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Interview with: Millie Singletary  
Interviewed by: Dr. David B. Austell, Jr.  
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DA:= Dr. David B. Austell, Jr.  
MS:= Millie Singletary

**DA:** Good morning. My name is Dr. David Austell. And I'm director of International Student and Scholar Services, here at the University of South Florida. We're here today as a part of the University of South Florida, Tampa Campus, Library Oral History Program. The purpose of our program today really, is to get at some of the issues and history involved in international educational exchange here at USF. In other words, to look back at the history of international affairs on our campus. It's my great delight to have as a special guest today Ms. Millie Singletary. Millie was the international student advisor, the first hired by the University of South Florida; the person in charge, responsible for the presence and activities of foreign students on this campus, beginning in the mid-1960s. Millie, thank you so much for being with us today.

**MS:** I'm glad to be here.

**DA:** We're gonna have just an informal conversation about your life here at the university. And we want to hear anything and everything that you can remember about your work with the students, and about the students' lives as well. And I thought we would just start there. Can you tell us a little bit about the nature of your work related to foreign students here at USF?

**MS:** It was a wonderful life. And I was assisting in the Student Affairs Office with the Dean of Men, who had the responsibility for foreign student affairs, at that time. And we had first one student, and then another, and the numbers began to grow slowly through the years, up until a certain point. During that time, we cleared the student for admission financially and issued the I-20 to the student to come over. It was our responsibility to receive the student and to give personal orientations to the campus. To assist them in finding housing, which was non-existent in the area. And we were fortunate to have faculty and staff people who would be excited to have an

international stay in their home for a semester or a year. And that was not a difficult situation at the time. We also assisted with transportation, because the student had no way to come from Carrolwood, from Temple Terrace, to get to the university. And so many volunteers were willing to bring the student to campus when they came here to work. Take them home after they were off. We didn't have night classes at that time, so that didn't pose a problem. And we just were generally responsible for the student. In fact, Student Affairs insisted that we were surrogate parents to students at the university at that time; we were to look out for them.

**DA:** So in loco parentis , in place of the parents.

**MS:** In loco parentis was our motto in Student Affairs at the time.

**DA:** Wow.

**MS:** And it was a pleasure because--in the Tampa Bay Area, internationals, there were no Chinese restaurants, not a very active international community at all. And our students were sort of novelties in the community. They were invited to speak at organizations and in churches, and people were just excited to meet someone from another country at that time.

**DA:** Wow. When did you come to work for the university first?

**MS:** In September, 1961.

**DA:** '61. Were you working for Dean Wunderlich at that time?

**MS:** He was not here at that time. Dean Jonshoy was the Dean of Students. Dr. Decker was the Dean of Men. And I worked with him, and he had had an experience with international students and I learned of the processes one by one--I mean as the students came in--from him.

**DA:** From Dr. Decker?

**MS:** Yes.

**DA:** And later on you were working with Dr. Wunderlich? In a similar kind of way with the students?

**MS:** Dean Wunderlich was the Dean of Students, and he was Dr. Decker's supervisor.

**DA:** Oh, I see.

**MS:** Dean of Men and Dean of Women were part of Student Affairs, and he was the Dean of Students.

**DA:** Millie, how many international students were present in those early days?

**MS:** Well, I would say that the first student probably came in '62. And then another and then another. Word of mouth, friends of faculty, began to make USF known in the community and in the international community. And we found that many students came here because of the climate.

**DA:** Oh, heh.

**MS:** If they didn't have word of mouth information, they were looking in directories, they saw Tampa and learned of the climate and that was what they wanted.

**DA:** So the students would have started coming in, really just as a trickle? Beginning in 1962?

**MS:** Right.

**DA:** Tell us a little bit about the transition from the administrative context that you had with Dean Decker to the context in the Phyllis Marshall Center. That occurred in 1963.

**MS:** In 1963, um hum.

**DA:** Tell us a little bit about that changeover?

**MS:** The Dean of Student Affairs gave the responsibility for student discipline to the Dean of Men. And there was a lot of discipline then. When a student needed to be disciplined, they would have to make an appointment with the Dean of Men, and they'd sit outside the door, and everyone who came in knew that, uh oh: discipline.

**DA:** Somebody's in trouble. Heh.

**MS:** Someone has done something wrong. Heh heh. Like Phyllis Marshall has a

funny story about what a disciplinary action was. Some of the students in the University Center, which had the first student residence, put a chicken on top of the elevator.

**DA:** Heh heh. A chicken?

**MS:** And that was one of the disciplinary cases which I remember. Minor things in today's society but a real discipline case then. But nevertheless, and international student coming in to that atmosphere hesitated to be seen, or hesitated to come in. So when we moved from the Administration building to the Student Center, where every kind of student gathered for different things, the internationals felt more comfortable. And we did too.

**DA:** Now where was the International Student Center at that time? Where was it located in the University Center?

**MS:** In a very small office which coordinated all of the student organization activities on campus. It was on the first floor. And I had a desk along with desks of other organizational advisors.

**DA:** So you shared an office with Phyllis Marshall?

**MS:** Yes, all of her advisors.

**DA:** In those days, Phyllis was primarily involved with the student organizations and activities.

**MS:** Yes, she was Director of Student Organizations--within the University Center.

**DA:** So you shared that space with her.

**MS:** Yes we did.

**DA:** I guess then, in going in with Phyllis, and given her activities here at USF with the student organizations, that gave you an opportunity to basically plan the program from the absolute beginning.

**MS:** It did.

**DA:** Millie, tell us a little bit about those beginnings. What was the program like, for internationals here, before you moved to the University Center. And what was it

like after you began developing the program?

**MS:** When we moved to the University Center, the university became a member of the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs. And one of the opportunities available to new advisors was an opportunity to visit another university to observe their programs, their complete set-up. And I took advantage of that. And after returning from that visit, I determined that one of the first things we needed would be a host family program. And so we enlisted faculty and a few community people who were internationally interested, and that was the first program that we developed. The host family program. And it was really exciting to all of the faculty who were involved, and the students were so well wined and dined by the faculty, and accepted into the community. And so that was an exciting way to get the students involved, to know that they had an opportunity to observe American culture, to help them overcome any kind of culture shock which they might have felt. Which was prevalent in the early days because it was new for these students to be coming to a strange place. And it helped in so many ways.

**DA:** Millie, talk a little bit more about the host family program. That was your program? You started that here.

**MS:** Yes, we developed that program. And it was the first program that we developed. We, each semester would have a social and invite the host families and the students to the social. They would interact, become acquainted with one another. And we thought that after the social we would assign a student to a family. But before the socials were over, they had found their own matches! The families had talked to someone that they especially liked, and the student was agreeable, and so they came and matched themselves together. And that was a good way for the student and the family to be compatible.

**DA:** And these socials occurred every semester?

**MS:** Every semester.

**DA:** Wow. Yeah, that's wonderful. What was the, how did the relationships between the internationals and those families? Was this a live-in situation where the...?

**MS:** No, it was more of a social off-campus kind of association for the students.

**DA:** I see. Volunteer program, the students were not living in the homes at that time? But simply visiting with the families.

**MS:** Some of the students were living in homes. They were not the students who really needed the host family program.

**DA:** I see. Yeah.

**MS:** These were for students who did not need that. And I'm speaking of the years now where we had between 50 and 100 students.

**DA:** That would have been in the mid-1960s or so. 1966, '67, in there?

**MS:** In that time frame.

**DA:** Millie, think back on those years. And tell us something about the lives of the international students at that time. What their perspectives might have been about the University of South Florida? About Tampa. Any particular challenges that they might have had, in being here?

**MS:** Challenges that they would have would be separating their lives, from academic to social. So many of the students felt that they were here to get an education and to get back home and use it. And they felt that they, it was difficult for them to understand the professor sometimes in the classroom. Especially if they would turn their back to the class and write on the blackboard and speak at the same time. The students would be confused. We would suggest that they could tape record the classes if the professor agreed to it. But they just couldn't get the feel of doing that right away. That was one of the challenges that they faced. They felt that weekends, or time that a host family would want to take them out, they just couldn't tear themselves away from their studies. But they knew they had the host family's support. And the host family wanted to take them to ball games or something every weekend--do something with them--and the host family felt sometimes disappointed that they didn't have more time with the student. Times have changed. Students now--heh heh heh--the international students don't have enough time to study because of their social life.

**DA:** Heh heh heh.

**MS:** In many cases. But it wasn't that way then. Another challenge that um--it was a real problem at first, and I couldn't understand it but now I can--the classroom situation was so different from their study places back home. Everything was so casual, informal. Professors, some of the students called them by their first name. They interrupted the professor. The professor would stop and ask a question, which

would surprise a student. And they weren't accustomed to that kind of classroom. Back home their professors were gods, almost. They revered them. They listened intently. And it was very distracting sometimes for the students to feel that way in the classroom over here.

**DA:** Millie, did you work with the students to help them understand a little bit more about the educational context that they were in? And how did that play out?

**MS:** When we had so few students--I say "few" compared to now--much of my time was spent in counseling and advising, heh. Because of culture shock, classroom interaction, away from families, they, it just was a different situation and sometimes all the needed was someone to listen to them. I didn't have to say very much to relieve their tensions, but just having someone to listen. And I had more time then to do that than in later years.

**DA:** I guess in the later years, you were experiencing what we definitely experience now. Which is that the technical side of our work, especially that which is related to the Immigration and Naturalization Service...

**MS:** True.

**DA:** ...begins to take more and more and more time away from what you were doing, and what many of us would love to be doing more of. Which is the direct, hands-on advising and counseling with the student.

**MS:** True.

**DA:** When did you see that change begin to occur most, Millie? When the technical started really creeping in.

**MS:** Well, at USF, the State of Florida had given this university all at once 150 out-of-state waivers. Out-of-state fee waivers for internationals. And it didn't take but one semester for that word to get around. And I would say within a year and a half our international population tripled.

**DA:** Oh. Wow.

**MS:** Because of that. And it seemed that the quality of the student being admitted at the same time was um, not quite the same as our early students. And there was a lot of pressure on our office to give out-of-state fee waivers. We didn't have restrictions on financial or academic performance. We couldn't say no, your grade point



average isn't high enough, or we couldn't say no, your finances are too well taken care of. And it just presented the dilemma as to how to meet the needs of all the students who were coming in at that time.

**DA:** What year was that, Millie?

**MS:** That was probably in the late-60s, early 70s. It went on into the beginning of the Iranian Crisis.

**DA:** Oh, okay.

**MS:** And our Iranian...

**DA:** That would have been in '79. And our Iranian population increased 100% heh at that time.

**DA:** Wow. Now, you mentioned that the population just within a semester, because of the presence of the tuition fee waivers tripled. Now, did your staff also at the same time grow?

**MS:** No. No heh heh.

**DA:** Well Millie how did you handle that workload?

**MS:** If I hadn't really enjoyed the work, I guess I couldn't have dealt with it. But, and the students were understanding of the fact that I was the "one" person to help them. And they appreciated that enough to not complain. And we managed. Didn't have as much time to spend with each student. And sometimes it just seemed that you just couldn't turn a student out of the office in order to take care of five or six who were waiting. But we learned how to do it.

**DA:** Well I can imagine that the students then, and later, were very understanding of the situation that you were in.

**MS:** Very understanding.

**DA:** And the relationships that you developed are legendary, Millie. And for example there is one student, Ram Hosmani who dedicated his doctoral dissertation to you. Could you tell us a little bit about him, and his life here? And tell us why he might have done that to honor you.

**MS:** Well, he of all the students that I'd worked with seemed to be needing the most personal help. He came over to a graduate assistant in one of our colleges. Could not speak English very well. Could not be understood very well. He depended entirely on the scholarship money for his existence over here. Which would have been fine, except some of the students, and especially Ram, felt that--they say that housing costs so much for a year. Well, I can get a little one room place, cook my own meals, and I can get by without any extra money. And housing was not prevalent in this area. Very difficult to find a place for him to be able to afford with his scholarship. He was frustrated and not performing well in his duties in the graduate college and they had threatened to cut him off. Well, my husband and I had befriended him in a family way; we had had him in our home and worked with him as a host family. Finally, it seems like overnight he overcame every problem he had. A couple of scholarship paychecks, and he was back on his feet again. It was that initial feeling. And from then on he was our son from India. And later when he went back and married the young lady his family had picked out for him while he was here. And later on they had a daughter, and it was just a relationship that most host families can appreciate and enjoy.

**DA:** A little while ago we were talking about the tension that exists between the human side of the work that we do, and the technical side of the work that we do. The human side being the counseling, the advising--work that is related to helping international students adjust to life here at the University of South Florida. The technical side, as you indicated, really related to Immigration and Naturalization Service. Immigration laws that govern the presence of international students in the United States, and specifically here at USF. That tension I guess has always existed. But over the years it's definitely increased to the point now that maybe 80% of our time, if not more, is really focused in the technical side, the immigration side. That's a reality of the work that we do. Millie, I want to look back a little bit on the technical aspects of the work that you did; particularly in the 60s and the 70s. Can you tell us a little bit about immigration law at that time? The technical side of the presence of foreign students here. What was your role in working with that with the students. And also, what was your relation with the Immigration and Naturalization Service at that time?

**MS:** When we had had our first international students, Immigration was having its first international students at this district office also. There were no other schools in this area who admitted internationals. Therefore the staff and the director were not familiar with all of the student regulations. Our first students, the process was very simple. Just issue the I-20, and they were in, as a student. They would renew their

stay whenever it was necessary and that was all there was to it. As the population increased, the uh--as our staffing was crunched, theirs also. The people not being familiar with the regulations for students. When they'd have a question that wasn't just directly related to admission, they would not understand what it was. And we of course didn't really understand either, because we at that time weren't privy to all the government regulations for students. So together we were both becoming frustrated about the situation. Of the Immigration delaying students' requests, not being able to give them information in a timely manner. And it was frustrating to them, to the student, and also to our office. But as the population increased, the frustration increased. To the point where students were, they absolutely refused to go to Immigration. They were treated very discourteously. And I'll say right here: student admission was not a primary focus of the immigration office. They were here primarily to watch the ports, to seek out illegal aliens; not to deal with an educated student who was here to get an academic degree. And there was just friction in the interaction. We were able to overcome that with some discussions that we had with the immigration offices in that the students were treated more civilly, I should say. But the students didn't have transportation. They'd have to take two or three busses to get to the immigration office. Wait in line; they didn't have a student section. Wait in line, and sometimes the line would be cut off and the student would have to come back without an answer. We tried to make appointments for the students, but they would not make appointments. That existed I guess for about a year before we were able to resolve--not the problems as far as timely attention, but as far as their being received in the office. They were treated with more respect after we had worked together about the problem.

**DA:** Now did you initiate those conversations, Millie? With the Director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service?

**MS:** Yes I did. Um hum.

**DA:** And tell us a little bit about those discussions. How did you conduct them and what was the nature of the discussions?

**MS:** Well, I approached the subject on the fact that these students who came over here were not illegal in any way. They were not trying to pressure for first attention. But they were there because they had to be. It was a regulation that they were having to meet to be there and get their stay extended and whatever. But the director himself said, opened his drawer and said, "This is our, what we guide the office by." A book of regulations about this high. I'm not sure how much of that was related to students. But he said, "Every person who comes in to this office is

handled by what this book tells us to do." So then I reminded him that these students were educated people, they were polite students, they were not aggressive or ugly in any way, and we felt that they deserved more respect from the person there whether they could help them or not. At that moment. And I think they must have had a little staff meeting, heh heh, because from that time on, the students were accepted as being, getting the respect they needed.

**DA:** About what year was that, Millie? Can you remember?

**MS:** It was probably 1970, or '72.

**DA:** That is so interesting because we have continued with the model that you established. Of having now regular, annual, summit meetings between the international leadership of the University of South Florida and the Immigration and Naturalization Service leadership. So really, you started that model. And it's been most helpful during those years, and even now. Millie you mentioned another technical area, aside from the immigration part. Admissions. There are other technical concerns. And one that comes to mind is one that is both technical and highly advising-counseling oriented. And this has to do with crisis management, and how a crisis among the international student population is dealt with. You know my own experience here, since 1993, we've had a number of deaths in our population of 1,200 international students.

**MS:** Um hum.

**DA:** Many illnesses. And this is by no means unusual.

**MS:** Right.

**DA:** You having to struggle with that a long time yourself. Could you tell us something about the way that crisis was managed in your office, from the very beginning?

**MS:** Crisis. We did not have too many crisis situations which we had to deal with during my tenure. One of the most critical situations was a time when our intercultural organization had a picnic on a lake. And one of our international students who was disabled--a young lady--who should have used crutches to get around, was so daring she'd walk all over campus without them. And everyone would feel that she was going to fall. Very bright young lady from the Caribbean. Who was very near graduation, in her last semester. On this picnic we had boat rides. And all of a sudden, Joan thought she should have her turn. Everyone tried to

discourage her from getting into the boat. But she did. And as the boat went out, she drowned. And so did a young man who tried to save her. Very critical situation for us. To have to notify the family, to try to let the family know how it happened. And we just dealt with it in Student Affairs. We didn't know how the family was going to react toward the individual on whose lake it occurred, to us as individuals who sponsored it, or to the university.

**DA:** Now, the university then looked to you, to manage that crisis when it occurred, Millie? In contacting the families, working with other students...

**MS:** Yes, right.

**DA:** ...as a result of that.

**MS:** We did. She had a friend on campus from her country. Who knew her family too. And we turned to him to get in touch with the family and to break the news to them. And then later we had the family come over after the situation had been finalized. We still didn't know how they were gonna react. But they came over. And we had a social, whereby we charged for people to come in, to have a little contribution to make to the family. From our organization, but the university didn't get involved.

**DA:** What you're describing is a great deal of support. Emotional support, and even technical support that you would have given to that family.

**MS:** Oh definitely uh huh.

**DA:** And there are so many examples of this, Millie, that we're only gonna be able to scratch the surface of the things that have occurred. And I want to now bring your attention to something that I know is very close to your heart. That was designed by you. Again, to augment the whole issue of how students are impacted, how their lives are impacted, how they're assisted, in many different ways. And I'm referring to the Conversational English program.

**MS:** Oh, um hum.

**DA:** Now the Conversational English program has been here a long time, and very well established and has impacted our community very much. I'd like you to say a few words about the beginning of that program. Why it was organized, what need did you see, and tell us a bit about how the program got going?

**MS:** I had felt the need for some kind of assistance for the students who, although they had passed a test for English before they came over here, before they were admitted, they had difficulty in conversation with us, responding in the classroom, in the community. And we in turn had difficulty understanding them. And I had heard of a program in other universities where they had volunteers who would tutor in English conversation. And I wanted to establish that program. Didn't really have time to go into the establishment of the program until the director of the Baptist Student Union came over one day with a missionary couple, who had just retired from Chile. And they wanted to get involved with internationals. So I made this proposal to them, and they took it and ran with the idea of beginning a Conversational English program. Not only for the students, but for their families. Because at that time, many students had families over here with them, as visitors. And so we started out with the two coordinators. And by the second semester, we had eight coordinators. It was such a popular program, and filled the need for the students.

**DA:** From the very beginning then, it was really a community-based volunteer program.

**MS:** Exactly.

**DA:** And the Baptist Student Union was also involved?

**MS:** Yes they were.

**DA:** How were they involved, Millie?

**MS:** They gave us space for socials. We would have socials as well as uh--the tutors would even act as host families for the students as well. They supplied materials for us. And some of their members would be tutors for our program. And they now support us in a small way, financially.

**DA:** The Conversational English program went with you? Upon your retirement at the University of South Florida. Tell us a little bit about that transition.

**MS:** When I retired in 1987, we just continued the program. With support from your office and the Baptist Student Union, and it's still helping students with their conversation.

**DA:** Yeah it's going strong.

**MS:** This past semester we've had a lady from Spain who was over her, she was studying in child development program. And couldn't speak a word of English. And since that time she's been to several international conferences concerning her role. And one of them she said was in English, heh heh. And she did very well.

**DA:** Millie, because of your work with this especially--with the Conversational English program, a community-based program--and related to something you mentioned earlier, your earlier involvement with the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs. NAFSA is the most important professional organization, really in the world--the largest and most influential such organization in the world, related to international educational exchange. You and I have both been very active. And our region in the Southeast is region seven. Related to your work in the Conversational English program, just this past year at Orlando, you were given the very prestigious Community Service Award. And were honored in Orlando at the conference...

**MS:** A real honor.

**DA:** ...and basically just completely wowed the audience of about 400 people that were there. I want to congratulate you again on that honor.

**MS:** Thank you.

**DA:** And much deserved. And, thinking back about you, when I first came to interview here at the University of South Florida, the first person I met was Millie Singletary, heh.

**MS:** Heh.

**DA:** And your husband, Homer. And I remember how gracious you were, and kind to me as I came down from the University of North Carolina. So I've had direct experience, and since then from time to time, being able to look to you for advice and wisdom. About the specific challenges that we're facing even now with International Student Affairs. Millie, as we get close to the end of our time today, I want to not look back again, but I want to have you look ahead a little bit. And you with the most experience, directly, with the hands-on advising, crisis management, technical advising, processing with the students since the early '60s, can you dream a dream for us? What does the future of international education look like to you? As you look ahead.

**MS:** I would think that the more we interact with other cultures on an academic or social basis, the more we can experience the opportunities to have cultures come together, to understand one another. And hopefully some of these conflicts that are in progress now, even, would not continue or carry on in the future.

**DA:** Millie, thank you so much for joining us today. It's really good to see you again.

**MS:** Thank you. I appreciate being here.