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Yael Greenberg (YG): Today is Wednesday, July 16th, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni in order to commemorate 50 years of university history. Today, we will be interviewing Dr. Preston Mercer, who came to USF Lakeland in 1999 as the vice president and CEO of the University of South Florida Lakeland campus. Good afternoon.

Leonard Preston Mercer (LM): Good afternoon.

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

LM: Okay. I'd been at the University of Kentucky for the last nine years as chair of the nutrition and food science department, and I had thought it was a good time in my career to look for a different position. Sometimes when you're in academics, you like to move around occasionally, just to get a new challenge, so, being from the South, and my family being from the South, I looked for several positions—administrative positions—in the South. And the University of South Florida was appealing because it's a Research I university, and I've spent my whole life involved in—not just in instruction, but also in research. I wanted to be associated with a Research I university.¹ So I actually sent my vitae to several places and got several interviews, and the one at the University of South Florida looked the most promising, so we ended up on the regional campus of the University of South Florida in fall of 1999.

YG: Prior to you coming to the regional campus, what kinds of things had you heard about the University of South Florida as an institution?

LM: Yeah, I probably had not been that familiar with the University of South Florida. Obviously, I was at the University of Kentucky, which is a land-grant school, and the University of Florida is the land-grant college in Florida. And of course, everybody's heard of Florida State University. We usually know about universities because of their sports programs, which is just now starting to come online at USF. So it was more looking at job opportunities and seeing the University of South Florida, and doing an investigation of if it would be a place that I'd be interested in. Otherwise, it I really wasn't that familiar with it.

¹ Research I is a category used by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education to indicate universities in the United States that engage in the highest levels of research activity.

YG: You mentioned the fact that USF is a Research I institution, and that was something that you found appealing. What were some other qualities that the University of South Florida had that appealed to you?

LM: Yeah, well, you know, it's a comprehensive university. My background is medical education, and so I was interested in being at a university that had a health campus, in terms of medical school. I've also taught dental school and nursing school. So the medical outside of it was appealing to me just because of my research interests. And a large urban university—there's just a lot going on at a university like that that's interesting. Lots of possibilities for collaborations, lots of colleagues. So it's—the size of the university and the comprehensiveness of the programs and just—it's just a good place to grow in a scholarly way and to have interaction with students. Just a lot of pluses to be in a big state university, especially in a big urban area, because there's many state universities that are in really small towns, where there's not much else available except the university, you know. So if you want to have a life other than just the university life, it's nice to be—of course, Tampa Bay is one of the world's leading vacation destinations, so a lot of pluses at USF.

YG: When you first came here for your interview, did you interview on the Tampa campus, or the Lakeland campus?

LM: Yeah, the—you start off on the Tampa campus, and then go to the Lakeland campus so that you meet both groups, because the governance of the regional campuses is through the main campus in Tampa. So you have to meet the administration in Tampa first, then you go to the regional campus. And since you would be the chief administrator there, you're mostly meeting faculty and staff, and meet students and see the facility, and so you do both.

YG: What were your first impressions of the Tampa campus? The physical surroundings, the structures—let's talk first about that.

LM: Yeah, it's pretty impressive, you know. USF has a thousand acres, and it's got the Florida look, palm trees, and it's very appealing when you drive up to it. So it just looked like—it's a good, solid, well-kept-looking school. My wife said, "Hey, this is really impressive," when we drove up to it the first time, because that's—our visit here was the first time we'd ever been—actually even been to Tampa. So it was it a good experience for us. We enjoyed it.

YG: Once you had your interview on the Tampa campus, and then you interviewed as well on the Lakeland campus—what did the Lakeland campus look like in 1999?

LM: Well, you know, the Lakeland campus has only been built since about 1988. So, actually, when I got there, it was about 10 years old. And it's a very nice campus. It's in an orange grove. It's a very attractive campus. It's not large. The campus currently is shared with a community college, and the money was put into it to build a very pleasant environment. Free parking—that's one of the things that people really like to come to Lakeland for. And it's just—it sits back in an orange grove, and it's just—it's a very attractive, pleasant, quiet place. So a good impression.

YG: Once you were hired to the University of South Florida, what was your official title when you came in, in 1999?

LM: Yeah, the advertisement was for dean, and it was kind of unusual, because dean is usually dean of a discipline, and this was more like being over an entire program at a smaller university. So we used to talk about that it would be more like being a vice president, or a vice provost, and sure enough, the legislature finally went in that direction. But the original job was dean, and reported to the provost's office.

YG: And your current title?

LM: Is vice president and campus executive officer.

LM: What is the mission, if you will, of a regional campus?

YG: Sure. Regional campuses are important. I think the main topic of discussion for regional campuses around the country now is access, and that is the availability of place-bound residents to get a quality, state-supported education without having to drive a long distance. And so we're there, and people are getting degrees in Lakeland that otherwise wouldn't be at the university, because they don't have time to drive to Orlando or Tampa. And that's generally true around the country.

Then the second thing is that brings a world-class—especially at a Research I university—brings a world-class research faculty into an area, so that an area develops economically, and the argument is that when a business decides to relocate, the first question it asks about the region it's relocating to is “What's the educational opportunities there?” K-12, community college, university. First, for the families of those who work for that institution, or that company, would like to have a place to be educated that's good. But they also like to have a trained workforce, which is available through a university.

And thirdly, and certainly not the least important, is the research interaction between industry and business. And a regional campus is an economic magnet for a region. And every time you see a regional campus go in someplace around the country, usually you see economic development followed closely after that.

YG: As the vice president and CEO of the Lakeland campus, what is your vision, Dr. Mercer, of the Lakeland campus? Where would you like to see the Lakeland campus in 10 years, and what have you done in the last couple of years to move towards that mission?

LM: Well, you know, I think the first thing that a regional campus feels as it grows is where does it fit into the overall scheme of things for the university, and certainly, we want to maintain our identity with the University of South Florida, because that gives us our scholarly base, our academic identity. So even though we're growing, we want to be seen as part of the University of South Florida, because that brings us strength to the regional campus, where my faculty is small, I can bring—have access to faculty from Tampa, for example, and bring over expertise in a lot of different areas to teach. So it gives us a lot of strength.

So as we grow, first, we want to stay as clearly identified as part of the University of South Florida. Then, you know our direction is to meet the regional needs of the service area. So, you know, we'll never offer all programs that people are interested in, but we will determine programs that are relevant to the economic development and for the area which we serve. So we interact with our community. We specialize and focus on programs which are important to the interests and development of the area that we serve. So as we grow at USF Lakeland, we're in the middle of what's called—Florida calls it the “high-tech corridor.” So our growth is certainly going to be in the high-tech area, and training computer scientists, information technology, businesspeople. In other words, there's an interest—Florida has an interest in seeing growth, right? And on I-4 is right in the middle between Orlando and Tampa, two international airports there—tremendous potential for growth.

So, you know, we're the smallest campus, but we've been the fastest growing, for the past three years. Every semester, you know, all the campuses are growing maybe at seven, eight, nine, 10, 12

percent. We're always up there at 25 or 30 percent a semester, because we're just in a rapidly growing area of the state. So we want to meet the needs of our service area. We want to be good at what we do. We're not going to do everything, we're going to relate back to the University of South Florida, and we'll just be a tremendous plus for our service area.

YG: You mentioned that idea of community. How does USF Lakeland work with the community to build its programs, as well as specifically to assist the community?

LM: Sure. It's really not very difficult. You have to get involved with the board of education, and with the chambers of commerce, and with the businesses around town, so we make an effort to see that our faculty becomes members of organizations like Rotary and Kiwanis and, you know, we have faculty that go to the churches and are involved in the social life of the community. And then, you just—you go to the—find the large institutions, and you go to them and say, “What do you need? What would you like to see from us as a university?”

And so, since I've been there, we've written about four or five studies for the community now. Just to give you an example, we're in Polk County, which is our main service area, which is a migrant area to a certain extent, with phosphate mining and citrus farming as a history. And so one of the questions there is what's the cultural opportunity in Polk County? So one of the first studies that I had done from our campus was the economic impact of the arts in Polk County, and actually showed that there is a tremendous opportunity for cultural activities and opportunities in Polk County. And after that study was written, then it went to the development—Central Florida Development Council, who puts that in their portfolio and takes it with them. So when they're recruiting businesses, they can say, Well, education is good, but there are cultural activities here, too. Not just Disney, but there's art museums, and there's the Imperial Symphony Orchestra of Polk County. There's lots of opportunities in Polk County.

So we're doing studies just to put information out that people might not know about Polk County. So we've done economic impact of the arts. We've done a power plant study, about what power plants need to be done. We just finished a quality of life health survey. We've done some studies for the Central Florida Development Council about what the future of economic development should be in the central area of Florida there. So, you know, we're bringing information out that wouldn't be done if the faculty wasn't there that had an interest in that, to do it.

So we go to the businesses, we work with Polk school board, we work with—Polk is unusual—Polk County is unusual. It's got 600,000 people spread among 17 small towns, and the service area that we serve is over 3,700 square miles for our regional campus, which is—we like to say three times larger than the state of Rhode Island. So we have ample opportunity to go out into the community. But it's a large area, so we go and find people and say, “What would you like for us to do?” And as we do that, we get more and more response, and people start realizing the power of having a regional campus in their area. And I think that's one reason we're growing rapidly, and our faculty are now called on to speak at meetings and further expertise in doing studies, and for collaborations and consulting and research. So we're doing, I think, the things that a regional campus should do in an area, and that is relate to the community, in all the areas—education, quality of life, health, economic development, all of those things that the community needs to be successful.

YG: Each of the regional campuses, it seems, has their own specialty, if you will, their own uniqueness. What is unique and special about the Lakeland campus?

LM: Well, of course, our location is one of the things that makes us special, as being very centrally located. So, since we're in the high-tech corridor, we started a Department of Information Technology, which didn't previously exist at the University of South Florida. And that is going to

provide the technology workers to a certain extent for the central Florida high-tech corridor as it grows. And then, you know, we're unique because of the faculty that we have. We're growing in education, in business, and in engineering information technology. But now we're getting into the social sciences in the area of social work and interdisciplinary social sciences, criminology, many of the things that are needed there. So we'll be unique in the way Polk County is unique. In other words, we'll reflect, I think, what the needs of the county are, and that's where we'll put our resources and grow.

So one of the things that's missing from the University of South Florida, which is a background I'm interested in, is nutrition. There's no opportunity for nutrition or dietetics in central Florida. So I think in the very near future, we'll start a nutrition and dietetics department at Lakeland, which will exist on the Lakeland campus and serve the central campus, the main campus, and the other regional campuses. So I think each group, each campus will develop specialties that sort of reflect the needs of their particular community.

YG: I want to talk a little bit about USF Lakeland students. What's the makeup of the students? Who are your students who come specifically to the Lakeland campus?

LM: Well, of course, our campus, and we're—by the way, we're looking for a new campus out right now, but our campus is owned by the community college, which can't have dormitories in the state of Florida. So we're a 100 percent commuter campus, and we have—probably 60 percent of our classes are taught after five o'clock, because most of our students are working people who are trying to either improve their education or move up in their job area. Probably, I think our average age on our campus is 28 or 29.

So we don't have what you would think of as the traditional student. Of course, we don't teach freshmen or sophomores. We only teach junior, senior, and graduate level, so we have older students and mostly working people who live in that area around Lakeland. But more and more, we're reaching out into the community, because Lakeland is an easy place to get to because of I-4 and the Polk Parkway, and people prefer to come to the Lakeland campus to having to drive into Tampa, or drive in through Orlando to get to the University of Central Florida campus. So it's a more nontraditional, working campus. And people are serious, because they've gone out in the world and realized that they need to improve their education.

YG: Being that the Lakeland campus is an all-commuter campus, judging from that, I would think that you would need some specific kinds of programs and specific kinds of services offered. What is Lakeland doing to address this commuter—all-commuter needs?

LM: Well, certainly, we need to have good student services so the students whose time is limited, because these—most people work, they have families—they need to be able to come on campus, go to student services, get the correct answers to the questions they have, get good advising, find their classes, be able to take their classes in a timely manner, and get back off campus to go home. So we try to make it a smooth, seamless experience for students to come on the campus and get the services that they need, because we don't have very many students who are just around campus during the day and have a leisurely time to wait between classes and study. You know, most people are businesslike. They come in, and they want to take care of business, go to class, and go home. Or they've been home and then they come back and take their classes, and want to go home and go to bed, because they've worked all day. So we make sure that the students have a good experience—not too much red tape, try to diminish the bureaucracy and give them the answers that they need so that they can optimize their time utilization.

YG: You mentioned that the USF Lakeland campus is in the process of acquiring a new campus.

Can you talk a little bit about why this is necessary, and where you guys are looking?

LM: Sure. With the growth of the Lakeland campus, and the growth of the community college who owns the campus, it's been recognized that for USF Lakeland to actually bloom as a regional campus of a Research I university, it needs to have its own separate campus with dormitories, a campus life, its own library, its own laboratories, et cetera. Because that's the—you know, that's the strongest situation that you can have, because, in general, people who want a campus life now have to leave Lakeland, because the community college does only offer freshman and sophomore [courses]. And then there's two or three small private colleges around, which are good but are expensive, and not everybody's interested in that.

So several businesses have offered free land to the university, because it's recognized that if a university comes and builds on your land, that the rest of the land you own adjacent to it becomes far more valuable. So we have five sites that have been offered to us now, and we have a master campus planning organization looking at the five sites to help us choose which one would be in the best location for future growth, to serve our students. But it will allow us to get off and be on our own campus, and sort of be the masters of our own future and have the things that people expect at a state university rather than be limited through the rulings of the community college.

YG: What is the timeline of this—approximate timeline?

LM: Next week, the committee will make a decision on which one of the sites we're going to choose, and then that will be presented to the university Board of Trustees, and then it's up to the Polk County delegation—legislative delegation—to bring in the \$140 million it's going to cost to build a new campus, and that doesn't count dormitories. If you add dormitories, it's more like 190 million. So we hope to get started in the next couple of years, and then it'll be a rollout process, you know, one, two, or three buildings initially, and then as we grow in student numbers, the campus will grow in infrastructure, I think.

So it's not too far in the future. As soon as we get the land identified, then the donors come forward, who have opportunities to offer—a person who wants to leave a legacy for their family has an opportunity, occasionally, to have a naming opportunity for a new building. You know, these things don't happen real often. So we believe that once the site is identified, we'll have—there will be more philanthropy available, along with the state funding. And, of course, as our student numbers grow, that brings in tuition dollars, too, and our faculty write grants, so we're working in all the areas to bring in the money to make this happen. But the state is going to be the main source of the initial offering there. But on land donated to the state, and all—each piece of land is probably worth \$10 million or so.

YG: As the vice president and CEO of the Lakeland campus, your title sounds very much like you—almost like you're running a corporation. What—as the VP and the CEO, what are some of your primary responsibilities?

LM: Well, the—even though you're a vice president and report to the president on the central campus, in a way on your campus, it's like being a campus president. You have to oversee the academic programs, you have to oversee the facility, you have to oversee the student services. You know, you just—you're exactly right, it is like running a business, because all of the pieces have to work together for the students to be able to come in and have that smooth experience that we talk about.

So I have an administrative team, and we work together to oversee the information technology on the campus. We're a technologically advanced campus. For example, we just put in the

infrastructure so that when a student walks on campus with a laptop, they're immediately online. It's a totally wireless campus, so you don't have to just go to the computer lab anymore. So we're looking to the future for that. So we have to run a complete operation, but being a person with a background in academics, I also teach a class every semester because I like to keep that student contact.

YG: If you had a crystal ball, and you could look to the future of the Lakeland campus, where do you see the Lakeland campus in the next decade?

LM: Yeah, I believe that we'll see—we're looking, by around 2010, the next five to seven years, being up to 5,000 students. In 1999, we had about 700 students. Now we have about 1,800 students. And we're growing. If the growth rate continues, you know, by 2020, we should be 10,000 students. Our main legislator is JD Alexander, who's been helping us with this, although the entire Polk County delegation helps us. But he's the main driving force, and he told the landowners to give enough land to build a campus that would hold at least 10,000 students. So that's the long-term goal—is 10,000, and who knows. You know, with 500 acres and no medical school, we'll have practically as much land as the Tampa campus has to run their programs. And with our location, you know, the high-tech corridor advertises that within 100 miles of the high-tech corridor, there are 7 million people. So there's—we're limited only by our own imaginations right now, I think.

YG: Why is technology so important to the mission of the Lakeland campus?

LM: Well, part of it is because we find ourselves in what Florida has called the “high-tech corridor,” and there's an interest in developing technology there, because let's face it: agriculture is on the decline, in terms of opportunities. You know, big companies run agriculture now. There's not so much opportunity for the small farmer anymore. Phosphate mining is more on the decline. You have to find businesses to replace the traditional businesses in the United States of agriculture, mining, industry, in terms of making steel, and things like that. So technology is just what everybody—you know, we're an information society, so technology is important, and our location on the high-tech corridor and our ability to reach our student body all involves technology now.

So we have to think—all of our courses—many of our courses now are either totally online or have web-based content associated with them. Our students are usually more sophisticated than our faculty, in terms of what they know about technology, because they grew up playing computer games and watching television. So technology helps us deliver our programs, and it helps us be more efficient, and to expand our footprint, because when we offer courses online, that can be all over the world. So everybody has to be good in technology, and we invest in the technology for the campus.

YG: In addition to offering a unique program of information technology, what are some of the other major programs that the Lakeland campus has?

LM: Our biggest program currently is in education. Florida has an unusual situation, and that is that the school district is the county. So our county, being over 3,500 square miles, is an enormous school district with 17 towns, like I told you, one school board with 82,000 students, 10,000 employees spread out over 3,500 square miles in a \$750-million budget, but a 50 percent graduation rate from high school. So, obviously, there are some needs there. Just because it's so large, makes it hard to manage. And the university there—we're working. For example, we just got a grant from the community, and we started a program called the Quality School Leadership Symposium, in which we're training the next generation of principals for Polk County. So education is our big push, to upgrade the educational opportunities in Polk County.

Of course, then business is right in there, because as businesses grow, you need people graduating in accounting and information systems in all the areas of business. And engineering information technology is big for us because, for example, Publix, which is one of the largest grocery chains, is actually located in Lakeland—is the home office, and they hire 700 people in information technology. So we have—actually have a big audience for our students right there in Lakeland. So those are our big three: business, engineering information technology, and education. Arts and sciences isn't as large, but we're growing in that direction. And next we'll get into allied health-type things like nutrition, elder care, the things that help the health of the community, because Polk County has a large percentage of elderly, higher than the national average, because people retire here.

YG: What has been the most challenging aspect of being a vice president and CEO of a regional campus?

LM: Well, I think the most challenging thing in Lakeland was to try to start realizing the potential of that location, because, like I said, when I came there was about 700 students and six faculty. So it was a pretty small, not well-known institution. My next-door neighbors didn't know the University of South Florida had a campus in Lakeland, so that wasn't too encouraging. I think the big challenge is to market ourselves to the community, and the capabilities that we have and what we bring to the table. And in that almost four years I've been there, our budget has tripled, our student body has almost tripled, our relationship with the community is far more advanced than it was. So getting ourselves known, and so that students choose USF Lakeland as their education provider, because they didn't really know anything about us. So I think it's getting us up and running and being known to the community has been the big challenge.

YG: In recent years, many of the USF regional campuses have begun to pull away from the University of South Florida as a whole. I don't get that impression in speaking with you about the Lakeland campus. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the regional campus of Lakeland and the University of South Florida as a whole?

LM: Well, there's an academic question and a political question there. And the political issue was—and actually sort of settled this last year in the legislature—was that the regional campuses had enough autonomy to make locally based decisions to meet the needs of the local constituency. So that was a good thing, because that gave us some power to make our own decisions. But as I said to President Genshaft, because I got here a year before she did, I wouldn't have taken or even accepted or looked for a job at just a small community university, because that's not my interest or my background.

So I think being a regional campus of a Research I university to me personally is important. And I think it's important to our community to have that connection, because when a company comes to Lakeland and Polk County, they can get a reasonable price on land but still be connected to a Research I university right down street who has access directly to the main campus in Tampa. So I think it's not so much pulling away as it is growing, specifically for the region and—but still maintaining that identity of one university, geographically dispersed, because that identity to me is an important aspect of our success.

YG: In your four years—I think four years—

LM: Yes. I'm just finishing my fourth year.

YG: In your four years of history at USF Lakeland, what are you most proud of?

LM: I would say the staff and faculty that we've brought on board has just been tremendous. You know, we've been able—because of the location of central Florida and the Tampa Bay region being so well known, and so much interest in the lifestyle here, we've been able to attract top-notch faculty to this area, just because of the quality of life. So, you know, we have just gone over 30 faculty on campus. We've got, I think, around 85 full-time employees on the campus now. We've been able to bring in top-notch people, and that's been reflected by our growth rate, which has been 25 or 30 percent every semester, and I have to throw in that we beat every other campus every semester in growth rate. It's because of our—because of the good work our faculty and staff do. We love to see the numbers come out every semester.

YG: Just two more questions. You mentioned that next week USF Lakeland will have a new site, and you talked about the master plan. What specific things is the Lakeland campus looking to design in their master plan, in terms of the size and buildings and the overall look of the Lakeland campus?

LM: Well, that's a good question, especially the look part, because we want to look like Florida, since we're in Florida. But that's why we hired a company who—that's what they do, is they help designed—they do master plans for campuses. So, what we've done is projected our enrollments, the programs that we're interested in. They can't do a master plan until they see the site, and these sites look totally different. So when they see the site and then start looking at the access and then think about what programs we're going to be growing and how many students we think that we're going to have, then we pick a design, which—we're spending a lot of time looking at other universities, and we want to have something that looks really nifty, you know, for central Florida.

Then I think the process is pretty much driven—it's not a new idea, you know. This has been done before. We know how many students we think we're going to have, what we want to teach. We've got a company that specializes in that, so we work together with this company—choose—once the site is chosen and we know how the land is going to be square, or long, or tall, or probably not hilly in Florida, then we can move ahead with what our campus is going to look like. It's really—it's a very exciting thing to be able to do.

YG: My final question, and this is something that I've asked all of my interviewees: If you could leave a statement on camera, either to the colleagues and the students that you've worked with within the last four years, or to future staff and colleagues of the Lakeland campus, what would you want to say about the Lakeland campus, and your experiences with the University of South Florida?

LM: Well, I just wrote a document, which I sent you a copy of, by the way, which you can look at, called “Why Choose Lakeland?” And one of the things I've tried to do since I've been here, is write sort of like white papers or idea documents that keep us all on the same track and give us, everyone, talking points, and give that—everybody wants that 30-second elevator speech, that if you get on an elevator with somebody for 30 seconds, and they say, “What's going on in South Florida Lakeland?” you've got the 30 second-speech to give them.

So the main thing I came up with about Lakeland, of our goal and what I think we're achieving—the word that we're using is “quality.” You know, we're going to be a quality campus with quality offerings, and I would recommend anyone to come and give us a try. And the students that we turn out are being successful, because we invest our lives into the life of the Lakeland campus and back into the community, and just to prove that, we won the President's Trophy this year for the faculty campaign as being the highest-percent givers out of the entire USF system.

So, you know, the people who work at Lakeland care about Lakeland. They enjoy being there, and they want it to be successful. And we're going to be the best we can be. And it's not just trivial to

say that quality is our goal, because we have an opportunity to bring in the best now, because we're in a growth mode. So it's a rare opportunity to start with a real small group, rapidly growing, and be able to hand-pick the people that come here. So why choose Lakeland? Quality.

YG: Dr. Mercer, thank you very much.

LM: Thank you.

End of interview.