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Dr. Gary Mormino: Today is March 18, 1986, and it's my pleasure to be talking to Mr. William Poe in his office at Poe & Associates in downtown Tampa, overlooking the Hillsborough River. Mr. Poe, could we begin by—could you tell me something about your background in Tampa, your family's background, where it all began?

William Poe: Well, my mother and father came down to Tampa from Bowling Green, Kentucky in the 1920s. My father joined my uncle, who was in the road building business. My mother and father had just gotten married and they came to Tampa and then they had three children, and I was the third child. I have a brother and a sister that are five years and three years older than I am. I was born in the [Great] Depression in 1931.

My father was not well educated; he was a farmer. He ran away from home, I think, when he was about fourteen, fifteen years old, and I think he went to about the fifth grade. He always provided very well for us, but the fact was that he was not terribly well educated.

I grew up in Seminole Heights, and went to—

GM: What street were you born [on]?

WP: I was born—I don't know where I was when I was born, but the street—I lived on Osmond [Street] when I was probably one or two years old, and then I moved to Curtis Street, which was a block away. I was two blocks from Broward Grammar School, and that's really where my first memories were. And I grew up in the Broward [school] area on Curtis, and then we moved to—up near Nebraska [Avenue] and Hillsborough [Avenue] on Miami Avenue.

I went to Seminole [Elementary School] in the sixth grade, and then went to Memorial Junior High School, and then went to Hillsborough High School. When I was in the—I

guess just after I graduated high school, my mother and father moved from Miami about eight blocks away to the Lakewood Manor area, just above Nebraska. And my mother still lives there, and my father has passed away in 1965.

GM: Curiously, three of the living ex-mayors, Julian Lane,¹ Dick Greco² and yourself, were all born in Seminole Heights. Coincidence, or is this the nursery of mayors?

WP: (laughs) Well, I think it's probably not a coincidence, because one would—I'm not sure about Seminole, but if you used Hillsborough High School, you would find that more than 50 percent of the people went to Hillsborough High School. So, the odds would be that somebody from Hillsborough High School in my age group that was a mayor would have gone from Hillsborough High School.

Incidentally, Dick Greco and I were a couple years apart; he was a couple years younger than I was. He was in the same area near Hillsborough and Nebraska, but on the—he was just south of Hillsborough and I was just north of Hillsborough, so we were about six blocks apart. We knew each other, but we didn't play together because the big street cut between us.

GM: You mean the interstate [Interstate-275]?

WP: (laughs) No.

GM: No, obviously not the interstate, then, but Nebraska—

WP: No, just Hillsborough Avenue.

GM: —or Hillsborough.

WP: Hillsborough and Nebraska.

GM: The reason I was saying interstate is—Miami [Avenue], of course, is now cut off by the interstate.

WP: That's correct, it's right by there. Incidentally, I still go to the church at Nebraska, Seminole Heights Baptist Church.

GM: When you grew up, did Tampa strike you as a Southern town? This is always one of the perennial questions. Was Tampa then a Southern town? How would you—?

¹Lane was mayor of Tampa from 1959 to 1963.

²Greco was mayor of Tampa from 1967 to 1974, when he resigned. He was later reelected in 1995, and served until 2003.

WP: I don't think I had any particular sensitivity to what Tampa was when I was growing up except it was a wonderful place to live, from my perspective, and I did not think of it as a Southern or Northern town. Hillsborough High School, I think, and Memorial, were such a melting pot. We were segregated, but there was a great mixture of ethnic backgrounds other than black, and we really didn't think about it. At least I didn't.

GM: Yeah. I mean, it always struck me Tampa was a city of very distinct neighborhoods: Hyde Park, Ybor City, West Tampa, Seminole Heights. Certainly there was some fluidity, but in many ways blacks lived in their own bailiwick, a very rigid social system in that sense. What was it like at Hillsborough High? What percentage of the class would you say was Latins, at that time?

WP: What was interesting about it—I guess I never even thought about it. I think I—looking backwards, I think probably it was 20 or 30 percent. But you know, my best friends were Johnny Coniglio and Auggie Guarisco and Tommy Moore, and so forth. So, I really didn't make a relationship in that kind of an area. But you're right, we were structured. When I grew up, the neighborhood was everything. You probably had your social and recreational activities within six blocks of your home. It happened to be that schools were within six blocks of my home.

GM: Did you have any reflections then upon the politics, the era you were born in? Of course [D.B.] McKay³, [Robert] Chancey,⁴ you were a little too young for them, but Curtis Hixon⁵ you would have grown up, probably, remembering. I think it's—in hindsight, most people would agree that Tampa was very a corrupt city in the thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s]. *Bolita*⁶—it was an open city.

WP: Well, I really, again, was not sensitive to that. I was sensitive to the fact that I did go to—the cleaner came by and he took a quarter, and I didn't know what that was for, for a ticket. Or you went to—I still remember up on Florida Avenue and Osborne [Street], there was a Suwannee Drugstore and there was a slot machine in it, when I was very young kid. Unfortunately, we didn't have any money to put in the slot machine—or fortunately.

GM: For purpose of the tape, I assume that was not a laundry ticket you were referring to from the cleaner, right (laughs)

³Donald Brenham McKay served two terms as mayor of Tampa, from 1910 to 1920 and from 1928 to 1931.

⁴Robert Chancey was mayor of Tampa from 1931 to 1943. He also served as County Solicitor before becoming mayor.

⁵Curtis Hixon was mayor of Tampa from 1943 to 1956. He also served on the Tampa City Council and the Hillsborough County Commission.

⁶A type of lottery game.

WP: No. No, it was a *bolita* ticket, I assume. I'm not—it was a numbers ticket. I'm not sure what. And you're right, I do remember Chancey, but just as a name, really. The first mayor that I really remember was Curtis Hixon, and at that time I was out of college, so I would have known him. But, no, I guess I was sheltered in the sense that I was in my neighborhood, my family environment, and my school, and that was really, I guess, my life and my friends. It was very much neighborhood-oriented, school-oriented, and I guess to some extent church-oriented.

GM: And upon graduation from high school?

WP: I went to Duke University in—

GM: When?

WP: I graduated in forty-nine [1949].

GM: [I'm a University of North Carolina] Chapel Hill grad, by the way.

WP: Oh. (laughs)

GM: So we shan't talk basketball during this interview.

WP: We won't talk anything, then. (laughs)

GM: But how—

WP: Walk far across old Durham's ditches.⁷ (laughs)

GM: That's a leap across classes, certainly. Someone growing up in a very modest middle-class area—I mean, Duke [is] a very prestigious school. How could you go to Duke?

WP: Well—

GM: Why did you go to Duke?

WP: Well, my mother was a graduate of [Western Kentucky State] Teachers College in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and she had been a teacher for a couple of years before she married my father. So, she had—I mentioned my father did not have an education. My mother did, and she influenced my brother and sister and I in regards to education. So my sister went to Wesleyan [College] in Macon, Georgia; my brother went to University of

⁷GM and WP are referring to the notorious UNC-Duke rivalry, which is particularly strong in men's basketball. The two universities are approximately eight miles apart.

Florida; and then I went to Duke. I made the choice, I really don't recall. I wanted to go to Northwestern [University] to be in speech and then to be a sports commentator.

I ended up with a friend of mine, Donald Castor, who's now a judge here. We went up to Duke together as roommates. There were about ten or eleven of us, only I think two were from Tampa⁸ and the rest were from Plant [High School]. In those days, it was thought that Plant had the money and Hillsborough was the moderate- to low-income group. I think probably it was just Donald, my friend, had received an ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] scholarship and I had not, and my father could afford to pay for me to go. I guess it was just the adventure, never going out of town. I said, "Well, this is a wonderful school, and I'll try it."

That experiment didn't really work that well, in the sense that I got homesick. I left Duke after a year and came back to the University of Florida. I always put the caveat that I made the dean's list, and I was—I did well at Duke, but I was homesick. And Duke, as you know—Carolina in the winter is very gray and rainy. And so, I guess I was just homesick and decided I should come back to the University of Florida, which I did. And I went on to Florida and graduated.

GM: And majoring in?

WP: I majored in business with a minor in insurance.

GM: So you would have graduated, what, in fifty-three [1953]?

WP: Fifty-three [1953].

GM: Fifty-three [1953]. Was the world your oyster then? I mean, with a college degree, where did you figure you'd wind up in 1953? What were your ambitions?

WP: Well, I always had good luck, and in high school I was president of my student body and an athlete and all that sort of thing, and honors society, so forth. Then I got to college, and I—in politics I was (laughs) not very effective, in the sense that I never lost a—I had only lost one election since I was about in the fifth grade, and I probably won about twenty. And I lost in college every one that I tried, except for my fraternity, where I was elected president. But in the campus, I ran several times.

But in the fifties [1950s], early fifties [1950s], I guess—again, maybe I was just sheltered or something, but I really didn't have any particular goals or objectives, except to get out of school. Once I had to, I enjoyed it while I was there, and I really didn't want to leave, but I graduated. I guess I then just turned and I was interested in a young lady I dated for a long period of time, and I was interested in ultimately getting married. And then, I guess I had a bent towards wanting to get into a business and do the sort of things of

⁸WP is referring to Hillsborough High School.

raising a family and playing tennis and just having a nice time. I really didn't have any great lofty goals, politically or any other way.

GM: How did Poe & Associates originate?

WP: Well, in the last two years of college (coughs), I, in the summers, worked for an insurance agency—(coughs) excuse me. I was a file clerk during the summer, and I enjoyed it. I had minored in insurance on the advice of my uncle, who was a rather large businessman with lots of assets, and I guess he felt that he could help me in the insurance business. So, I got into that study, and then I went to the file clerk at Mynatt's [Insurance Agency] in the summer. And then when I got out, I was in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps.] and I went in the service for two years. I had about six months in between where I worked at an insurance agency, same agency.

Then I came back in late fifty-five [1955], and I decided that, instead of starting again with a sales career with the agency and Mr. [James] Mynatt, that I would try it on my own. So, I got my family, my uncle and cousins, my brother and father and myself—I was about twenty-three—and I said, "I got five or six thousand dollars. If y'all give me some, I'll put together twenty thousand dollars and I'll try to start a business, and that will be the seed capital. I'll be the only one that works in the company, but then I'll try and build it from there." And I think I started it at—I created a salary level of a hundred dollars a week for myself, and hoped that I could last a year and work it out so that my business would grow.

GM: Interesting. This was in the early fifties [1950s]?

WP: This was in late fifty-five [1955]; it actually started in December, fifty-five [1955].

GM: Before we get to your political inclinations, kind of a—just a word association game, a brief comment on some of your predecessors. Curtis Hixon?

WP: Small man.

GM: Physically or intellectually?

WP: No, no. No, physically. That always struck me. I guess I thought that—for some reason, I associated big people with politics. (laughs)

GM: Yeah.

WP: And he was a small man. Quality. I thought that, from my eyes coming out of college, that he was a—he happened to be a good friend and political ally with Mr. Mynatt, the gentleman that I worked for for those couple of summers. So I knew him in that sense, and you know, it was a very positive relationship. I thought he was a very fine gentleman.

GM: What—just in—

WP: But I did not know him in a personal relationship.

GM: In retrospect, you know the [*Tampa*] *Tribune* a few years ago had some revelations of one of its former associates, Danny Alvarez, a policeman said. He said in effect that he was the bag man for Curtis Hixon, that virtually every election was tainted with *bolita* money through the forties [1940s] and maybe even early fifties [1950s]. Any reaction?

WP: No. You know, I don't know whether they're making reference to contributions for elections or whether we're talking about the taking of money, as a bribe or otherwise. I don't have any knowledge of it. I know that there were sources of campaign money that seemed to be, perhaps, from my way of thinking might be tainted. But I really don't know anything about what occurred during that period of time.

GM: Hixon dies in fifty-five [1955], fifty-six [1956]. J.L. Young [is] temporarily—interim mayor.⁹ Nick Nuccio defeats J. L. Young.¹⁰ Your reflection upon Nick Nuccio?

WP: On Nick?

GM: Mm-hm.

WP: Oh, well, he and I were—that was my first entry into politics, and I became very active in his campaign, particularly through a friend of mine who now works with my company, Tom McMullen. I got active in his campaign. He was always very interested in young adults that were businessmen and so forth, and he enjoyed their company—the JCs [Junior Chamber International]—and that's how I got involved. I worked hard for Nick, and we are still very, very, very close, good friends, I think. And he was kind of a—in politics, he was kind of a father figure for me.

GM: That's interesting. I suspect most people would not have thought that. I mean, you—in style and everything, Nick seems a world apart from the modern politics of highly managed media campaigns today. I mean, he—

WP: Well—

GM: A relatively uneducated person, blunt, known for malaprops.

⁹Junie Lee Young, Jr. was acting mayor of Tampa in 1956 after Curtis Hixon died.

¹⁰Nick Nuccio served two terms as mayor of Tampa, from 1956 to 1959 and from 1963 to 1967. He also served on the Tampa City Council and the Hillsborough County Commission.

WP: Well, from my perspective, he was the mayor. He was the one that I was first close to and worked with. And in a social sense, he was very kind to me, and he would invite me over—and others—to his home for parties. He seemed to enjoy it. I enjoyed him. I guess part of it was that he was a celebrity type, from my eyes, but I think we had a true friendship. I think he is very blunt and colorful, but I think that's a good trait. So, I enjoyed it, and I always felt that I didn't have to talk up, or he was not talking down to me, and so we could be friends. Not a straight-laced relationship, but I would kid him, he'd kid me.

He also was one to delegate authority to people very quickly and allow them to do what they did best, and then if they didn't do well, he wouldn't delegate again. But he tested people and delegated authority very, very well. But when I say that, I'm now talking about in our relationship. He might appoint me to do a job for him. I would try to do it for him, and then he would, I guess, review it, then ask me to do it again. So over a period of time, we had a rather frequent relationship, and so we became very good friends.

GM: One of the quote, unquote "controversies" of his administrations was right out the window there, the purchase of all that land along the river. "The great railroad robbery," it was called. What do you think, in retrospect?

WP: Oh, I think it's probably the finest act that has occurred in the downtown, and therefore, I think you must probably spread that throughout the whole county. I think that when he did that for whatever reason, he created in the long term the rebirth of a major city in downtown. Without it, you just—and I think that he had great vision, but I don't think he would articulate that. I don't think that he would necessarily get credit for doing it, because he would probably dress it up in such a way that it would be, from a PR [public relations] standpoint, it wasn't a very positive thing. He got negative publicity at the time, which is ridiculous, but nevertheless, he—right now, what you see in downtown happening, that was one of the very basic foundations that allowed us to go forward.

GM: Why, do you know, did the [*Tampa*] *Tribune* so bitterly oppose him?

WP: I really wouldn't know from the *Tribune's* standpoint. My observation of what they were doing was that they did not feel that he was an appropriate representative in his style and manner to be mayor of a somewhat large city in the South, and that probably they felt that he—I would think that there was a putdown based on his lack of education and his lack of being articulate, and the fact that he was a strong stubborn person that quickly made decisions, and if it happened not to fall within the purview of what the so-called establishment then, so be it. And he didn't have the—although, I think he had great respect for people who he felt were good thinkers, and businesspeople and editors. I think he had great respect for them individually, but I think he had some distain for some of them in a group, because they were unfair from his perspective, I think, as to what he was doing, even though he did wise—he was very wise within his office. He didn't get credit for being, because of the way he proposed himself in front of them

GM: Julian Lane?

WP: I didn't know Julian. Actually, I ran against—I worked against Julian for Nick, when Nick beat Julian after Julian had been in. I know Julian now, and I think he was a—I think he is a very kind and wise and nice person. And I think—I just have a lot of—I guess I look afterwards, not knowing Nick—knowing Nick and not knowing Julian, and having been on Nick's side, I probably I have some reservations now, knowing Julian as well as I did, that I had to work against such a nice guy. However, I did it for a very nice guy and a good friend of mine, Nick Nuccio.

GM: Dick Greco?

WP: Well, I know Dick—I knew Dick very, very well, and of course I worked against Dick in politics because he ran against Nick Nuccio.

GM: Did you think at that time that Greco would beat Nuccio?

WP: Oh, no.

GM: Seriously?

WP: No, but of course I was—my views were very slanted towards Nick.

GM: Yeah.

WP: And Dickie was a young kid that was trying to do against a guy that I respected very greatly. Now, I like Dick and we were friends—and Dana, his wife. In high school, we were all—although not terribly close, but you get to be close, I think, in those days in high school if you just—if you knew each other and you liked each other, you were close whether you saw each other once a week or so forth. I like Dick very much, but no, I thought he didn't have a chance against Nick. But he did.

GM: Do you think Greco was kind of the new symbol of Tampa, in effect? Here's how—

WP: Sure.

GM: —I view this.

WP: Exactly.

GM: I think in many ways you've hit a key word, style. Here's a city that was about to move into the new South, that wanted to be like Atlanta. Nick Nuccio was a relic: he was old Ybor City, smoked cigars, was not terribly articulate. Dick Greco was the new ambassador.

WP: But you got to put in, “And he loved kids.” See, Nick always gave a gift to a kid, and he had them write down his name and he sent them a little letter.

GM: Lowry Park, the petting zoo.

WP: Sidewalks, the zoo—

GM: Benches, free tonsillectomies. No, you’re right, he’s an extraordinary figure. But do you think Dick Greco was kind of the new mayor in the effect of business type? In effect, he’s really a manager, administrator, rather than a personal embodiment as was Nick Nuccio.

WP: Well, I agreed with you up till we got to the end, (GM laughs) and I don’t agree that Dick was necessarily a manager kind of figure.

GM: Public perception of.

WP: But the perception—but he was the new. And I think part of it was that both were Latin, Spanish or Italian, and that Nick was the old and was not very articulate and so forth. And here there was another Latin, and he was coming in and he was good-looking and articulate and educated. He was much the opposite of what people saw of Nick. So it was a great shift, I think, from the old to the new, and I think that there was a style of—a great style difference, so I think that did make a change, and I think that’s why probably the media switched over to and helped Dick towards the end. It allowed him to be elected. And so, I think you’re right. And then, Dick did a tremendous job, I think. Dick Greco, young man, and he brought that off, I think, in the public area. So, I think it did create a contrast.

GM: What about in terms of substance? I mean, obviously the bloom on Greco has kind of faded in recent years, and many people say there was more style than substance.

WP: Well, I think those things are all relative. First of all, I think that mayors as individuals, their talent, for some reason, is multiplied and exaggerated once they get—all of a sudden they do better than they should. Normally they don’t have the talents, but they get the job done, and they perform much better than people would anticipate.

Now, I thought Nuccio was a doer. I thought he made his decisions and got on down the street. He was no nonsense in his decision process. He says, “Let’s do it,” and then he told people that if they got in the way, then he said, “Get out of the way, we’re going to do it.” And he got it done. And I think that was needed and necessary, and I think it created a part of the government which was a responsive government—not necessarily in the great planning process, but in the day-to-day picking up of garbage and fixing streets and so forth, we did the job.

Then Dickie—I think it was a style, but you see, I think that there’s an awful lot of value and talent in being a PR person. And so, I don’t think it’s just style, I think he had quality. I think he had—perhaps his quality as a manager and as a day-to-day public official probably—his ultimate output may not have been as good as some of the others, but his PR [public relations], his work on the shaping the image of Tampa. And then, Dick followed Nick, and I’m sure Julian and I—when I start with Nick, it’s just because of my knowledge of the people. But see, Nick, I think, was—I saw him in a sense of being a liberal person in race—and in those days, that was difficult—and then I saw him—then I saw Greco come in, and I think he did a tremendous job in creating relationships with the races. That brought us into the twentieth century.

And so, when you say—if you are going to evaluate Greco, I think that many of the things he stood for—that he did an excellent job. He was good in race. He also brought in some people that, indirectly at least, he has to take credit for—he started the planning process, particularly in the fields of utilities, water and sewer—Dale Twachtmann, so that we got far out ahead of most counties and most cities in the South. And Dick started that.

So, I think it’s style. I think that probably Greco will probably be known more because of his style, the change that occurred and so forth, rather than the quality of his product. But I think that he was a nice person, and I think that his thoughts were reasonably pure when it got to race and trying to get things for the city. Politically, he was not corrupt, and so forth. So, all of that, I think—if you start with the process that a person is honest and he’s mayor, from that point on, it’s uphill. I mean, it’s—

GM: Hillsborough County, that’s (laughs) not a lot sometimes.

WP: Well, yeah. But you know, that’s a shame, because gee, you could go through, and our city government has just been—you know. Julian—I’m talking about when Julian started—Nick, Dick, I think myself, Martinez, if we were honest at that point, then you’re a leg up, and from then on, you can then use your talents. And Dick, I think, was not a real political type person at all. Nick was much more oriented towards the ward system. Dick wasn’t; he’s a populist. He’d think that he’d win because he smiles good and talks good, and he did. And I followed his pattern, in the sense that I was not oriented very much to politics.

GM: Would you have been mayor had Greco served out his second term?

WP: No.

GM: The timing was there for you?

WP: No. I would have—mine was a quick judgment, because circumstances were such and all. I was told about, I think, eight hours before the mayor resigned that he was going to resign. And then there was some fairly heavy friendship pressure that would indicate—

GM: Through business associates? Friends?

WP: Mostly high school friends that happened to be in business.

GM: So it happened very quickly, then, that you—

WP: They came in and talked to me. There were three people that came in and said—they were close to Mayor Greco—and they said, “How ’bout you running? We don’t know who’s going to run. How ’bout you thinking about it?” And I said, “No,” and I laughed about it, and then I said, “Well, maybe.” I’m in that forty category where I need to—lifestyle change and stuff. I got to thinking about it, and talked to the family and so forth, and decided that that might be something I’d really like to do.

So, it was very quick. If I had had to plan it for a year, my business would not have allowed me to do it. If I could—what in effect I did was dedicate six months and said, “If I can become mayor in six months, then that’s wonderful. But if I can’t, I’m just not that interested that I would sacrifice a year’s time and money and so forth.” You must also understand at that time, it didn’t take any money. I used twenty thousand dollars as the—there was a cap, and so all I could spend, I think, was either twenty or twenty-five thousand in the first primary, and a combination, I think, of forty thousand dollars in the whole election. And I spent that in the first election; the second election I spent twenty thousand dollars.

GM: In retrospect, I find it sobering, perhaps, that, were there a 185 vote change, Joe Kotvas would have been mayor. (laughs) Any reaction to that?

WP: Well, no. I hear so much, (laughs) comments of that. However, I’m not sure that if Joe had been mayor, he might have risen above the situation and might have done a good job. I don’t think he—

GM: You’re a kind man.

WP: Well, I just don’t think he would have done nearly as good a job as I did. I’m, I guess, conceited in that sense. But, yeah, Joe was not my cup of tea. We were almost opposites. He would almost say whatever’s necessary, and I would go almost the other way and be non-political. So, that’s one of the reasons I almost lost. The only reason I won is because I had great number of friends. I had money, personally, but I couldn’t spend it, so that I couldn’t buy the election in any sense of buying it through advertising. So, I had to do it through personal contact, and I’m not—charismatic, or whatever you call it.

GM: Charismatic.

WP: Charismatic. And so, here I was in a quick period of time trying to, without any public name, trying to do it. But what did happen was I had a hundred to two hundred

friends that would really go out and work for me. And it doesn't take that much time, but maybe four or five hours a week, and then right at the end probably eight or ten hours a week. They would knock on doors and do the kind of things that you hear about but not done very much. Most of them were moderate to higher income folks with suits on and this that and the other, and they were knocking on doors. That all stemmed from friendship and family and goes back to high school days and so forth.

And so all that occurred, and all of a sudden I turned around and Joe Kotvas and I were in a—most people also forget that Bob Martinez was in that election;¹¹ he ran third, and there were three councilman in that one, I think, and so forth. So, there were seven of us that ran. But I think about Joe—but of course, you know, I didn't know Joe. I didn't particularly like him, but I guess that was because that I knew that he was saying things that were close to not the truth, that he would do this and he would do that. Joe was a great one for telling every different group what he would do differently for them. You just couldn't do that—I couldn't—and then come into the office and do it the way I think was expected of me.

GM: To clear the record, what was the exact story with the famous nude photograph? Was this a factor in the election?

WP: I don't think so. See, that was the second election. The first election was the most difficult. That was seven people, and it got down to Kotvas and Kotvas came in first and I came in second. I think that he was maybe a thousand [votes] ahead of me, and then I think Martinez was three thousand behind me. It was something like eleven, ten, and seven, and then it worked itself down to about two. And so then he and I went out and we finished about three—I beat him by about three hundred votes, but when we finished without the write-ins, I think I was something like eighty votes up. So, we had to go into it. Then I got more of the write-ins, so I got—so, that was kind of the situation.

Now, the second time around I had been in for a year, so I had the benefit of being in office and being the mayor. And incidentally, I didn't campaign, except after hours, which I guess was my style. I think that was probably my own personal decision, rather than that it was a good thing to do publicly. I didn't enjoy it that much, and so I did it after hours. But anyway, Kotvas was the only person of the seven or anybody else that wanted to come back at me. I had done a good job, I thought, and I didn't have too many negatives except perhaps firefighters.

So, I went in, and I was going to win, and I did win 63 or 64 percent, I think, in that one. So, the nude photos didn't mean anything to me. All they did was cause me a lot of consternation, because I didn't have anything to do with them. As a result, I would not—I was shown a photo about four months—no, probably in December, after the election in September. Four or five months afterwards I was shown the photo that purported to be

¹¹Robert Martinez was mayor of Tampa from 1979 to 1986, when he resigned to run for governor of Florida. Martinez was elected governor in 1987 and served until 1991.

Joe Kotvas. It was a pose that one would not particularly like to be seen in, normally, and it was porno [pornographic] in nature. And it was a younger person than I knew, so to speak.

I looked at it for about three or four seconds. I did not know—it was interesting. They had it in a bag, and they pulled it up from the feet up, so I didn't know who it was till they pulled it all. And there was—and I looked. I told the person that—it was a person in authority, and I said, “Where did you get that?” He told me that it had been found in a trunk by a gay person—what he believed to be a gay person—in a police search, and in going through the magazine the detectives had found this picture.

So, I told him, “I'll tell you what you'll do. Take it and put it in a vault. I don't ever want to see it again, and I don't want you to ever show it to anybody again, and I do not want it—take the people who may know there is such a picture and see if you can swear them to confidentiality, and let's forget it.” And he—the other party had suggested to me, he says, “Now you won't ever have to worry about Joe ever running against you again.” And I just looked, I think with disdain, at him. He was enthusiastic and I was much the opposite, and I said, “Put it away.” So, I never discussed it again.

The newspapers found out about it in some fashion, and they came at me pretty hard with lots of pressure and gave me all kinds of questions. “Do you know? Have you seen this picture?” I said, “No comment,” all the way through. From my perspective, ultimately it was a negative rather than a positive. I just didn't want to get in the mud. I didn't have any reason to, and it's not my normal nature. And very frankly, I don't like controversy to begin with, and I didn't need that to beat Joe. I'd beaten him the first time; I could sure beat him, being in the mayor's office and so forth, the second time and him not being in office at all. Really, it was not thought to be a threat to begin with.

So, that really had no effect on it, except that it created enough interest, I guess, that ultimately the election had some color that otherwise it probably wouldn't have, because it was a pretty cut and dried election, much like the second time Martinez ran.¹² There just wasn't much to it.

GM: Right. Moving to a loftier subject—

WP: (laughs) Yeah.

GM: What would you like to be remembered for? What should you be remembered for thirty, fifty, a hundred years from now?

WP: Well, those are two different questions.

GM: (laughs)

¹²This was the 1979 election for mayor, in which Martinez defeated Poe.

WP: I would like to be thought of as being the best mayor that there ever was in the City of Tampa. That's what I tried to do. That was my ultimate motive if I was going to get into that game, and I wanted to use whatever talents I had just as hard as I could so that the public would know that I had done an outstanding job. That's a generalization as to what I should be. I should be that I had created—I think I should be thought of as, if I'm being honest about it, from my own conscious standpoint, that I re-organized city government, put it on what is called a businesslike basis. But I got into—I organized it so it was efficiently operated. It had run down a little bit over a period of time, particularly—there was a year in between Greco and myself and so forth. But Dick in the last year or so probably didn't pay a lot of attention.

So, I reorganized it, because we had two governments going. We had the model city in related to federal and we had the City of Tampa, and they were almost separate. I merged the two and reorganized them and made super-department heads, instilled planning. And then, I think, we got going on a good—I was, I think, a very good operating officer. Maybe not an executive officer, but I was a good operating officer. I got it going.

And secondly, I created the rebirth of downtown Tampa. That was done through the Quad Block and a great number of people, but if you—you know, when you single it out, there were things that occurred that I was responsible for.¹³ I think I got the catalyst going and got downtown moving.

I should be thought of as a builder, in the sense that I had a great deal of physical projects that were built during my administration. We did not blow our horns an awful lot, but we did a great deal in a physical sense. So I think we regenerated the mundane infrastructure kind of activities, sewer and water and things like that. We restructured them and regenerated that, so that for another fifty years we can go forward. I think that's basically—and I think also, I guess I gave a confidence in the community that perhaps psychologically was needed. We were coming out of Watergate and so forth. I think I had the centennial—

GM: Bicentennial.

WP: I think that was a great event. I think that's hard for people to understand how much that meant to our whole country, because you know, it sounds kind of like when you go and pass that look backwards, it looks like hoopla and this, that and the other. It meant a great deal. It did to me. I got a new fresh start of confidence in our country and in our government, in our local government. I think that I added to that. And I think, then, we were kind of behind Watergate and we were out again into a fresh—

¹³The Quad Block was a construction project during the 1970s, which redeveloped several blocks of land in downtown Tampa.

I said when I came into office that what I was interested in, I was hopeful that I could create an atmosphere in our city that would allow people to have the opportunity to be happy. And I think that's one of the few wise things I probably said, but I think that was a very true thing. That's what I was trying to do. I couldn't make people be happy, but I think I could create an environment where people could make their own choices and hopefully be happy.

I did a lot of things I think that were hidden: housing. I think within the race area I was outstanding, but not so much—my administration was, not so much for me, but I had Alton White and I had [C.] Blythe Andrews, a lot of folks, who did a lot of work physically—parks and other things for what is thought to be the black community, so to speak. I think that was very positive. And that was a fluke, which is, I think, psychologically interesting, in that I didn't even know any blacks in a friendship way. And yet, because I had a friendship with Alton White and put him in my office and gave him the authority and responsibility as if he was the mayor—that had not been done in that sense, and all of the sudden I became somewhat of a hero in the black community. All of a sudden, I could do no wrong. Having been encumbered—I came from the establishment—and all of a sudden it was a great mix. I could go—anything I wanted to do positively, and nobody would criticize me hard.

GM: Is it because of him that you're mayor? You know, because he threw his support to you? Had he thrown support to Kotvas, would he have been mayor?

WP: Yes.

GM: What of—

WP: I don't look at that way.

GM: Right, right.

WP: And he doesn't look at it that way, but if you want to just look at numbers, if I had not split the black community and gotten 50 percent—I started out with 3 percent, and I went and I got a majority. If I hadn't gotten those votes, I was not—but that would also be true of Davis Islands and Beach Park, so I don't look at it in that light, and I did not. And incidentally, I made no deal with Alton White. A lot of people think that. I didn't even know Alton, and we got to be friends on the campaign.

The day after he got beat, he called me and he says, "We had a meeting last night at my campaign. My people—" and they had worked—it was first time they thought they really had a shot winning a black mayor. And he says, "I told them they could do whatever they want to do, but I was going with Bill Poe. So, partner, whatever you want me to do, you go out." And I said, "Alton, I don't know how to campaign in those areas." And he says, "Don't worry about it. I'll do it," and I didn't see him any more for a week. There was only three weeks, and I saw him a couple times during that, though we didn't talk about

anything about what he would or wouldn't do or I wouldn't do for him, or anything like that. And he had a lot of—I think he had some debts. Nothing was discussed. I won.

What was interesting about that conclusion, perhaps, to you—what was interesting to me was that on the day of the—on the evening of the election, we had poll watchers. Each poll called in to my home. My brother took the numbers, and about eight o'clock he told me that I was about 400 behind. There were only six precincts to go. I told my wife, I said, "Honey, we tried, didn't we?" It was almost a relief. I said, "I guess I should be very sad, but I'm not. I tried hard, and I'm so lucky that I've got a business and everything. Let's go to the International Inn and tell the people, thank them for all their hard work and I appreciate it." So, we got in the car, took the little baby I had—Charlie—and we went to the car.

What I didn't know—I could not win those six precincts because they were the wrong precincts, the ones that were out. There was not a lot of votes out there, but whatever they were I had lost them before and Kotvas had won, so I knew that I was down. So when I walked to the International Inn, the TV [reporter] says, "Congratulations." And I said, "That's a funny way to greet me. Same to you, fella." (laughs) I said, "Why in the world would you congratulate me?" and he says, "Because you're eighty votes ahead." and I said, "No, no." What happened was that most all of those six, four of the six, were black precincts. And I didn't realize what Alton had done, and Blythe and all the others.

GM: Interesting, yeah.

WP: So, I think I got 55 percent, that was what I needed, or 60 percent, and that was all I needed, see. That brought me even, and then I was eighty ahead. But I had no knowledge that could ever happen, 'cause I didn't know what Alton was doing out there and I didn't know anybody was helping. But I do know that I had got killed in four of those six precincts. Anyways, that's another story.

GM: That's interesting.

WP: But just to give you a perspective. So when I went in I gave a speech, and I said, "I have absolutely no idea whether I've won or lost."

GM: (laughs) Yeah.

WP: And I said, "That's a really a nice thing, because I can thank you without knowing where I am. I really want to do that."

GM: Any regrets? Will historians fifty years from now see a flaw in your administration? I mean, if you were to critically examine yourself?

WP: No, no. Not from my standpoint. My regret is that I wasn't—I'm not better at PR. I would like from my own ego standpoint. But also, I think I did a straightforward, honest,

good job. As a result I would like for people to know not necessarily “Bill Poe” but that “The mayor did that,” so that it would be looked up to an example for to others. Of course, I think all the mayors have been—that I know—have been excellent.

But I should have had a press fellow that put out nice stuff about me. I would have been smarter if I had not been—but it’s still my style. I handled most every controversy myself, I didn’t put it in—I don’t delegate it to staff. I guess I had that Nuccio approach in the sense that if a reporter asked me, I told him. They came in any time they wanted to.

end of interview

[Transcriber’s Note: The audio ends abruptly.]