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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project  
Oral History Program  
Florida Studies Center  
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[Transcriber's Note: The following is an introduction statement about the Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project.]

**Mark I. Greenberg:** Hello, I'm Mark Greenberg, Director of the Special and Digital Collections Department and the Florida Studies Center in the USF Libraries. It's my great pleasure to introduce Otis R. Anthony, a Tampa native and USF graduate whose passionate commitment to the history of African Americans in Florida has led to the creation of the Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project.

**Otis R. Anthony:** As you are aware, I'm a graduate of the University of South Florida, and one of my degrees is in Africana studies. It was there that I became deeply excited about the history of the African American community, not only in Tampa and in Florida, but around the world. I took that curiosity, I suppose, into the community when I became a member of the staff of the Greater Tampa Urban League, which is a very important organization, as a matter of fact. As we get into the history, we will learn how important that organization is.

But I was working for the Urban League, and they were beginning to get short on funds. I was approached by one of the museum directors for the Hillsborough County Museum, who said, "We got this great idea for a project on the history of African Americans in Tampa and Florida. Would you be interested in working with it?" And I was so excited. It was, for me, so consistent with my own philosophy. It was consistent with my studies. And it was the kind of thing—I was young, I was energetic, and it was the kind of thing that I wanted to do, because it gave me an opportunity at a very, very early age to make a difference. And so, I quickly accepted, and eventually organized a staff of about seven people.

We first got started at the Hillsborough County Museum, and this was in the late, late seventies [1970s]. As a student, when I started on this project—again, I have to reflect

back on the fact that as a student, I was inspired by what I learned here at the University of South Florida. I was really anxious to go into the community and apply what I learned. Now, I have to say that what I learned intellectually ran into a wall (laughs) of reality when I got into the community.

But we had a staff of seven. We had four people who were interviewers, who actually went out into the community, every sector of the African American community here in Tampa, and did oral interviews with various members of the African American community. Some of these members were in their nineties, some were in their eighties or their seventies, but all of them had a very rich and incredible story to tell about their experiences growing up in Tampa, working in Tampa, and trying to make a life for themselves in Tampa. Many of them migrated to this area as a result of work.

For example, many of the longshoremen that we interviewed in this project were men who worked on the Mississippi River. They worked in New Orleans, and they worked their ways down to Tampa and they became a part of this project. So, you'll see a lot of that, how the demand for work really helped people to migrate to this area we call Tampa now. And you'll see that it is a vast variety of people. There are doctors and lawyers and maids and servants and laborers and postmen—you know, just a great array of people involved with this project.

We were also activists, and I should say that as activists, we believed that knowing the history and being able to teach the history to people in the community when we were organizing was a real weapon in our hands when we were out in the community trying to get the community to respond to issues. So the history became part of us in that sense. It was a reflection of our commitment to make a difference.

We were trying to assess what we had done with the project. We talked about the fact that the children and the grandchildren that will have the opportunity to read their grandmothers' history and their grandfathers' history. This history will serve as an inspiration to them, to make a difference in their own lives and make a difference in their own community. We thought if it had that kind of impact, then that was saying a lot about the power of history and what it means to a community and means to a people. And I knew if I got the university involved, we could possibly preserve the tapes, and preserve the details in the project.

Dr. Susan Greenbaum, whom I knew personally because she had been in the community—she had been active in Afro-Cuban affairs, and we knew her to have a great deal of integrity towards minority issues. That is what made the difference and the connection for us. So, we made sure that we got all of these materials to her and her students, and I was so happy to see that she not only preserved them, but she put them on different tapes, and that is why we are here today.

We were aware of Special Collections, and we knew that you had the Robert Saunders papers, and some other really important and precious material that came out of the African American community. So, when we heard that Dr. Greenbaum and the

Anthropology Department was working with the USF Library and Special Collections, we knew that this material, this history of African Americans in Tampa and Florida, had found a proper home.

*end of interview*