very controlled kind of environment.

And then we all of course had to be on the meal plan, so everybody ate together in the residence hall cafeteria area. And so again, that was another opportunity to create a lot of interaction because everybody who lived in the residence halls ate in the cafeteria. And lunch was only available back then from 11 to 1 or something like that. So, every single person who lived there was eating there. So, the social environment and all of the resident assistants and resident instructors who lived on campus ate in the residence halls.

And because you ate in that confined period, you knew virtually everybody. And so it all created a great sense of community. We were not allowed then to have lofts, we were not allowed to paint our walls. We were not allowed to open our windows. So there were all kinds of rules and regulations governing these cinderblock small areas. I thought I lived in a very nice dorm because it was air-conditioned. Not all residence hall facilities at all state universities at that time were air-conditioned. And in fact that was one of the selling points for USF and the residence halls was that they were fully air-conditioned. In Florida that becomes a selling point.

They were carpeted and very nice and very modern and very new by comparison to some of the other residence hall facilities at other state universities. But of course, looking back it reminds me of the fact that that's why the dorms are made for 18 year olds, because certainly this 50 year old would not be living in a residence hall these days. And yet they, again, created a great environment for personal and social growth and development.

YG: You mentioned the idea of the cafeteria and the cafeteria being a place where people got together and socialized. What was the food like in those early days?

VA: The food's about the same as it is now, I would think. Yes. It's just one of those—but you know, interesting enough it just wasn't a big deal. You just went. It was the expectation, of course. And what's so different now is that, you know, if you go now even into a secondary school and you look at the cafeteria options and you know they've got



Subways, or you know, the fast food franchises in the high schools. That wasn't the environment I grew up in.

In those days you just went down the hall, down the line with your tray and ate what was offered to you. And so, again, it wasn't a big deal, it was just the way it was, and people didn't really get uptight about the food. You know, it was kind of like, today, I liked what they have. Today it's not so good. Oh, well. We'll have to go this afternoon and get something off campus. It just didn't become a really big deal, but it was the standard institutional food and you did the right down the cafeteria line with your beverages and took your little tray to your table.

And you know in cafeteria there were always places where certain groups would sit. You know, certain sororities or fraternities would sit together or they would all have their little corners of the cafeteria or this group or that group. And so there was a lot of, again, affiliation available at that time. And a lot of rushing, if you will, for student organizations occurred informally at those meal functions as people would come to lunch or dinner and not have anyone to sit with, or, Come sit with us, kind of this. And again, just a very, very collegial environment.

YG: You mentioned being in a sorority. What sorority were you in?

VA: I'm a KD [Kappa Delta]. And I found that to be one of the most significant experiences that I had. And I think, again, because USF didn't and still doesn't—but we're getting closer—have the fraternity, sorority housing, the sorority membership and involvement was a little bit different than you found at a traditional university. When you were in a traditional university at that time you lived in the sorority house. So, the sorority thing kind of consumed and created your life. You lived, eat, breathe, and sleep with your sorority sisters.

At USF, because we didn't have that kind of living environment, a sorority became a student organization choice in much the same way that the Catholic Student Union became a student organization choice, or whatever that interest was. And that it was a social organization they had to work a lot harder to create that sense of community, sisterhood, and brotherhood because it wasn't built in by living in certain places. And yet at the same time it didn't pigeonhole people.

It gave individuals the opportunity to do that and do this, and this, and this. And so there was, again, a lot of flexibility with that. And one of the things that I think particularly appealed to me because I was not interested in being pigeonholed. I had been

pigeonholed my whole life, and when I came to college, that was one of the things that was very important to me. So, you would find me doing war protests in the administration building, carrying candles on my way to a sorority meeting, which you didn't find on a lot of—that opportunity on a lot of campuses, for that flexibility and, again, freedom of expression.

YG: Who was the president of the university when you first came?

VA: I think it would be John Allen would be the president and Cecil Mackey came, I think, in '71-ish, somewhere in that neighborhood. So, John Allen retired not too long after I came here as an undergraduate. When I went to work on the staff, Cecil Mackey was the president, and it was Cecil Mackey who really provided the impetus for some of the things that we did in the mid-'70s that moved USF a little more out of the, We'll just build it and they will come, into the more planned growth and development era. Cecil Mackey was the one who gave the impetus to this office of new student relations and the development of that recruitment team that I mentioned earlier.

Cecil Mackey was the one who said that we needed to have a comprehensive new student orientation program, which was not the norm at that point in time. And so USF was really on the cutting edge of all of our relationships with new students, with the recruitment, with the orientation. The concept of the office of new student relations being the consistent contact point between the first time that the student perhaps got a letter from USF or talked with a USF representative in their high school, all the way through their initial registration, their orientation, their moving into the residence halls.

So, that office really took interest in the new student from beginning to end of their new student until they actually got to the campus, got registered, got settled in, and then moved forward from there. And so it was really a seamless way of getting student acclimated to the university and one that was real important. The literature probably still says—I don't know, I'm a little outdated on my educational literature—but that students who drop out, drop out in the first semester more frequently, or the first term in school.

If you can get students through that first term, then the chances are good that they'll hang with the college experience even though there will always be bumps in the road. So, one of the points of the office new student relations was to make that transition positive, easy, and supportive for the student so that they would stay. You know, it's so much easier to keep the students you have than to continue to go out and try to find more. So, the retention piece of that whole process, that retention begins with recruitment was sort of

the point of all of this office of new student relations and that really all came from Cecil Mackey.

YG: I want to go back a little bit to you as a student.

VA: Okay.

YG: And your course load, what was a typical course load like for you?

VA: No different than it is now. We were on the quarter system, 12 to 15 hours was pretty standard for a fulltime student. One thing that—it makes me laugh because I still have my catalog from my freshman year, and the quarters tuition or registration fee from a Florida resident was \$150, and you took as many courses as you wanted to for \$150. And that's what it cost. And you know, a great hue and cry when it was raised a couple of years later to \$180 a quarter. You know, it was very, very big stuff. But there was not the per credit hour charge that we see now in the university system, but just, you know, \$150, that was it. Take as many as you wanted.

And what you would find is students doing very creative things. They would in fact register for more hours than they knew they could reasonable handle. They would register for 18, 19, 20, 21 hours, fully intending to work with faculty to take incompletes in these courses so that they could reduce the number of quarters for which they had to pay registration fees by overloading in registration. We did, if I can talk for a minute about registration. Registration was held in the ballroom of what is now the Marshall Center. And the bookstore was in the basement of what is now the Marshall Center.

So, the registration was up on the second floor and the bookstore was down in the basement. So it was sort of a one-stop shopping for registration in what was then the UC, the University Center. And literally, we pulled punch cards to register for class. So, if a class had 30 seats in it, there would be a box with 30 punch cards for Section 1 of freshman English. And you would go and stand in line and say you wanted section 1, and if there was a punch card left, you got it.

And then you'd go to this little table when you gathered all your punch cards for all of your classes or, then you'd have to some times go back and trade in your punch cards because what was available conflicted with something you already had. So you were back and forth around this little ballroom, trading in, trading out punch cards. And then you wrote your name and your student number, which was your social security number, and

turned them in at the end of the line. And then they went to some group of people who did all of this key punching to create the class rolls and generate grade sheets and all of those things.

But it all started with this punch card. Needless to say there were sometimes errors with this. And you know, resolving the punch card errors were probably more difficult than resolving the computer errors. But it was all very manual and, again, there were just these people who sat at these tables and handed out these punch cards for registration. It's one of my very fondest memories. And we've always talked about the fact as the university grew and technology was embraced and we moved from punch cards to filling out a form that then was put into a computer, it was really a request form, it wasn't a registration form, and then you waited to see what came back.

And all those things. The telephone registration to now the online registration, and I was fascinated in fact to hear we thought, when we had telephone registration that we were just absolutely at the end of the technology. I mean, that was just the cat's meow and we'd never have to have people standing in line for registration ever again. It was a wonderful thing. And I just learned recently that telephone registration is being discontinued because nobody's using it anymore and everybody is registering online. But the dramatic changes, again, between 1970 and 1990 in technology and the growth of the university and how we had to grow to handle the registration.

It's just mind-boggling. You know, the number of buildings that were built. You know, you talk about coming and the three original buildings that what is now the student services building, the administration building, and the university center. When I started school the dorms were being built, there were still some residence halls under construction. Fine arts was there, you know, the life sciences building and physics, but the old College of Business building, the old social science building, that was about it. I mean, there just wasn't that much there and it's just incredible the kind of growth the university's experienced in its first 50 years.

YG: Where did you go to study and to socialize?

VA: Let's see. A lot of socializing in the university center. A lot of socializing in the library. It wasn't quite as controlled an environment as it is now. In the residence halls on each floor there was a lounge area for the residents that had a—because we weren't allowed to have cooking utensils or anything like that—so, we had to have this community oven and sink that was in the lounge area. In the Andros and Argos center there were study lounges.

So, there was a lot of going there to study, but mostly people would just kind of, I don't want to say hang out but there was a lot of hanging out. There was a lot of outside activity, a lot of—of course, remember the era we're talking about—folk singing, music. People did a lot of singing. And that is one of the things that even then when the sororities and fraternities, when they had their Greek week, there were competitions, and it was singing competitions. So, there were serenades and folk music and always small groups of people clustered outside under trees.

Again, remembering the era, this was, you know, make love, not war. We had our share of hippies and recreational drug usage was beginning to be a thing. And so there was just a great deal of that; those small, informal gatherings. And you would also interestingly enough, that is another place where you would see some of the student affairs staff. You would see the staff who lived in the residence halls out with the residents in this environment. And so it was just a great time. A great time to be at USF and a great time to be 20 years old.

YG: Was there a dress code for students and faculty in those early days?

VA: Well, yes. There was a dress code as a matter of fact. People would get yelled at if their shorts were too short. They'd have to talk to the dean of students about those things. That was—many people at that time, women were still wearing dresses or skirts to class. Men, if you go back and look at some of the old year books. You know, men: shirts and ties. It was a little more formal but again, I came in in the late '60s and that was when we began to see that whole transition from the kind of university as a place of privilege to the university as the place for every man, and that whole concept of freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of action.

The university struggling to determine its goal in supporting students to develop as human beings and at the same time, students demonstrating behaviors that were not perceived as appropriate. And so it was a real challenge for the university at that time. By the time my freshman year ended, blue jeans were the standard and the sort of the cut off and stringier the better, and we moved right into that very sloppy stage in a period of about nine months. By the time I came back in the fall of 1970 there were no hours anymore in the dorm, there was none of that clock in, clock out stuff. In that one year things had just changed dramatically in between '69 and '70. And the university changed those practices because there was a lot of discontent, if you will.

YG: This discontent, these inappropriate behaviors, let's talk a little bit about that.

VA: Public affection, for example? Not allowed in the residence halls, not allowed in the lobbies, conversations about inappropriate expressions of public affection. Walking across campus, holding hands was okay. It wasn't really appropriate to be sitting up against the dorm on the outside making out, that wasn't quite acceptable. And again, a great deal of the university staff and faculty acting as parents would. That first year particularly, I can remember a lot of that. There were demonstrations, if you will, about dress codes. There were demonstrations about hours, there were all this business I mentioned earlier, the visitation. Because of the way the world was, demonstrations were the standard. If you didn't like something, go get some posters and start marching. So we were marching for everything.

And again, just really beginning to see that time when students told the universities in no uncertain terms that they wanted more opportunity to control their lives and very difficult for, I think, a lot of our traditional faculty and staff, who had grown up with the universities in a different environment, and difficult for parents who had sent their children to college thinking that they would be taken care of and now the university was backing off of all of this. And so it was a very interesting time for the university.

YG: In terms of demonstrations, you were going to school during, as you said, a very tumultuous time in the world. And I want to talk a little bit about Vietnam. Were there demonstrations against Vietnam on campus and did you participate in them?

VA: Yes there were demonstrations but they were never very big. It's one thing again, in the way I've always characterized the early days at USF, USF was a very accepting environment. So, if you chose to protest that was fine. If you didn't chose to protest that was fine, too. Candlelight vigils, candlelight marches, in the administration building, sit-ins, if you will, in the administration building. We had some, but fortunately never any that got out of control, that became riot-based or violent in any way. Always very peaceful. And to answer your question, yes, I did participate in candlelight marches.

I was in school when Kent State happened. And Kent State was the impetus for most of the protests here at the university. And back then we didn't have, really, university police, we just had university security officers; they were not uniformed officers or sworn officers of the law. But they were very, very careful to let this play out. And again, the dean of women, dean of men, student affairs staff, very involved with getting people to talk through their concerns, and there was a great deal of that, and fortunately, never any violent protests. And most of the protests were very small and very understated in there. But again, that outlet was there for those who felt strongly, who wanted to express their opinion about the war and the world.

YG: Race relations. Were there demonstrations about race relations at the university?

VA: Not while I was at school. Now, when we got into the early '70s after I had graduated, there was a little more racial tension then. In the '60s there just wasn't that much racial tension. There was, you know, of course that was at the height of the integration and just an incredible time in our country. But USF didn't have a lot of minority students and the minority students that were here were very much blended into the campus life.

So, there wasn't a black student union for a while. You know, with you, I've always talked about Florida being a little behind the times, you know, but eventually the civil rights unrest did reach Florida, and there were some militant African American students and some white students protesting the fact that we didn't have more African American students and those kinds of things, but not something that made the environment uncomfortable. It was all very open and—I don't know how to explain this exactly, you felt like you were sharing this. The protests that black students created were for everyone to protest this issue. It was never exclusive, it was always very inclusive. And that's sort of how USF was back then. Because I think it was, you know, small and everybody just kind of did everything.

YG: I want to slowly transition now to you becoming a staff member. But before I do I want to ask a final question in your student mode. Do you have a favorite memory? Or something that really sticks out for you being a student?

VA: It's one of my favorites and people will laugh if anybody who knows me ever sees this tape. In the fall of 1970, the week before school started, my sophomore year, I had a fire in my dorm room. And it's referred to generically, for those who were around then, as the "Kappa fire." It was a very big fire and the first big fire that the university had ever had in a building. And it turned out that—and again one must remember the era we're in—that the people that lived next door to me, one of the students was heavily involved in art and had all kinds of aerosol paint and decoupage, you know, that lacquer stuff, and blah, blah, blah.

Well, it turns out that the drape was open; the sun came in—true story—reflected off of a magnifying makeup mirror, which we had back then, to the bed and started the mattress on fire while we were at lunch. The middle of the day; we were sitting in the cafeteria. And I can remember vividly what I had on, what I was doing. We were eating. And back then you just carried your meal card with your ID. You didn't carry a lot of other stuff.

What I had to my name at that point was my meal card with my ID and the clothes that I had on my back. And I can remember vividly leaving the cafeteria and seeing all these people filing out of Kappa hall and laughing because school hadn't even started yet and somebody had set off the fire alarm.

Well, it turns out there was a big fire and by the time this all happened, flames were coming out of the second floor room and lapping up onto the third floor. And the fire department came and the guy I was dating called the radio station and got a check for \$13.80 for the news tip of the day for the fire on the USF campus. And it was just scary of course, because you lose everything you've owned. But that was when you saw the university act like a community. And there were staff there from student affairs before the firemen were there, and we were relocated and we were taken care of and we had clothes to wear.

And so that whole sense of community was demonstrated. And again, it is one of my favorites because the director of housing then was Ray King and I know he could never, ever look at me again without thinking that I had burned his dorm down. No matter, I lived, you know, on campus and I worked on campus for another 20 years and I am sure that every time he saw me that is what he thought about.

YG: Two more quick questions regarding student life. You mentioned recreational drug usage. Was that occurring on campus in the '70s? Did you see that?

VA: Do you think I should answer those questions? Yes, it was occurring on campus and yes, I did see it. And mostly, we were dealing with marijuana. Again, like USF, just kind of on the edge of what was going on. But yes, there was a lot of marijuana usage both on and off campus.

YG: Student radio. Was there a student radio?

VA: I don't know. I'm not sure. It never hit my radar screen.

YG: I want to move into your transition from being a student in '69, graduated in—

VA: Seventy-three.



YG: Seventy-three. And when did you begin working at the university?

VA: Actually, my first job with the university was in the summer of 1972, when I was an undergraduate student. And I was in the first group of undergraduate students selected to be orientation leaders. I mentioned earlier the comprehensive new student orientation program called "Focus?" It started in the summer of '72 and there were 20 undergraduate students selected to basically work with small groups of new freshmen throughout the summer as they came on campus for their orientation, academic advising, and registration.

That is how I got the opportunity to meet the staff that then, in 1973, opened the office of new student relations and was offered the opportunity to be a graduate assistant. So, I went to graduate school in the fall of '73, full-time, and worked part-time in the orientation office as a graduate student, and then completed my coursework for my masters in that school year, '73, '74, and then started full time in the fall of '74. As what was called the preadmission advisor for high school students.

And in that role, coordinated new student orientation programs and was responsible for freshman recruitment. Which means, you know, get in that car and get that cart and those catalogs and brochures and take off like a traveling salesman all over the State of Florida visiting high schools. In fact, my husband tells me to this day I'm the only person that can get around the State of Florida by where high schools are located because I think I've been to all of them, or had been at that point to all high schools in the State of Florida.

YG: Was it a difficult transition to go from being a student to eventually becoming a full-fledged staff of the university?

VA: It wasn't a hard transition for me because I had been so involved in the university as an undergraduate student. It just seemed to me to be a natural extension of doing something I really enjoyed, and that was being a student. You know, so if you can't be a student forever, you might as well work on a college campus forever. And I mentioned earlier that I changed my major a number of times, and I ended up getting a degree in secondary education.

And I really wasn't interested in teaching and didn't have the foggiest idea in fact of what I was going to do at that point when graduation came. So, I sort of ended up in the right place at the right time. For me, I didn't have to go out and look for a job. I didn't have to decide what to do. It sort of came to me and I had this great opportunity to develop a new program, to do something that the university had never done before. To participate in the

growth. To pay back the university for what it has given me by mentoring and working with undergraduate students myself.

And so it was just a natural for me to stay on campus and stay young. Back then there was a whole cadre of young professionals that arrived almost every fall. Typically through the resident instructor program in the residence halls. And those were the full-time professional staff who actually lived on campus. Those were typically people who had master's degrees and student personnel, or guidance and counseling, something in that field who wanted to be in higher ed., in student development.

And this was like an entry level position, you know, because people don't live on campus for their whole lives. But it was an entry level position for a new professional. So we would get a whole bunch of people who would come in every fall and spend one or two years in the residence halls. So there was a very close knit group of young student affairs professionals who worked together, partied together, and sort of created that environment for undergraduate students that we'd had when we were undergraduate students.

And so it was just so very different than it is now and some of those people are still one of my closest friends. The people that were in my same class, if you will, as a higher ed. professional rather than a student. And you just—we did a lot of stuff together and a lot of student work. We spent a lot of time with students.

YG: Those interactions with students. How have, you being a student, you seeing yourself going through being a student, what kinds of changes or how were these students different? These new student different from you and your generation?

VA: I think there are some differences but I would also suggest that based on my experience: a freshman is a freshman. And that regardless of our environment, regardless of our world, regardless of past experiences, whether the student is coming to college—back when I started school not everyone went to college, it was almost a privilege, and now it's an expectation. And a college degree has in many ways replaced the high school diploma in the market place.

When I read the literature now it says that you know, students are more the generation Y. What's in it for me? More self-centered, whatever it is, but I believe as I worked for 20 years with that transition period that the freshman experience transcends those generational changes. People are only 18 once. They only leave home one time. They only go to live in a dorm or an apartment or whatever; they only have that one time when

they sit in their first college classroom. When they realize that no one is going to wake them up the next morning, that that's their responsibility.

And so I think that you can always relate to a freshman student based on that transition, because there is apprehension regardless because it is a new phase of their life. And so as a university, if we can provide the support and those support systems change with what students need and what their prior experiences were and where they are in the world and what the world is like. But the point is to provide that support system to make the students successful in the transition. Then we've done our job at that level in the student development process.

And so even as students changed and their experiences changed, when I was talking with them I was still able to relate based on that transition because it is universal for a freshman. And so it was always very exciting. You know, fall opening was an exciting time no matter what was going on in the world. All these people don't know where to go, don't know what they're doing, they have a level of frustration, they're standing in line. If you can reach out and help one person, two people, three people, know that they can make it because it's not this daunting thing, you've made a difference.

And so that was always my feeling and the staff that I hope worked with me in the admissions office, because despite the fact that what we did was process paper, there was a person at the end of every piece of paper. And so it's not a paper business, it's a people business. And one of the things that I regret is that I think that the university has moved away from that in some ways. And that there isn't the same emphasis on the student experience as there once was.

And in my opinion as a student affairs professional that there should be. I know that you're probably looking at me like I've got six heads on when I talk about faculty and staff participating as advisors to student organizations. That was expected. You know, we had this thing called the "freshman dinner" in the Sun Dome, okay, and all the freshman, almost all of them came. Now, granted, there were only a couple of thousand then, it wasn't that big a—but as a student affairs staff member you were expected to be there, you brought your spouse, and you interacted with the new freshmen.

It was just part of what we did. And so as the university has grown and you know, everything changes, nothing stays the same. I happen to believe, however, that the more things change, the more that freshman transition remains the same, and that it needs more emphasis at the university, the whole student experience does. But it's a big place now and it's a big business, so, very different.

*Track 1 ends; track 2 begins.*

YG: Okay. I want to go back to something that you said and that was the idea of the growth and the major changes in the different transition periods that you've gone through in this university. Can you talk a little bit about that growth going from 1969 to 1994?

VA: It is just amazing to me. The regional campus system, the acquisition, or merger if you will, with New College, and now of course their re-independence, but that whole concept of an honors college being part of a state university system. The number of buildings, academic buildings primarily, that were built; it's almost mind-boggling. I think that when the university goes from some 5,000 students to 35,000 students that the demands on the infrastructure were incredible. The whole—I can remember when I started in the admissions office that the process was manual.

You know, you filled out a paper application, you turned it in, we got paper transcripts. We manually computed high school grade point averages. We had this application that we coded, and again, it got sent upstairs to the keypunchers who would punch this in. And every morning we would get computer printouts that were probably this high of applicants. And if we were making an admissions decision, we would literally go through that book and change it with a pencil, a red pencil, if you will.

And at the end of the day that book went back upstairs and those changes to status were key punched again. And so we went from that to a virtually totally online admissions system. That online advising system, the state advising system, all those things were in response to the need to really develop an infrastructure that supported 35,000 students instead of 5,000 students. And 35,000 students on five campuses, not just 35,000 people in one place, but in 5 places. The physical changes to the campus, in a lot of ways, and the changes that happened, you can almost see based on the president.

And this is something I was thinking about in preparation for this interview, so I want to try this out on you. You know, John Allen was our founding president. He set the tone for the student centered-ness of the university. That was his thing. That students would be active, students would be involved, and that the university was here for the students. When Cecil Mackey came, we were getting bigger, we began to act more like a teenager. We were beginning to feel our way. We were beginning to challenge Florida and Florida State for students.

We began to establish our own identity separate from that, and very much like a teenager with its driver's license, you know? We had a few accidents but an incredible external

focus. President Allen was very internally focused, as I guess one had to be when one created a university from the ground up. But Cecil Mackey was totally externally focused. When Jack Brown came, he focused on technology. His background was in engineering. His thing was infrastructure and doing things better with technology. Frank Borkowski came along and his thing was to be a little more traditional.

So, it was under Frank Borkowski's reign that you got the decision to do intercollegiate football. Some of the decisions to begin to reemphasize on-campus living, new residence halls. Some of the seeds of that began when Frank Borkowski was here because he came from a more traditional mindset, and he wanted to create more of the traditional student activities environment and focus on campus. So, Frank was very warm and fuzzy and always wanted—was student oriented and much the same way that John Allen was.

When President Castor came, which she came right before I left, you began to see the political nature of the university emerge. Very much based on the experiences that she brought. And again, that external focus that we didn't have under Frank Borkowski, but her contention to make USF—or her goal to make USF the university of choice. This whole Research I (university) designation, the whole lobbying effort to make sure we got our share went, I mean, really made dramatic strides under President Castor. Primarily because of who she was.

And now with President Genshaft, she's just inherited a whole bunch of stuff that I think she hasn't really had an opportunity to put her mark on the future of the university because she's got all this stuff popping up that she's having to deal with. But certainly the context of the world now with 9/11 and the [Sami] al-Arian issue<sup>1</sup> has certainly put President Genshaft in a position of having to do some things that no one before her has ever had to deal with. So, you can sort of put the university growth and development in the context of its leadership in a lot of ways.

And I think that the dramatic changes to the physical appearance all relate back to the, We need to be big time and these are the big time things that you see. And yet in many ways USF is still a stepchild and maybe always will be. And so one of my things as an alumnus has been to be really excited with the number of USF license tags and the amount of USF paraphernalia, and the crowds at football games, and the number of people that are bringing their children in USF clothing.

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<sup>1</sup>Sami Amin Al-Arian is a Palestinian-American civil rights activist who was a computer engineering professor at the University of South Florida. In what began as a contentious fight about national security and freedom of speech between USF administration and various teachers unions, Al-Arian underwent a series of civil and criminal trials from 2003 until his deportation proceedings in 2014. Al-Arian was deported to Turkey on February 4, 2015.

You can go places now and get USF clothing where you used to be only able to get Gator and Seminole clothing in our community. And so it takes intercollegiate athletics to do that, I believe strongly in that because it's what USF needs to move to the next level. It needs that alumni population that is out there supporting the university. So, many of our graduates had only a handshake relationship with the university. They never had a hug relationship with the university, so many of them were experiencing "drive-thru U."<sup>2</sup>

And there weren't those things that created that strong affiliation, and that's where I think we've really made some strides now is with some of this gathering the alumni back together who can hang their hats on a football program, and that's okay. If that's—a winning football team is going to attract way more alumni attention than a winning researcher in microelectronics. I mean the Research I stuff is great, don't get me wrong, but that's where USF needs now to work, is in its alumni relations, and I think our football program is really going to contribute to that. And I think it was personally, a great thing to have done.

YG: You previously mentioned something called the freshman dinner. What was the freshman dinner?

VA: What was it? It was held at typically the Saturday night before classes started on Monday and all freshman were invited. They got a letter to their home in the summer from the vice president for student affairs and president inviting them to meet the university community at a dinner in their honor. So, in 1981 we started it in the Sun Dome and literally, all of the student affairs staff, all faculty were invited. There was a little wine and cheese reception ahead of time for faculty and staff.

You know, to kind of sweeten the pot for this participation, and then there was typically a barbeque dinner done by whoever was handling the on-campus food service at that time. A band or a DJ, and dancing, and an evening of just informal interaction for the freshman to meet each other and to meet others in the university community. It was a great thing, the freshman dinner.

YG: And when did the idea of the freshman dinner cease?

VA: Probably somewhere in the mid to late '80s, when we just had trouble attracting students to come. Not as interested in these organized things anymore. No real feeling

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<sup>2</sup>Here Ahrens uses the phrase "drive-thru u" as a metaphor to explain that many student just go into the university and then out, without ever making a real connection to the university.

that they ought to go. A part of what, you know, drives all of this is that sense of obligation. I ought to go do this; I ought to go do that. And changed then our summer orientation program—the focus program changed its name and direction maybe in the early '90s.

And what happened was I think the focus between '85 and '90 was more on reaching the student where they were. That's when you saw this expansion of electronic recruitment materials, and the email thing and colleges making DVDs and CDs that they would send to prospective students. The virtual campus tours that you would pick up on the Internet. And so it was more of a let us reach you where you are through electronic means rather than requiring you to come to us. There was a little bit of a change in philosophy at that point.

And that was when we began to do a lot of electronic transcript transfer. So, that we got away from all of the manual computation of grade point averages because we built all these computer programs and high schools in Florida were required to be able to transmit their transcripts electronically. Florida public high schools, so if you applied to—you could apply to USF in essence by going to your counselor's office and authoring the release of a transcript.

We then sent back a confirmation of receipt of the transcript that really, Sign this and send it back, and that constituted the application. So, the whole process became more student-focused rather than university-focused and catching people where they were and making it easier. And that was again, a lot of the response to the world. And so the freshman dinner at the same time kind of just lost its value. People weren't interested in it, and if people weren't interested in it than we would do something different.

YG: My final question, and this is something that I've asked everyone who's sat in that chair, being here 25 years, is there something, a thought, a sentiment, a message, that you want to leave to the people that you worked with or the future students that are coming in. Is there something that you want to leave for the record for these students?

VA: I think that what I would like is for everyone to have as positive an experience with the University of South Florida as I had. My goal would be for every student to walk out and say, I hate to leave. It's been the most wonderful time of my life. And I would just love to know that our students were getting that kind of experience.

YG: Vicki, thank you very much for your time.

VA: Well, thank you for letting me do this and reminisce a little bit.

*End of interview*