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Mark Greenberg (MG): This is Mark Greenberg, the director of the Florida Studies Center and Special Collections at the University of South Florida libraries. And today is March 12th, 2004. I have the pleasure of being with Florida Senator Victor D. Crist as part of a project to commemorate 50 years of USF history. Senator, thank you for being here.

Victor Crist (VC): My pleasure.

MG: I know it's a busy time of year.

VC: Well, we're just home from session for the weekend. We always arrive very tired. So hopefully I'm not too tired and too slow to answer your questions today.

MG: Well, I'm going to bring you back a few years. We won't spend much time talking about your legislative career.

VC: Certainly. [Sound of tape player turning off] That's all the time I get? (laughing)

MG: What I had wanted to do, instead, was to talk about your background a little bit. Your biographical background—. [Sound of tape player turning off] Excuse me.

VC: I'm back.

MG: A little bit of biographical information and then spend most of the time talking about your experiences here at USF. [I'm] interested in your influences on the university and the university's influences on you. But let me start by asking you where you were born and where did you grow up?

VC: I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. I think the seventh generation in the city at Mercy Hospital. And I spent the first five years of my life there. My biological father passed away in 1960 from war-related wounds. He was a medic in the Pacific during World War II, and my mother got a degree in nursing. She met a man that was also in the military in 1962, and they eventually got married. And we, the family, shipped out to Washington for six months and then over to Pakistan.

And I spent three years in Pakistan, went to school there at a couple of different schools. One was a unique one. It was a convent on an island. And the four-wheel drive could only take us out there to the school when the tide was out. So we'd have to wait for the tide to go out, and the "truckster" would take us out to—the "Jeepster" would take us out to the school. And then we'd have to wait until the tide went out again before it could go back onto the mainland to take us back to home.

MG: Long school days?

VC: Oh, it was long school days. It was neat though. It was a French convent, and the nuns wore hats like the old French hats, kind of like what you saw in *The Flying Nun*, you know, the old movie, the old show. It was quite an interesting experience. We spent some time traveling all up through the Middle East. My parents took nine months off, and we traveled through African and Europe, so I had a chance to really see a good part of the world. Came back to the United States—

MG: How old were you?

VC: We arrived back, I think, I was about nine, eight or nine. I think I was nine years old. Settled back into Louisiana for a short period of time, a few years. And then Dad got sent to MacDill Air Force Base to help set up the intelligence unit of Strike Command, which was the forerunner for Central Command¹. And when he retired in late '68, they chose to

¹United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), oversees military operations and activities in concert with allies in partners to increase stability and security of a region. Its area of responsibility encompasses more than 4 million square miles, which stretches from Northeast Africa and the Middle East to Central and South Asia.

remain here in Florida and raise us kids out on the beaches, which is not a bad way of life. In fact, it was quite enjoyable, living out on the water with flipper and the boat and all the things that go along with beach living here in Florida.

MG: Where were you living specifically? Where were you living?

VC: Treasure Island. In fact, the family still has a home out there.

MG: I wanted to ask you, seven generation New Orleans. That puts you in fairly elite company. Where did the family come from? Where is your family from, originally?

VC: Well, in New Orleans, if you know the history of the city of New Orleans, it's a potpourri of nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. And there are so many different trunks of the family tree that I could go down that could lead in so many different directions. I could go, you know, the Scottish direction. I could go the German direction. I could go the British direction. I could go the French direction. I could go the Italian direction. But there's so much heritage, and when I'm in that city, I look around, and I can see family roots and legacies from generations before.

MG: You came to Florida, largely for reasons of your dad and his military career. But you had been through a good part of the world, arrived here, what, when you were 10 or 11 years old?

VC: Uh, I think I was 11 years old.

MG: What did you think of Florida when you arrived?

VC: Hot. It was hot in Pakistan, but it was a dry heat. And we slept, took naps, during the hottest part of the day. And the entire lifestyle was engineered around that kind of climate. When we came back to the United States, we thought it was cool. And it was cold, and it was humid. When we were in Louisiana, we thought it was humid and cold. And we got used to that humid and cooler weather. And when we moved to Florida, all I remember was that drive from New Orleans to Tampa, coming down US-19 when it was first built—nothing along that road, at all, for miles.

And we were towing a trailer because my dad had this wild idea: he was going to buy this trailer, and we were going to camp out in the trailer coming to Florida and just enjoy the

wildlife. Well, we enjoyed the wildlife, all right. The car kept breaking down about every hour on the hour and overheating. And the windows were down, and the air conditioning wasn't on, and my sister and I are, like, in the back of that car in May or June of summer just drowning in sweat. That's what we remember: mosquitoes and heat.

MG: But you got here.

VC: We got here.

MG: And you end up living in, really, a beautiful part of the state.

VC: Yes. We were lucky.

MG: And going to school. Tell me about school and recreation, being in Tampa.

VC: My parents believed in a well-rounded education. My father was into healthy, athletic sport-type of extracurricular activities. Dad was into working out, looking good, and being healthy, and martial arts, and weapons, and things of that nature. So he wanted to make sure that we had an understanding of the things that he had an interest in. My mother, on the other hand, was actively involved in a lot of public service, human service, cultural activities; she was extremely talented as an artist and as a musician and wanted us involved in that as well, so that we would have an experience in many different venues that we could find what we enjoyed doing and where our talents were.

MG: What did you do?

VC: Well, I mean, as a child, first, they put me in music. At the age of four, I started studying piano. By the time I was 10, I was competing on a state basis. And by the time I was 13, I was competing at the national basis in the National Piano Guild, and they all thought I was going to go on to be a concert pianist. And I, at the time, thought I would too, but I started developing interests in voice. I went on for voice training, sung in a barber shop quartet and a concert chorus. I went on to study dance. I met a young lady when I was in seventh grade that wanted to be an actress and a dancer, and I helped teach her the basics of reading music and how to swim, and she taught me the basics of dancing and how to French kiss. And she went on to be an actress, and I went on into politics. Kind of ironic, but she was my first campaign manager in seventh grade. Those of us that were engaged in the arts wanted our fair share of the candy sale money from the World's Finest Candy Bars. And it was all going to the athletics department.

So we got this wild idea that we'd run me for student body treasurer, and I would divert the money to the arts side of the school activities. So Angela was my campaign manager with my sister, and everyone said, "Well, who is Victor Crist? Who does he think he is, running against the most popular cheerleader in the school and her boyfriend being the most famous athlete in the school?" Well, I won, and I diverted only half the money to the arts. I let the athletics department keep half. But Angela went on to be a movie star. In fact, back in '95, when she got recognized as a top black film actress in America, they brought me out for her debut on stage for one of her awards that she was receiving. And it was good to see her again. It was Angela Bassett, and she's a fine person.

MG: She was wonderful in *Sunshine State*.

VC: Wonderful person, yes. Some of the activities, well, I took karate. I worked my way up to a third degree, third belt. I studied boxing, wrestling, track, swimming, diving, scuba-diving, boating, went through all kinds of power squadron. I was an active member of the Sea Scouts. On the flip side of the coin, I was active in music, dance, theater, art, and involved in all kinds of nonprofits if it was a civic organization or environmental movement. Mom was in the south side of St. Pete working with faith-based organizations helping to feed and clothe and provide medical services for the needy. And my sisters and I were always actively engaged with Mom in those activities.

Or we were down on the beach in a picket line, swinging a sign, standing in front of trucks, or in a march, or knocking on doors, passing out literature with Dad. Because Dad, upon his retirement, became an activist, helped start 18 different civic groups in Pinellas County up and down the beaches. And it was just a busy but fun and active childhood. My parents didn't believe in sitting at home and watching TV. We were only allowed no more than two hours of TV a week, and no more than five minutes on the telephone and no more than a cumulative of 30 minutes in any given day. So telephone and TV were out of the question. It had to be activities that they felt were constructive.

MG: Where did you go to school?

VC: Well, in New Orleans—

MG: On Treasure Island and in Tampa.

VC: Oh, okay, because I was going to say I've been to so many different schools—

MG: Yeah, here in Florida. And I guess you would have arrived at the junior high school level here in Florida?

VC: Actually, no, I arrived in elementary school.

MG: Ok, okay.

VC: Yes, I went to Gulf Beach Elementary School on St. Pete Beach, and it's still there. In fact, I buried a little chest out in the playground with all the codes to our—I started a club in school, and people had to pay a membership fee to join the club, and that membership fee kept me in all the candy I could possibly eat as a kid. But I had the coolest club, and I enjoyed being the club leader, but I buried that little box with the codes out there in the playground. And one of these days, I'm going to go back and dig it up. But the Gulf Beach Elementary out there on Gulf Boulevard, Azalea Junior High School; they've torn down the building I was in and they built a new one. That's where I met Angela, and I was active in a variety of different clubs there. I ran track there. But that's where in, I think it was eighth grade, that I ran for student body treasurer.

MG: High school?

VC: High school? Well, I would have gone to Bogie², but it was the year that they had started integration, and there was a lot of riots and a lot of fights. And it just wasn't a very pleasant scene, so my parents decided they were going to put us in private schools. So I had a choice between Bishop Barry [Catholic High School], an all-male Catholic school, or Admiral Farragut [Academy], an all-male's military school. And I had crew cuts and flat tops all during the '60s when it wasn't cool, so I wasn't going to go through this again in the '70s. And I said, "Well, you know, Bishop Berry is going to go co-ed here," and my interest in girls was peaking at the time. And I figured, "I'll just tell them I want to go to the Catholic School." And they ended up putting my sister and I both over there, and it did turn into a co-ed school. But again, we didn't have air conditioning, and it was still hot. I remember having to bring two pairs of underclothes because I'd be drenched halfway through the school day. Kids don't know how lucky they have it today with the air conditioning in school because, oh my God, was it hot.

MG: In high school, what were you thinking about doing at the end of high school? What were your plans? Was college a foregone conclusion?

²"Bogie" is a nickname given by locals to Boca Ciega High School in Gulfport, Florida.

VC: Well, I had a physical challenge, and they didn't know what the problem was. I had to have a lot of tutors to help me with my reading, and they really didn't have the knowledge in those days. It was between my junior and senior year in high school that I went to Eckerd College for a summer program, and it was a combination program for advanced students, and there was a specialty course in there for those who had trouble with reading. And even though I always had high marks and was considered an advanced student, I had difficulty reading, and I'd have to have readers. And they diagnosed dyslexia, among an additional where I have a very narrow scope of acute focus. And the combination of both of those made it very difficult on me.

And the counselors at my school thought that it would be to my advantage to seek out a good trade or a profession that wouldn't involve reading because it was my Achilles heel. Not me. You know, at the time, I had started a business as part of my Junior Achievement activities, and we were making lots of money. And two of my friends actually dropped out of high school to run the company. My parents told me, "Forget it. You're not dropping out." So I had to rely on them to run it. I just took care of the books and my profits.

MG: What was the business?

VC: It started out as Victor's Vessel Valets. We took the good looking cheerleaders and the brawny muscle guys, and we put the guys on buffers cleaning boats, and the cheerleaders in their little bathing suits with a lot of bubbles, and we'd go behind the homes of wealthy people who had big yachts, and we would clean their boats right there. And a lot of the owners would like to watch because it was kind of fun watching everybody have fun cleaning the boats. And it turned out to be more of an aggressive company doing a lot of other things than just that because, you know, once you get your foot in the door, you start growing the business.

It became Gulf Coast Boat Cleaning. And we made some great money. It was fun at the time, but I wanted to—I had an uncle who was an attorney that I had a lot of respect for. He was head attorney, senior vice president of legal affairs for Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati, and both of his sons went into legal profession. And I had another cousin who I idolized that went into entertainment law. And I liked the idea of entertainment law. Because I looked at Jay and I saw what he was doing, and it was really neat, and it was cool. And I figured, with my background in the arts, this would be the direction to go. I got active in the debate team.

And I started winning awards and actually came in first place in the state in expository speaking. I went off to the nationals and came in second in one category, third in the

other. And I figured, “Well, you know, I’ll go on to trial law.” So I enrolled—I was at SPJC at the time because I wanted to test my eyes, rather than just go off to school. I had the grades to go off to a variety of excellent schools, and I did well on the entrance exam. But my mother read to me all my textbooks, and I was afraid to get too far and not have my reader. So I went to SPJC first to get acclimated, did well, and then transferred to USF. Now, I would’ve probably gone out of state.

I probably would’ve gone to Tulane, where my dad went to school. But I was engaged at the time, and my fiancé didn’t want me to leave. She wanted me to stay close. So USF was the closest university, and I could commute. And that was my original intention, was to go to USF where it was convenient, had a great reputation, and commute back and forth to my reader and to visit my fiancé, my girlfriend. She ended up not lasting more than another year. And my reader kept up with me, but it became very inconvenient for me to drive back and forth because it’s almost 50 miles one way. And time and gas. So what I would always do, we’d buy two sets of textbooks. And I would give Mom one set of the textbooks, and I would take the other.

And I bought a recorder, and I would record my lectures, and I would send her the recordings. And what mom would do is—at the time, we didn’t have computers—she would type my notes off the lecture tapes, and she would mail me my notes in manuscripts. And she would record my textbooks on tape and send me the tapes a chapter or two ahead. And I was always a chapter ahead of the class, and I would play the tapes, and I would read my notes. And consequently, I had a 4.0 average in my major, and I graduated with honors with two undergraduate degrees and a minor.

MG: What did you study? What were your majors?

VC: I started off with a double major, which was a preliminary to going to law school, in business and political science pre-law. Because they had a pre-law program in political science. And my uncle thought that I should tie the business in with it because he said I should go for an MBJD in entertainment law and that that would give me an advantage. I ended up taking a lot of classes in communication because I was on the debate team, and I loved it. So I took a semester off and went to work for an attorney in town as an intern. In fact, it was one of my professors that asked me to help him on a trial he had, a really difficult trial, and he picked two of his best students and asked us to work with him, and if we could get credit we would and if we couldn’t, we couldn’t.

But he said it would be an experience that would be incredibly valuable. He was right because, from that experience, I learned a lot about law. I learned a lot about the system. I learned a lot about our courts. I learned a lot about how an agency or a firm runs. And I also learned it wasn’t what I wanted to do. And here I was, two years into my—four years

—three years into my college education, and all of a sudden, boom. What I thought I wanted to do isn't really what I want to do. And the primary reason: my eyes. At the time, we didn't have computers, and I had to do all that research on my own, and it was agonizing, just absolutely agonizing. And I thought to myself, Do I really want to torture myself the rest of my life like this?

You know, I think if I would've been born 10 years later, it would've been simple because computers today do all that for you, but not back then. And so, I was a little bit confused at the time. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. And I started taking more and more classes in communications, I enjoyed it so much. And all of a sudden, I realize, you know, with all of the fun classes I've taken in the arts and the performing arts—because I took a lot of electives in that area—with all of the classes I have in political science—and I've already finished my business degree—why don't I just go ahead and stay on an extra two semesters and get a second degree in communications? And I had a professor that was a great advisor. And she—actually two of them, he and she. But both of them said the same thing.

They both said that I had a skill that weighed well in the area of communication, and that I should consider a career in either mass communication or in a field where communication was the focus. And I wasn't quite sure, well, what direction and how? Well, I was so involved in student organizations and activities, and I was an advocate and an activist on campus. I mean, I took what I grew up in and just brought it to school. If there was a problem, I weighed in on it and of course organized efforts to combat the problems. And one of the issues at the time was affordable, quality housing for students. Here we had a school with 27,000 students, only 2,200 beds on campus, and the quality of housing off campus was piss-poor.

And you had to get on waiting lists to get an apartment, and then you had to be bonded, so if you ever skipped out on your rent, they'd come sue you. It was ridiculous. And so, a group of us decided that we were going to create an off-campus housing union for students. We were going to unionize the students that lived off-campus so we could collectively bargain with landlords and with the university to improve quality of housing here as well. What spawned out of that was the creation of the off-campus housing agency here at USF in Student Government, and I was the first director for a couple of years. And legal aid, legal aid was basically, at the time, an attorney that came on campus once a week to talk about immigration issues and outside-school general, legal issues.

We advanced that office into an advocacy and a service where students could more collectively deal with their landlords. And I wanted to start—we wanted to provide a vehicle where students could actually discriminate against slumlords. And the way we could do that would be having a blacklisted publication where we would publish only the preferred properties. Well, the university attorneys wouldn't let us get involved in that. So

it had to be done privately. So I started a publishing company to publish an off-campus housing referral list. Well, it took money. So we came up with the idea that we should sell advertising.

When we met with people who would buy advertising, they had a little different idea of what they wanted to buy advertising at. So the whole thing changed dynamics and became an off-campus housing lifestyle publication with the preferred listings in it, and we sold a lot of advertising. And my partners that I worked with, other students were really good at their craft. And before we knew it, our clients wanted us to design ads and billboards and brochures. God, I remember that first cable spot that we did. And we just kind of looked at each other and said, “Man, we’ve got an agency. We’re making money. We’ve got an ad agency.” And then, bingo! That light went off. “Victor, you belong in advertising.” So I reincorporated the company as Metropolitan Communications Incorporated, brought on some talent from some other firms that already had experience working in agencies, and the rest is history.

MG: And you’re still a student at the time.

VC: Yes.

MG: How did you manage? How many years were you at USF, first of all?

VC: I did three years at SPJC and I did four years at USF. Seven years in college. I graduated with fulltime credits in three different undergraduate degrees.

MG: And you’re actively involved in a variety of student organizations. You’re running an ad agency. You’re requiring a little extra help with your schoolwork. Did that slow you down or speed you up?

VC: Well, I had sold out—I had two other businesses while I was at SPJC. I sold my interest in the boat cleaning company, and I went into a partnership with a guy in a condominium conversion company that we upstarted. I didn’t know anything about the business; he did, but he was undercapitalized. I had cash and business savvy, so I did that side of the business. I’d bid the jobs and kept the books and dealt with the contracts, and he ran the crews and actually did the labor. And from time to time, I was out there with him, so I learned both ends of the business. But when I came to USF, after my first year here, it was too hard to hold onto that.

So I sold my interest out of that. For about 10 years, I was a very active model, and I worked at a dance studio, so I was very—at the time for the '70s, contact dancing was very popular. So at the time, I took my background in a variety of dance disciplines and started developing dance steps in—I wouldn't say the hustle. My form was more of swing than hustle. But it was very popular during the disco era. And I started teaching at happy hours at all of the nightclubs. It was a great way to meet ladies, and we had a lot of fun. Did I sleep? Yeah, I got my four or five hours of sleep in. I think that's where I learned to survive on little sleep.

MG: Did you study?

VC: Did I study? I mean, all I did—I mean, I was busy every hour I was awake, and I studied a lot. I had set times that were for studying, and nothing infringed on that. And even today, when I look at my schedule, I have set hours in the morning where I just will not do anything other than my business. And I miss a lot of breakfasts, and I miss a lot of luncheons because I just won't do them during that period of time. That's for my personal business. Because if you don't set aside that time and be regimented about it, it'll get infringed upon it. Before you know it, you'll become unbalanced and you'll lose that homeostasis. And the same thing in school. You had to study, and that study time was booked.

MG: But you were also very, very active. I mean, you had mentioned the off-campus housing agency; you were involved in a variety of Greek organizations—

VC: Well, it was in my senior year that the lady I was dating, her best friend was active with a sorority and a fraternity, and they found out that I could auction and speak like an auctioneer. I would auction the pies for the ADPi's³, and I got to know some of the guys in the Sigma Chi fraternity. And I thought to myself, You know, the one thing missing in my college career is the true, on-campus, college spirit, because USF was a commuter school. And I thought, you know, looking back at my college experience, all my friends are off-campus. My closest friends aren't really schoolmates on campus. And I didn't want to leave the school without having that sense of tradition. And I figured one way of doing it is to join a fraternity. So I joined the Sigma Chi fraternity and added an extra year onto my schooling because I didn't want to leave it.

MG: What kinds of things did you do in the fraternity?

VC: Well, what they didn't tell me is that the fraternity was in financial trouble. So here I am, I get rushed. I'm an over-the-traditional-age "rushee" pledge, so I go through a

³Alpha Delta Pi.

shorter program because I'm really involved in debate team and student government and everything else, and they wanted me in there because they wanted a high profile student. And I wanted to get in there, so they cut the pledgship down by 70 percent, so I didn't have to go through all of the traditional stuff. And we had a small pledge class. There were only three of us. One of the guys failed the examination. His grades weren't of the average that they expected, so he didn't make it, so only two of us made it.

And all of a sudden, we're inducted, and we're a brother, and we find out they're on that last quarter of their twelve-month probation, and they have failed. And we're like, Man! We just went through all this to join an organization that's going to go under? Well, the guy—Chris Flag and I, who pledged, said, "That's it." So I became senior vice president, which runs the executive committee. Chris was my right arm. We restructured, reorganized, got them to re-elect officers and changed directions.

And within six months, the president had to step down because of his grades, and I stepped in as consul, which is president. And at the end of that year, we won—not only did we get off of probation, but we won the top award for improvement in the state out of the five chapters. And the following year, we won national. And today, I'm still active. I've been on the alumni board of the housing corps now for 22 years. I'm chairman of the housing corps today. And we finally have a house on campus and a great group of brothers. But, you know, that was an experience. I look back [and] I am so glad I did it because when you're on campus, and you're a student in Greek life, you're competitive with the others. But once you graduate, you're all brothers, and you're all sisters. And when I run into somebody in my profession, or even when I'm traveling, that's in a Greek organization, male or female, immediately there's a bond. And there's a friendship, and there's a conversation. And I've closed some big business deals because I was sitting across the table of a fraternity brother or a brother of a different fraternity, but we were Greek. And immediately we had a friendship and a trust and a bond.

MG: Student government as well and student government came first. What got you involved in student government?

VC: You know, my life's always been kind of backwards. I'm a guy that sits down and strategizes and plans, but it never seems to go the way I plan it. And it always seems to go—you know, I always thought, I'd go to school. I'd get a degree. I'd get a job, maybe branch out and start my own business after I'd learned some business somewhere, make some money. And then, in my golden years of retirement, get active in some local, public service activities. And my life turned around, the other way around. I ended up starting the business, making the money, then finishing the education, then going back and making more money, then getting elected to public office, and now looking to start a family as I'm approaching the ripe, old age of 50. (laughs)

MG: Were there things going on, on campus, that compelled you to become active in student government and other campus organizations? You mentioned issues with off-campus housing.

VC: Yes.

MG: But student government in particular.

VC: Oh, yeah. I got involved with student government not because I wanted to join an organization. It's because I was compelled to try and find a way to combat issues and problems that I saw on campus. Growing up in a family where Dad was such a strong leader and such a strong advocate and such a strong grassroots organizer, I knew that if you wanted to change something, you shouldn't talk about it, you should take action. And the first way of taking action is finding others who share the same concern and then organizing. And then coming together, identifying your strengths and your weaknesses. Build on your weaknesses, build on your strengths, and move forward.

And several of the issues that concerned me on campus, one of them was the quality—or lack of quality—of housing off campus and on campus. Both were bad. We needed to have something on campus and off campus to contend with those issues, hence student government. Everyone kept pointing their fingers. If you want to create an agency, and you want to help students, and you want to do a referral service, and you want to improve legal aid, then you need to focus on student government. So that's what encouraged the involvement there. In addition, I had such a love for the arts. And while it was my mother's dream for me to be a concert pianist, I didn't want a profession at what was my hobby and my passion.

And I took a lot of courses and hung out with a lot of creative, bohemian individuals, and I enjoyed the environment. But it wasn't profitable. And when I looked at USF, I saw, you know, here is a great university with great potential. I won't be graduating with honors, but, you know, I'm not going to be Phi Beta Kappa because it's not here. And why isn't it here? Because USF isn't liberal arts enough, and every time they came out here to accredit the school, the school failed because it wasn't liberal arts enough. And at the time, our president, John Lott Brown, came from the sciences side of school, and that's where all the money went.

So I persuaded the powers that be in student government to put me in positions and in places where I could be an outspoken voice, an advocate. I became the liberal arts lobbyist on behalf of student government. I was very effective. I wasn't afraid to stand up

to the administration. I wasn't afraid to speak my mind and stand my ground, so I started getting more and more responsibilities. Then the student body president at the time decided that there were other issues that were important that he needed a strong voice on. For an example, the Sun Dome⁴ was built, but it wasn't being used because the contractor built it wrong, and it was falling apart.

And the university president decided to take the monies to pay the legal fees out of the A&S⁵ dollars for the students. Wrong. A&S fees are meant for activities and services, not for paying legal fees. That needs to come out of the administrative budget. So I was appointed to deal with the issue. Well, what came out of that was the creation of the Sun Dome advisory board. And I got appointed to that. On the Sun Dome advisory board, we came up with a solution on how to settle the legal issue. But also, we came up with a solution on how to make the Sun Dome a profitable venture for the university.

And that's where the idea of making it a community forum or a community concert hall came about. And we looked at all kinds of designs for staging, portable staging, and actually picked one that, I think, cost half a million dollars to build at the time, which was a lot of money back then. I think it was '82. And that was interesting. I mean, I met a lot of interesting people in that position. I met Neil Young. In fact, I had to be his mother's companion for the evening. I got to sit next to her and hear all the stories about all his songs and what went into the writing of them and what things meant. It was really interesting, and I got to meet Neil afterwards. In fact, he offered me a ride down to Miami on his bus, but the timing wasn't such a good idea. I could've gotten in too much trouble. But that was an interesting thing.

Other areas? Probably the one I enjoyed the most was the Capital and Improvement Trust Fund task force. And that took a lot of maneuvering and political strategy. What we had to do is we were—the school—USF was getting a large chunk of money to do some capital improvements. And we had to prioritize how those dollars would be spent. The university president and the administration pretty much had a hidden agenda that we were just supposed to facilitate and rubber stamp. Wrong. We threw a monkey wrench in, and we turned the list upside down. Myself, along with a couple of others, ended up forging a coalition with the St. Pete campus, the Sarasota campus, and the Ft. Meyers campus, and each of us took our three top priorities. And each of us got one, two, three four, and then five, six, seven, eight. And the first one of each category is based on the size of your campus, the number of students you had.

So the first eight got reprioritized. And number one was the renovation of the University Center here on campus. It wasn't called the Marshall Center at the time; the university ended up naming it later. But that was like number 20 on the list, and we moved it up to

⁴The **Sun Dome** is a multi-purpose arena located on the University of South Florida's Tampa campus.

⁵Activities and Services.

number one, the renovation and the rebuilding of the Marshall Center. And we moved up from, like, number 10 or 11 to number 5, the new phase one and two of the fine arts rehearsal hall and exhibition center. So what did these things have in common? Well, the Marshall Center was the student center, and it was for students and building and forging and strengthening student services and activities and advocacies here at school.

So the purpose of that was to strengthen the students' voice and to focus on their needs. The fine arts rehearsal hall and exhibition center was to strengthen and encourage further development of the visual and performing arts, and that was quite a challenge. But I can now look back and see phase four, five, and six on both and feel a great deal of pride of knowing where it originated.

MG: You were involved in Mortar Board⁶.

VC: Yes.

MG: Tell me about Mortar Board. What was its goals? Why did it exist?

VC: I was treasurer of Mortar Board and treasurer of ODK⁷. I was a member of all the top honor societies here on campus, and my grades were very good, and my leadership was very strong. ODK is an organization where, at the time, the two top honors societies were ODK and Mortar Board. And Mortar Board was only for those graduating seniors. You had to be a graduating senior to get into Mortar Board. That's your last year, or two semesters, of school. And it's a very scholastic-based organization. ODK is scholastic but very leadership focused.

And I got involved in that one in my junior year, and we had a lot of fundraising activities, a lot of functions and things. We were—the students that were—I guess you could say, we were the ones that had strong grades, strong leadership, strong involvement, lots of spirit. Kind of the ideal model of what a university would want to have a student be. So they made sure that we were very visible. And for me, as a student, that was good because, again, I met a lot of movers and shakers outside the university, and I made a lot of friends and contacts that, later in years, became valuable contacts.

In fact, at the time, there was young guy that was an attorney in the office here at USF, Steve Wenzel. He was working under the vice president of student affairs, and he was the

⁶Mortar Board is a national honors society that recognizes college seniors around the country for their achievements in scholarship, leadership, and service.

⁷ODK stands for Omicron Delta Kappa, a national leadership honors society for college students, faculty, staff, administrators and alumni.

appointed advisor for ODK. And he and I had a nice friendship. He was a little older guy, but he was a smart attorney. And even today, twenty-something-odd years later, he's like one of the top labor law attorneys in town, and we still are in contact. And he has given me a great deal of good advice over the years.

And that was a friendship that was developed during those times. You know, I look back, and I think about my experience as a student, that's some of the best time of my life. I met some of the best people that I'm still friends with today. I had some great experiences. I recommend getting involved in student organizations; you must do that. If for no other reason, to spread your wings and practice flying because, here in the university environment, you can jump out of that nest and try to fly and fall.

But you can get back up and try it again with very little damage. Once you're out in the real world, you may not be able to get back up again, and you can suffer some severe damage. But organizations give you the ability to try things, to experiment, to learn things from practical and hands-on experience, develop relationships that last a lifetime, and to really, really be a part of the legacy and the spirit of a major university.

MG: Were there some folks on campus that mentored you? You mentioned a couple of professors in communications.

VC: Oh, yes. Yes.

MG: Are there some people who you think back on, whether they be professors, administrators—

VC: Marsha Vanderford Doyle, which was my debate coach and one of my professors and counselors in the Department of Communications, is on the top of that list. The attorney that was in Webster that was over in the School of Business. I mean, I can go down a list: Ms. Marshall who ran the Marshall Center, Chuck Hewitt who was dean of student affairs, Dan Walbolt who was vice president of student affairs. I mean, as an activist, I was constantly engaged with these people.

And while we may be at the odds of an issue, there was an admirable respect for one another. And as a student, I learned a lot from these people. As an adult, I continue to learn from them. And even today, I still hear from them. But I've got a long list. Dick Bowers, who recently retired, who—you know, vice dean and head of development in the College of Business, incredible, incredible individual. One of the most well-connected people I know in the City of Tampa, can that man raise money. (laughs)

MG: Did students and administration have a cooperative relationship, adversarial relationship, in between?

VC: Things were different. You know, my student rebel-rousing remained, even after I graduated. I ran 10 student body elections, never lost a one. And the reason I did that is we set a five-year plan in motion when I graduated, and I wanted to see that five-year plan carried out. So for five years after I graduated, I ran. I came back as a professional advertising agency and ran student body races. I would hand-pick candidates and run them. What they had to have is the skill to do the job, the talent to do the job, and the independent spirit to stand up to the powers to be. And they needed to agree to maintain the focus on the five-year agenda. They could add to it; they just couldn't subtract from it. And that way, we were able to see the Marshall Center and the fine arts rehearsal hall and student priorities here on campus remain a priority. See, it's through consistency that things are accomplished. And a lot of times, on a campus, students are only here for four years. They may be only involved for two of those four years, and they leave. So the administration, the faculty, and the staff have an advantage of nothing more than time. And I wasn't going to let that time overturn the work that we had done when I was here.

MG: What year did you graduate?

VC: Which time? (laughs)

MG: You were here four years as a USF student.

VC: Yes, yes. I graduated '83 and '84.

MG: And, in '83, what were your plans, career wise? You had started the advertising agency.

VC: You know, I wanted to do three years in the Peace Corps. I wanted to go to China or Africa. I love African culture and art, and I collect it, and I have quite a collection. In fact, maybe one day, it may end up here at the library. Everyone else is scared of it. (laughs) And, like my mother, I had that public service spirit. I wanted to either go to one of those two countries as a teacher and advisor. But I had started a business, and I was making more money than I ever dreamed. And I just couldn't leave it. I had people who were depending on me. I had employees.

We were growing so fast. And I was very conservative. I saved a lot of that money. So when the bottom fell out of my industry and a lot of my colleagues went under and several of my clients went under, I was able to sustain. In fact, I ended up paying off a number of my clients' debts, which normally agencies don't do. They just fold up, let the debt disappear and then reorganize under a new name. I didn't do that. Just out of honor and respect for my vendors. And that ended up paying off tenfold because, years later, those people came through for me when I needed help.

And one thing my mother and my father always taught me, you know, money isn't important; a quality of life is what's important. Money will come if you're good at what you do. And if you are fair with people, people will always be fair with you. And I've always lived by that philosophy, and it has always paid tenfold in dividends. And every dollar I'd saved, I ended up giving a dollar away. But, you know, I was still a dollar ahead. And that's all right.

MG: At what point were you thinking about political office? You had been active as a student here. Did that get you thinking of the possibility of local or state politics?

VC: No. I remember when Mary Fig, who was then running for the state house, came by student government, and I didn't know what party affiliation she was; I didn't think to ask her because I wasn't involved in politics, not outside of school. And I was so impressed because she came back like three times to solicit our votes and talk us into voting, and wanted to make sure we were registered. And I said, "You know, this woman is persistent." And she was fundraising. I always carry a two-dollar bill in my pocket as kind of a lucky charm. So I pulled out one of the two two-dollar bills that I had, and I gave it to her.

And I said, "Here, if you need to deposit it, deposit it. But my suggestion is, it's been good to me. You keep it." And that was about my extent of politics. In '92 now, I had long hair, and I had lots of hair. And I had curly hair because in '84, I dated a woman that was a hair stylist, and she permed my hair. And she liked it long and curly, so I just kept doing it. And I did it for 18 years, so most people didn't even know I had straight hair. But I had long, curly hair, and I had it pulled back, and I had an earring. Typical artist.

You know, I worked in a creative environment running an ad agency with creative people, and I had started a civic group back in 1980: the off-campus housing association. Remember I had mentioned that I tried to unionize the students off campus? Well, we formed an organization, and I kept it going, and we had about 2,000 members. The conditions of the university area got so poor that, by '89, it was just unbearable. This became the second largest economically depressed community in the State of Florida.

And when the SNLs went under, and the RTC took over the properties, 70 percent of the rental property—which makes up 90 percent of the property within the surrounding communities of this campus—went into receivership and closed up. And the area became one great big dark hole. There were no lights; there was nobody living here; it was just abandoned, boarded up properties. And as the RTC auctioned them off, and absentee landlords turned them into 50-dollar a week rentals, the City of Tampa at the time was going through crime crisis. The new mayor started a quad squad, and she started an effort to tear down projects or tear down houses that were abandoned where there was illicit activity going on.

MG: Sandy Friedman?

VC: Yes. And what ended up happening is it grossly displaced the crime element from Tampa to this community. And when the crime element moved in, that even further pushed people away. And it was along the same time that New Tampa was born, and bond money through the Reagan administration was created. And insurance companies and banks were building large apartment communities with this cheap bond money that was for restricted incomes, and students were moving North to the nicer properties. So the west side of campus turned into a large ghetto.

And it was just unbearable. I mean, here we are fighting to try and improve quality of life. Okay, the quality of apartments improved for students because we were able to lift the moratoriums and get new construction north. What we didn't count on was the abandonment of properties to the West and the exodus of the criminal and low-income element from the City of Tampa. And it was more than one organization could handle. And there were like six or seven or eight different groups functioning out there, and we all decided to merge in 2000 under one organization, and we took the name the USF Area Community Civic Association. And we merged into that.

MG: In 2000 or—?

VC: In 2000. And I became president. I went from president of the off-campus housing association, for ten years, to president of the USF Area Community Civic Association, of which I am still president today. So I'm still president after 24 years of the communities that surround the university. But we have over 4,000 members. Back in '92, it was a reapportionment year, where all of our elected officials were up for reelection. And there were all new seats drawn and new people running for office. And to give you an example, the sheriff's seat was open. There was going to be a sheriff elected. The state's attorney was open; there was going to be a new state's attorney. The public defender was open;

there was going to be a new public defender. The county commission, there was like three of the seven seats open, and the one for this district was going to be a new county commissioner. There was an aggressive congressional race going on for this congressional seat. The house seat was open. The senate seat, there was an aggressive race going on. I mean, everything was in a turmoil, and it was a year when every politician found themselves actively engaged in campaigning.

Well, our civic group was concerned that we weren't getting attention because the neighborhood was low-income, and it was transient. So the politicians, regardless of their party affiliation, just weren't listening, and we needed somebody to listen. So an old man took his hat off at our board of directors table, and 18 names went into that hat. He shook it up, and he said a prayer over it. And he had to pull a name out, and that person had to run for office. And the name that got pulled out was mine.

And I had two options. I could run for a county commission seat, but there were already eight or nine people running for it. And I could run for a house seat, and there were two people running for it. So I went out, and I talked to all the people who were supposedly "politicos in the know" to get some advice. And their advice is, well, you're a registered republican. And that was the first thing that they were a little bit confused at because here I am, a civic activist, and I had a ponytail and an earring. And I'd been an activist on campus. They said, "Hm, that's a little unusual for a republican, okay."

MG: When did you become a registered republican?

VC: When I turned 18. I registered republican at 18 because I wanted to vote in the primaries, and that was the only primary that they had on the beach at that time. Pinellas County was a republican county, and the Beaches was all republican. And my mother changed parties because she got tired of not being able to vote in primaries. So, to me, at the time I had to register to vote, there were good and bad people on both sides, but I wanted to vote in primaries, and I believed in free enterprise. And I thought, Well, republicans' basic philosophy is free enterprise. But, at the time, I had to make the decision in two weeks because it was close to what they call qualifying.

And I talked to some people that were elected, some people that weren't elected. I talked to a political consultant, Mary Repper, who was the top political consultant in Tampa Bay, who I knew personally through the advertising industry. And they all said the same thing: if you run for a county commission seat, you're a well-known activist, and when you look at the numbers, a republican could win it; if you run for the house seat, no republican had ever been elected in those precincts at any position in government, from president of the United States down to county commission.

And that the house seat would involve a lot of money, and a lot of political party involvement, and a lot of connections, and would just be a challenge that you really wouldn't be able to do on your own. So I went back to my organization, and I said, "Look, my business is going well now. I'm making money. I don't really have a lot of time for this. But I think we ought to package the neighborhood and label it, and let me sell that package. And let me shame the elected officials who are running for reelection for allowing it to happen. And let me get those who are running for those open seats to make it their priority. We will lose, but let's lose gracefully because, as an advertising professional, I don't want the embarrassment of a wallop. And for the lost time and lost dollars, because I won't be focusing on my business, I'll just take the materials of our campaign, put them in my portfolio, and go back and solicit candidates next year, and make up the difference off of retainers for their work. And I will have experience in this field, this part of my field," which I hadn't at that point. So the name Suitcase City was developed. We created our paper dragon to slay. And the image and the identity was formulated, which wasn't hard to do. But you had to put it in words. And I went on the campaign trail.

I picked to run in the house seat. Now, it was only 33 percent my party affiliation, over 40 percent minority. It was an extremely young, female, single voting constituency. The average voter was a 41-year-old, pro-choice, Democratic woman. The two Democrats that were running—if I would've run on the Democratic ticket, I would've had a primary and would've got my butt handed to me. If I ran on the Republican ticket, I would've gone straight to the general election, and I would've been able to survive the entire campaign season. So that was a no-brainer. The consultant said, "You know you're going to lose, but let's try to lose gracefully," and we all agreed.

I had one thing my opponents didn't have and that was manpower and a—not just a message. Unlike most elected officials—they all have messages—I had a solution. And I was selling the solution. Not to get me elected. I was selling it because I wanted those who would get elected to use it. And the media found that so enlightening and so enjoyable that I got so much earned media, it wasn't even funny. And I got endorsed by both papers. At the time, the *St. Petersburg Times* had never endorsed a Republican. They wrote a glowing endorsement.

And they published my endorsements first. They published them early, early on before they published anybody else's, so that they made me a player. Well, I couldn't get the Republican Party to take me serious until the papers started endorsing. And they decided to throw my name in a poll. And they found that I had fifty percent of the vote, and they were shocked because I hadn't spent any money. My opponents were very powerful, very well-financed, very prominent people.

And the woman was the lobbyist for the Moffitt Cancer Center, and she was the administrative assistant to the former house speaker, Lee Moffitt, for 19 years. And I believe [she] had dated or was close friends with the president of the largest, most powerful lobbying organization, Associated Industries. And [she] had connections and lots of money. Her opponent, democratic opponent, was Bob Buckhorn, who was Mayor Sandy Friedman's right hand man. He had a lot of connections.

He was the former lobbyist for the homebuilder's association. But he was the conservative democrat; she was the moderate-to-liberal democrat, and she was a woman, and she was young; we knew that she would win the primary. And when she won the primary and became my opponent, we just figured she was going to win. And it was a good election. She was a lady, an honorable person, and we had a very clean race. And it was just unbelievable. I mean, I had almost 400 people walking the streets.

It was funny because I had—we identified, okay, of my volunteers, who were democrats. Well, they would wear "Victor Crist for State House" T-shirts, and then they would put the Clinton-Gore badges on. And we sent them to all of the super-voter Democrat households. And then they would talk about why they were a democrat supporting Victor and my message. And then we sent those who were independents to all the independent households with the Perot badges on, and they talked about why they were an independent supporting Victor. And then, we put the ones who were republicans with the republican badges on, sent them to republican households, and they talked about why they were supporting Victor. And we passed out a lot of palm cards.

Finally, the party came around when they did that poll, two weeks before the election. And we argued. They wanted to come in and run my race. I said no. They wanted to get partisan. I said no. I said, "If you want me to win, then you hand me the check, and you let me, as an advertising professional, maximize the impact." So I went over to St. Petersburg, and I said to this other guy over there—Charlie Crist, who was running—I said, "I see you've raised about 600,000 dollars. Are you into any TV? What's your message? Okay. Very good." So I came back, and I tailored my direct mail campaign so that you had Crist on crime, Crist on education, Crist on community development, and Crist on families—oh, and Crist on the environment.

Tape 1 Ends; Tape 2 Begins

MG: This is Mark Greenberg, director of the Florida Studies Center and Special Collections at the University of South Florida libraries. March 12th, 2004, continuing an interview with Senator Victor Crist. Senator, when we left the last tape, you were just mentioning rivalry, or at least an election campaign involving Charlie Crist and some campaigning strategies.

VC: Charlie was running for the state senate, and he had raised a lot of money, and he was going on TV. And we found out, through him and his people, what their messages were going to be and asked them to conveniently just focus on Crist. And we conveniently just focused on Crist. So I was able to more than quadruple my impact by having mailers that were laced with a similar type image of what his was laced as. And his was laced with a similar kind as mine.

And I believe, as an advertising professional, it's a smart move because it's maximizing on message and media. But at no time did we ever dream that we'd win. And that night, when everyone found out how they fared, we didn't. I didn't find out until 12:00 o'clock the next day, and it was after they counted the absentee votes. And I had won by 900 and something-odd votes, almost 1,000 votes. And I was shocked, shocked. Along with everybody else, shocked.

MG: Did Charlie win his race?

VC: Oh, yeah, Charlie won his race overwhelmingly. And I went up to the legislature, and I remember that first night, before I was getting sworn in—I was on the fourteenth floor of the hotel. I don't remember what kind of hotel it was then. It's, I think, a Peach Tree now, but it's the tower downtown. I couldn't sleep. I kept pacing the floor, and it was like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, and I'm staring out the window at the capitol. And I'm thinking, Oh my God, what did I get myself into? I don't know these people. I don't know this process, oh my God. And I called my mother.

And she said, "Honey, you've been down this road before." She goes, "It's just new faces and a new environment, but the same thing. Just go with your gut feeling, and you'll fare well because you always have." And I got in. And the first two years were rough. I felt like a fish out of water because I wasn't warmly received by either party. And I figured, "Okay, I'm going to learn this system. I'm going to figure out who is willing to take me under their wing. But I need a big dog that's been in this process, that's not in it now, that needs something I can help him with."

And I found a former house speaker, a democrat, here in Tampa, that was on a board with me over at MOSI. And MOSI had an issue, and he was the point person for government relations for MOSI—the layperson on the board because he was a former house speaker and a powerful attorney. And here I was, the legislator on the board at MOSI, and regardless of the fact that I was a republican and he was a democrat, we had a job to do.

MG: Is this Terrell?

VC: Terrell Sessums. And he was former chancellor of the board of regents. And I said, “You’re going to need to teach me how to work this process.” And I’ll tell you, I called him all hours of the day, every day of the week. Question on this; question on that; how do I do this? He had his network of friends, this network of people, and he’d put me in contact with them. And it helped me to, one, develop friendships across the aisle. Two, it helped me to learn the process through the back doors. And three, it helped me to develop the confidence I needed.

And from that, I reached across to the senate. I developed relationships with Curt Kaiser, John Grant, people who I had some things in common with in issues, or in region, or in friends. And I actually developed friends first in the senate and in the cabinet before I did, actually, in the house. And it was after my first term that I really started to develop friendships in the house. And what I realized early on is, this is a process about relationships. It’s a process about honor and respect. And if you can develop relationships, and they’re formed on honor and respect, regardless of party affiliations, you will get the help you need when you need it.

MG: Did your time at USF, your experiences at USF, help prepare you for your legislative career?

VC: Absolutely.

MG: How so?

VC: Well, I mean, there were always issues to advocate here. There are always dragons to slay here. I always loved speaking to students and to faculty; I’ve got a great relationship with the faculty-staff unions here on campus. Because, when I got elected, I was more in line and lock step as an advocate and activist with the unions and students than I was with the original administration. And it took time for the administration and I to develop the relationship that we have today because I’d always been on the other side. And the experiences on how to work an issue, how to organize, how to build coalitions, how to walk into a room, debate your heart out, shake hands, walk away, and go have lunch with that person and be friends.

Developing the skill of forensic communication, persuasion. It isn’t necessarily being the most articulate orator—in fact, the slickest orator really isn’t your most credible persuader. The art of forensic communication is being able to help someone else see it the way you see it. And that may take a variety of techniques, and not necessarily the slick ones. USF is a wonderful venue for a person to not only learn the book smarts; you can

learn that at any university. USF is a great venue to be able to apply those book smarts because you have so much, on campus and off campus and a collaboration of both, to experiment and be a part of. A lot of your universities are so four-walled. And you're so isolated. Here at USF, I didn't really feel that nor did I really experience that because it was such a strong commuter school that the involvement of on-campus and off-campus were always well connected.

MG: As a legislator, were there issues in addition to the neighborhoods, Suitcase City, that you advocated for? I want to think more broadly. First about your house experiences and now your senate experiences, of where you see USF's place, and how your relationship as a student here has affected issues that you've brought in front of your colleagues, first in the house and now in the senate, to advocate for USF?

VC: Well, I'm a firm believer in a holistic approach to education, and what that means is being exposed and having the opportunity to be exposed to everything that you could possibly need to be exposed to legally and to have an understanding of. I think lecturers, having people come in from all over the world or from many different disciplines or many different perspectives—even if you disagree with where they're coming from and what they're advocating. To be able to be there, and listen, and engage, and think, and study, and confront is the essence of a good university and building a strong mind. And, as a legislator, I've always advocated for that open door, open mind policy with our universities.

I think that we need to stay focused on optimal learning environments. And I think what happens is, in government, you're interfacing with the administrators more than you are the faculty, the staff, and the students, and sometimes the administration has different priorities. And from my experiences on campus, I always look beyond that. It frustrates the lobbyists, especially here on campus. I won't mention names, but I can tell you there have been many a time where they've come into my office just pulling their hair out because I've gone around them. But I don't want the message after it's been cleaned and purged and reformatted. I want the information directly from the source.

MG: There have been issues in this university, in particular the relationship between the Tampa and the St. Petersburg campus, that have played out in the interests and needs of legislators and their constituents. Powerful influences in Pinellas County advocating on behalf of the St. Pete campus. Where do you see yourself in that? But, probably more importantly, where do you see USF and the vision of USF with its multiple campuses?

VC: Well, you know, they call this University of South Florida, but we're not South, we're Central. So that's kind of a misnomer there. But the reason it was called South Florida is because, at the time, we were the southernmost university. And, over the years,

populations—especially in the beach communities—were just exploding, and it was difficult to get here. So USF, for their junior and senior classes and for some graduate classes, were developing satellites in St. Petersburg, in Ft. Meyers, in Sarasota, so that people could have access to education. Great idea.

As these communities have continued to grow, instead of hundreds of thousands of people, now there's millions of people. The need for larger space and more curriculum has become a demand. And the policy has always been that the undergraduate, freshman and sophomore, and the graduate and post-graduate be taught at the Tampa campus. And that's always been kind of a tug and pull. I'm not an academic. To weigh in on that at this point, you know, I couldn't say. But what I can say is that we need to stay focused on making sure that quality, affordable, accessible education is available.

And that it be made available in a way where people can do it around their schedules. I know that I weighed in, early on, in the legislature, in support of a law school for Florida A&M, and I was the only republican on that side of the argument. And I ended up being requested to write an article for the law review—I'm not a lawyer—on that issue. And the bottom line, the reason I was supporting it was because I went to Florida A&M, and I let them work with me. I did a study and found out that the bulk of their alumni is in Tampa Bay. I found out that the second largest black community in Florida was in Tampa Bay.

And I thought if they were willing to locate their law school in Tampa, especially in the area known as Suitcase City, it would be an economic development engine for that community. If they were willing to tie it in to a combined JDMBA program with USF, it could be a law school that USF could capitalize on. They had started the School of Architecture here that way. It wasn't USF's School of Architecture at the time; it was Florida A&M's School of Architecture here at USF.

And I figured, you know, it would just be a matter of time before USF could have the law school. That effort failed that year, but again, it's looking for ways to expand the opportunities for education. My greatest influence on campus? I can look around and see a lot of capital projects. I've been fortunate enough to really learn the appropriations process, and I've played a major role in helping to bring money home for the school. And that's been difficult because FSU and UF have always been at the forefront of bringing the money home. And I've had to use a lot of those back door strategies to help facilitate that.

MG: Is it changing, in terms of the way in which USF is perceived among legislators in Tallahassee? Do you have more USF colleagues in the senate or in the house?

VC: Yes, there are more USF. The older this university becomes and the more of its graduates that become influential in the community and in the political arena, the more powerful this university becomes. You know, the quality of education at USF and FSU and UF are all excellent. The facilities are all excellent. The differences are the ages of the institutions and where their alumni are. And USF is becoming of age. And because of that, they're beginning to retain more resources and get more attention. Is it a respected institution? Yes. Is it a force to be reckoned with in the process? Absolutely.

The president that we have here now is very visible, and very aggressive, and very active. The research that's done here is international. I'm on the board of directors of the Jim Walter Institute here on campus. I'm also on the board of directors of the FAMU Institute on Urban Policy and Economic Development because my interest in the legislature has been redevelopment of blighted communities and reduction of crime. And these two institutions are working to help cultivate improvements in low-income areas. We just formed a collaboration between USF, FAMU, and UF. And that partnership is headquartered here in Tampa, and we're working to help build capacity in community organizations that are focusing on redevelopment, not just here in Tampa but throughout the state.

MG: Are there goals you have of this university? Things that you would like to do for USF?

VC: Oh, yes.

MG: While you're in Tallahassee?

VC: Absolutely. And we've been laying that groundwork for years. Things take time. I've worked hard and have been at the forefront of raising over 150 million dollars for capital improvements and programming surrounding the Tampa campus at USF. My legacy, once I'm gone, will probably be what I was able to do around the campus to strengthen this university. Because a university is as good as its professors and its students, but professors and students won't go to a university that's in the middle of a crime-infested, depressed area. And the communities were headed in that direction, and we've been able to turn that around. And a couple of projects I'm working on now that are very important. Let's go back to my beginnings.

Liberal arts lobbyist in Phi Beta Kappa. I've been working, for years, with the school of —both the School of Visual and Performing Arts as well as other liberal arts programs and curriculums on campus. We've helped to develop collaborations. Right now, there is a project that is a collaboration between the University of South Florida, McGill

University in Canada, which is one of the top 10 research institutions in North America, and the University Area Community Development Corporation, which is a nonprofit I helped to create in the community, and Bay Area U Services.

And it's called Prodigy. Where there's 1,800 children in Prodigy, about 900 of them are sent by the courts. It's an intervention program, and what it is, is it's a program where we're not only modifying deviant juvenile behaviors, we're using the visual and performing arts to do that. And we're using it as a laboratory, as a test to "validate" the premise that arts education improves and enhances learning skills. Students who are actively engaged in the arts, whether it's their major or their minor or their extracurricular activity, do better in school, stay in school longer, go further in their educations, and are more successful in their afterlives. McGill is on a 20-year research project.

They're getting money from the Canadian Endowment for the Arts, the Seagram's Foundation, among others. I helped initiate that partnership between them and USF. And the CDC and BAYS [Bay Area Youth Services]. There's going to be the first publishing of articles this summer. They have a joint agreement in the sharing of the collaborative intellectual material, which is very difficult. Most universities don't collaborate like that. That is a forerunner of what I am expecting to see become a state and national trend, and it originated here, and USF will have, and McGill will have the copyrights and the residuals from that. We're on our fourth year.

The New School of Music, which is a 68-million-dollar project, is my baby. And I've been working, for the last three years, to get that money in place and to get that school established and started. And I hope to have that done before my political tenure is over. There's been several expansions to the Moffitt Center, and there are still expansions to go. I've been working with Moffitt to focus on the development of the 23 acres adjacent to the VA, so that they can co-locate into that area. And we're developing a main street down 22nd [Street], which would be the western border of it.

Currently, we have the New University Area Community Center complex, which has been a longtime project I've worked on. And there are 2,000 people a day that use it, and over 14,000 different people a month. There's a 28-acre park; there's a new visual and performing arts elementary magnet school called Muller Elementary; we have three after-school programs that we sponsor that the kids are actively engaged in the arts programming at our developmental center and at Muller. There's the new health and human services trades academy that will be opening this summer, co-located on the same campus.

There's a new library going in, a new daycare going in, a new health and a human service center under construction. I've been working in line with Alex Sink for the development

of a Junior Achievement headquarters in Hillsborough County. And you know, I mentioned earlier, Junior Achievement first got me interested in free enterprise when I was in school in Pinellas County. So I had a whole passionate part in my heart for that when I heard that they were trying to get established in Hillsborough and that Alex was chairing the fundraising.

I said, "Look, I'll match you dollar for dollar if you locate it on our campus." Because I know Alex can raise money, number one. Number two, all the business and industry that supports and gets involved with Junior Achievement and their activities would now be brought into the community, into our redevelopment area, and into what we were doing, so we could share those resources. But I bring this up because it's all within walking distance to USF. And USF is actively engaged at different levels of involvement with that health and human service trade school, with that visual and performing arts elementary school, with the health center, with the developmental center.

One project I'm working on right now, which I hope will come to fruition within the next 24 months, is the expansion of John E. Byrd Alzheimer's Center. The research institute is going on campus, but it needs to have satellite clinics and centers for application of applied research. And the first of such, I am working on establishing in the university neighborhood west of Suitcase City as part of our developmental campus. It will be built in conjunction and proxemics to the health and human service trades academy, the Bowers-Whitley School. So that kids who go in there, they get their high school diplomas, they also get a certification in the field of health or human services: optician, EMT, EMS, nurse's assistant, and specialties in the field of geriatrics.

And they could be doing their internships in the environment with the applied research developed here at USF through the Alzheimer's Center. I'm good at bringing people to the table. I'm good at finding resources, but I'm probably the best at forging collaboratives. And through our discussion today, you hear about a lot of different things. There's one underlying theme, and what it is, is partnerships. It's willing to make friends and to work with and define common ground with all kinds of people from all, many disciplines and leaving the politics and the differences aside and focusing on a common goal and a common objective.

And where did I learn that? My parents. Where was that reinforced? My family upbringing. Where did I develop the greater skills? In school. Where was I able to test it and practice it through trial and error, more or less do like an apprenticeship? Here at USF. And now I'm using it to achieve and develop and cultivate things for my constituency, the people of the State of Florida, and my public service.

MG: If you could look in your crystal ball, five years or ten years out, where would you like to see USF in five or ten years?

VC: Five or ten years? Whew. I think the University of South Florida will be, in the next 10 or 20 years—excuse me, I've got to get a drink of water here. My allergies, when I get back from Tallahassee (drinking water). In 10 to 20 years, USF will be one of the top research institutions in North America. We're already an excellent research institution, but I mean, first class, top-notch, top ten.

I really believe that will happen. We have an urban setting that a lot of other institutions don't have. That gives us a strong base outside of campus to forge collaborations. I think that, over the next five years, you're going to see some unique collaborations form between the private sector and the university. I think you're going to see some unique outcomes from those forged collaboratives, and I think the research that will be developed and the application of that research is what's going to make USF international.

MG: Where's Victor Crist going to be in 5 or 10 or 15 years?

VC: Well, that's easy to answer. I'm going to get married, and I'm going to start a family, and I'm going to be a dad that's going to be able to focus on my children. You know, my life ended up upside-down. I ended up building my career and developing my resources first. But what that's afforded me now is an opportunity and a knowledge and an experience that I can bring home and share with my children. And I want to be the very best dad that a man could ever expect to be. And I want to, hopefully, cultivate the love for humanity and the desire to achieve in my children that I have had an opportunity to have. And I hope, when it's my day that I leave this earth, that my legacy lives on, not through a building or a program, but through my children and their children.

MG: Thank you, senator.

End of interview