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Ed Baird : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Lucy D. Jones

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Ed Baird

Lucy D. Jones

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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TRANSCRIPTION

J: Today is Tuesday, November 25, 2003. My name is Lucy Jones. I'm a graduate assistant for the Florida Studies Center. Today I'm continuing a series of interviews at the Nelson Poynter Library at the USF St. Petersburg campus with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni, to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today I'm with Ed Baird, who in addition to being a world-class sailor is a USF St. Petersburg alumnus. Thank you for being here today.

B: It's great [to be here]. It's a fantastic place here.

J: Let's start with an explanation with how you came to USF.

B: I was born and raised in St. Petersburg. I've always loved it here. [I] went away for a couple of years for my first two years of university [studies]. [I] then was entwined in an Olympic sailing effort for the 1980 Olympics, which took a lot of my time and required that I was not able to go to school during the attempt to qualify for the team. When that was all over, I needed to go back to school again. At the same time, I had purchased a house here. [I] looked around here and said, gee, I could go to school here and live in the house that I own, or I could go back to some school that I would have to make completely new friends over again because all of the people that I had gone to school with had graduated by now. I made the choice to go here. It seemed convenient and

simple and easy and I could stay in the town that I love. I did, it was a little complicated, because the St. Petersburg campus didn't have all of the required subjects that I needed to take. I had to take a couple of classes at what was then called St. Petersburg Junior College, now it's St. Petersburg College. [I] then had to transfer all my stuff from the other schools. Then I was able to do everything that I needed here.

J: What degree did you get from here?

B: I got a general business degree. It was actually one of the few that were available without going to the Tampa campus. I didn't want to drive that much. I knew that whatever I did, it wasn't going to be something that required that I had a particular specialty of a degree. Really, my college education was a learning experience a little different than I think a lot of peoples. I wasn't worried about going to grad school or being a medical student or something like that. I knew I'd get off into the sport of sailing somewhere. My experience in the university would help, but it wasn't going to be the reason that I got a job.

J: You said that your experience was different than other people's. How was it different? [Was it] the fact that you were older, or sailing?

B: Not so much older, I was only two years older than the class I graduated with. I spent so much time traveling and organizing teams to go to these events. I spent time raising money and managing a budget for the Olympic program that I was with. School had to fit in around the other things that I was doing. I think there were a tremendous amount of people that went to school here that the campus provided that type of atmosphere for. This was a great mix of people at the time that were older business people or perhaps a mother and housewife whose kids had grown up and she wanted to finish her university

degree. There were a lot of people who weren't necessarily on the fast track of finishing up college. Yet, there was also about half as many that were doing a straight-up four-year degree and chose not to go somewhere else. It was an interesting experience, [and] an interesting climate on the campus at the time.

J: That was the early 1980s?

B: Right, [it was] 1980, 1981, and 1982.

J: What did the campus look like when you took classes here?

B: I have fond memories of going to school in what I was told were old army barracks next-door, where the marine research group is right now. The buildings that we were in had window-mounted air-conditioning. It was inadequate and very old classes with typical chalkboards. They had enthusiastic instructors and a great group of people going to school. It was quite an interesting thing, especially since the most recent university I had gone to previous [to that] was Florida State [University], which had all the newest, latest, greatest everything. Coming here was like going to an old one-room schoolhouse at the time. It grew quickly. It did have everything that we needed to learn the things that we were trying to learn.

J: Were you active in any groups on campus while going to [school here]? You were busy off-campus.

B: I was very busy off-campus. I did a little bit with the fledgling sailing program that was going on, but not really much. I worked almost full-time while I went to school here. I didn't have a lot of time for extra activities here. I did spend a tremendous amount of time in the library. Between watching the planes fly over the top of me while I was studying and looking out the window at the beautiful harbor, I really enjoyed my time on

campus.

J: Did the fact that the university is on a harbor with sailing play any part in your decision to go here?

B: No, it didn't. It was really proximity to where I lived. Now, if I were a graduating high-school student at the moment, and I loved to sail, I would seriously consider going here, because it is a great sailing program. It's starting to be nationally ranked in the top twenty on a consistent basis both for men's and women's group. They have such a fantastic facility. Of course, also the proximity to another university which is Eckerd College; another college campus that they can race against in the immediate waters. People from all over the country want to come down here and race for the winter when it's too cold up north. It's a lot different atmosphere. I would recommend to a lot of young kids that it's a good place to go now.

J: Who were some of the faculty members that you remember from your years in school?

B: Wow, the only person I really think back on was Winston Bridges, who went on to be the temporary dean for a number of years. I knew Winston before I went to school here because of sailing. He used to race boats quite a bit; [he] doesn't really do any of it anymore. I see him around at some of the sailing events still. Beyond that, it was a time in my life where the university had to fit into all of the other things that I was in the middle of. I wasn't really focused on the people that I was meeting on campus. I was just trying to get my work done and fill in the blanks on tests properly. I'm sorry that I don't remember anybody beyond Winston.

J: How about students?

B: There's a lot of students that I still run across. [I run across] friends of mine from before I

went to school here and some that I made while I was here. Probably the one I remember the most is Margot Fisher, who is David Fisher's wife. David was the most recent mayor before Rick Baker. Margo went to school [at USF] and in fact had a couple of classes with me. I remember especially one day that she came to school in a rather beat-up looking Camaro or Mustang. It had a lot of primer paint left on it. She found a place to park and I was just walking by when she was getting out of her car. She saw me looking at her and she said, it's not mine! It's my son's. It was really a beaten up car. There was an awful lot of folks that, Margot's just one of many, that I still run across and enjoy from the time here.

J: You grew up in St. Petersburg and you came back to St. Petersburg and you've lived here since then. As a St. Petersburg resident, have you had any thought about the way the university has changed since you were a student?

B: When we were going here in 1980 and 1981, there were a lot of plans for the future. [There was] a lot of foresight and vision that frankly, as an early twenty-year-old student with not a lot of experience in how cities grow, I looked at these plans and visions and thought, wow, that's going to really take a lot of time to make happen. Now, when I look around down here, this is an impressive place. It's a beautiful campus. It's got fantastic facilities, and the proximity to so many great things like the arts and the hospitals and the waterfront parks just to be able to go out and take a break from all the studies [is great]. The airport being so close by and marinas [close by], it's a fantastic place. [It's] unlike any other university I've been to. I'm pretty impressed about how it's all come together. I must say, remembering all the old buildings that were here when I went to school and the neighborhood that surrounded the school at the time, I would never had imagined it

coming out looking and being as wonderful as it is now.

J: Do you still maintain any relationship with the university?

B: I don't. The short answer is no. The longer answer is occasionally the friends that I have that are involved with the school will get me involved in something for an hour or two here and there. Certainly, I would love to see the sailing team prosper and flourish, so I try to lend a hand when I can. I travel so much and I'm gone so often that even that becomes difficult to do. I do think about the school a lot and I love driving by it. Every time I ever bring a visitor from whether it's another part of the states or somewhere overseas to see our town, I make sure to tour them through the campus because it's something I'm very proud of in St. Petersburg.

J: I was wondering if you could just briefly, it's probably a very long answer, but briefly describe your career in sailing. I know it's a long, long illustrious career.

B: The funny thing is, when I got out of USF, I did another two-year Olympic campaign for the 1984 Olympics. When that was finished, I was actually hired by a small boat dealership next-door to the university that was trying to grow. They hired me to help them with ideas of how to sell to racing sailors and do things that racing sailors needed. I worked there for about three and a half years. During that time, the business grew very rapidly, not only for the sales of boats and equipment and things that I was hired to help with, but they started to purchase a lot of the property around here. Eventually, I fell in as the manager for all those things, one of which is the marina next-door. When the [Salvador] Dali museum got put where it is, we started a process of developing this marina out of what used to be a grubby, nasty, commercial harbor. When you look out the window now, next door to USF there's this fantastic, beautiful marina called the

Harborage at Bayboro. I worked there for about three and a half years. At the end of that time, the company was beginning to grow even more and I was being offered an option to work within the company but sail less. My wife and I, actually, made the decision to stop working and try to make a career in professional sailing, which was not really something anybody else was doing at the time. It looked like it might be possible. In 1987, I left my job and started to make pro-sailing work. At that time, professional sailing was writing articles, teaching, and coaching people, scrambling around trying to do any kind of project that I could and hopefully finding some way to pay the bills. Very quickly, it became something that there were events that we could go to for prize money like the tennis and golf tours. We, the people that do this in a sport, started to be able to do things like the America's Cup, which is the biggest, most well-known event in the sport. Again, before 1987, it wasn't a professional side of the sport. You didn't get paid to go do the America's Cup. Now, the people who are at the top of the game and do that well get paid rather handsomely to be involved with projects that are successful in that event. All that just started in 1987. It took a while. It's just now starting to be where people get compensated for what we feel is fairly for their skills and knowledge and abilities within the sport. It's been a real trick to make it work. I must say that my wife, Lisa, who is also an alumnus here, she was very supportive through the whole thing. The two of us scraped and clawed and somehow held it together to be able to say now that, that's what I do. I race boats and I go all over the world doing these projects. [I do projects with] steering some boats, doing tactics on others, which is a supportive role to the helmsmen, managing projects like the America's Cup or the Volvo or Whitbread Around the World races. [I did] a number of different project types in between. I do a lot of coaching of

Olympic-level athletes in the sport. I do teaching and presentations for groups. I have sponsors that hire me to come and do team-building talks. [I do] everything from there to endorsements and so-forth. It's a bit of a hodge-podge, but it is, in a more minor way, like being a golf professional or a tennis professional. You have to be out there on the circuit doing your thing all the time. The more successful you are at the events, the more successful you are in being able to sell your image and the rights to your image and so-forth.

J: How did you become interested in sailing in the first place?

B: I learned how to sail when I was nine. St. Petersburg has a great family sailing teaching facility downtown that is managed by the St. Petersburg Yacht Club, but the property is owned by the city. It's open to anybody to walk in and say, I want to be a member of this sailing center and learn how to sail. That facility is still going down here. It's a little different-looking than it was, but it's the same deal. I learned how to sail there when I was nine and enjoyed it more than baseball or tennis or golf or football or any of the other things I had been exposed to. I think, perhaps because of the control of the vehicle and the complicated nature of the abstract racecourse that you have with shifting winds and currents and a lot to think about, it was a really fun thing to do. Rather than just being the strongest and being able to run the fastest in your sport, you had to be fairly athletic, but really think and prepare and plan and deal with different conditions every day. It was really interesting and fun and I grew up enjoying it and was lucky enough to be able to keep after it.

J: Being in St. Petersburg was a lucky happenstance for you.

B: I think being born in St. Petersburg was a tremendously lucky thing. I've been literally to

every other major metropolitan area on the planet that's near the water, and I can't think of one that I'd prefer being in than this one. It's a fantastic place.

J: When you were managing the marina just to the south of the campus, did you have any connections to or exposure to with the university? Were they expanding that way at the time?

B: We worked a lot with the university. Remember, what I did was worked with the group that built the marina. We built it from not having anything there. It's a pretty big structure out there. It impacted the whole neighborhood. It impacted the harbor. All the neighbors and users of the harbor had to be satisfied and comfortable with how the marina was going to be developed and how it was going to be managed after it was built. Yeah, we worked a lot with the university and had some very friendly and helpful and wonderful planning sessions with the university, and we had some heated and exciting arguments with them about how to do things. We learned a lot about how other universities that are on the waterfront share their resources with the surrounding communities. [We] ultimately built a facility out there that I'm very proud of and I hope the area really enjoys.

J: How does the university share the facilities in the harbor?

B: There was a great concern when we were going to build the marina that there wouldn't be enough room for the research vessels to get in and out and that there might be constriction for other types of sailing and motor vessels that might come in and out of the university. Of course, the university was existing, and they wanted to continue to have the open field that they had experienced in the harbor. What the marina has done, is to allow one, more visibility of the university because there's a huge amount of people who

enjoy the marina both from here and from out of town who suddenly see what a cool university we have here. Two, the university activities can be put together with and in conjunction with the things that are going on in the marina. There's an added safety by being able to have more eyes down here looking at the equipment down here. If there's a storm that comes through there's a safer haven for it. There's a lot of things that go on that are shared. We look after everybody that uses the water; we have to look after each other because the water is much, much more powerful than any of the rest of us. We have to be careful with it. Also, as the university expanded, the neighborhood had to be developed in a way that was comfortable and proper for the whole community. I think that the group that I was with, the Talcorn Corporation and Florida Progress that made this marina, always had in mind a very high quality facility down there. I think that by putting it in, it made the whole neighborhood much nicer, which made it that much easier to envision where the university was going. To purchase all the old properties down here with the old decrepit houses on them and get rid of them and put up new buildings and make the whole area into a fantastic space.

J: What changes to the harbor do you remember as a result of the university? The university is right on the harbor, and they have a seawall. They must have been...

B: Right now, we're sitting in the library, which is on the northern edge of the harbor. I can very clearly remember when I was a kid that there were old wooden decrepit shacks of buildings sitting here with hideous bunches of junk outside of them who's backs went to the water and they claimed to be marine businesses. The entire Bayboro harbor was ringed by these businesses, which many of them serviced the local fishing and commercial fishing groups. Also, [it serviced] the local sailors and boaters. The problem

was, it was a very inexpensive areas for rents. The people who inhabited most of these businesses kept them up in a way that was consistent with the inexpensive nature of the surrounding facilities. It wasn't very nice. Eventually, many of those buildings got abandoned or condemned by the city and taken over because it was messy. It is now, such a pleasure to see the quality of construction and the fine facilities that are all around the harbor. I'm really excited that it's happened like that. There's a lot of places in the world where the junky old harbors are still junky old harbors.

J: There's not much of that on the harbor. They tore those businesses down when they built the library?

B: As I said, I can remember facilities being here, where the [Salvador] Dali museum is, where the Harborage is. All of those had private ownership properties that were servicing the waterfront. They were in pretty bad repair. Slowly, they got moved out. The army core of engineers had the old army barracks where we ended up going to school the first few years I was here. While we went to school in those barracks, the new buildings that we're sitting in right now were beginning to take shape. This library was more modern than that. The library next-door, which I guess is the main part of the offices and things like that, that used to be the library when I went here. That stuff was all built while I went to school. Literally, the first year that I was here, that was all being finished up. The second year that I was here, it was a comfortable, wonderful place to go and hang out.

J: Did the USF sailing team always use the harbor? They use it now for the smaller boats.

B: I think the sailing team, like a lot of the southeastern U.S. universities started out as a club. It was really people who wanted to go sailing and learn how to sail and fool around

in boats and enjoy themselves. Of course, when you're on the water, what a wonderful thing to be able to take a boat out in the afternoon and go for a sail. It grew from that and now it's a bona-fide team that actually has practices on a regular basis and goes and travels to events and hosts events. There have been national events hosted here as recently as this past month. It's really great to see that level being reached. For instance, in the Northeast and out in the southern California area, universities for years and years and years have been fielding big, solid teams that go and train just like any other team does at the schools. For most schools in the Southeast, it's only a recent phenomenon that they've gone away from being clubs and becoming actual varsity teams.

J: Do you feel that your general business degree from USF actually helped you in your career? Was it a good choice?

B: It was [a good choice]. I always knew that business was important for me to understand. What I did by getting a general business degree was to be able to touch on areas that I would later want to know more about in a lot of different parts of business. Everything from statistics to accounting to business law, they all are things that I use every day. I've been involved now with two America's Cup teams. One as a skipper. When you're running a team like that, you've got incredible legal issues. You've got fantastic team building and processing challenges. You have to work with people from the billionaire status down to the very most poverty-stricken, starving on the street, fledgling sailors. It's an amazing system that you go through. Then you have to work with people from different countries so therefore you get different ways of doing things and different climates of doing business. You might even be working in a different country where you have to understand enough about the way the world works to wiggle your way through.

On top of that, you need to know how to resource things. [You have to know] what is out there. How can we figure out how to win the America's Cup? [You have to know] how to develop a better piece of equipment than anybody else has and come out on top on a timely schedule and be ready on race day. I think a general degree was pretty helpful in getting a touch of many different things, rather than focusing in on one particular area that might have left me a bit ignorant on something else. For me, it was an excellent way to go about getting my education.

J: Knowing that you were going to come and do this interview, did you have any stories that came to mind? I'm sure something did.

B: Again, the university experience here for me was a commuter experience. It wasn't a living experience. That in itself makes the time spent here a little shorter, a little less activity-filled. Story-wise, I probably don't have any great stories. I sat around and listened to a lot of great stories from around here, but really it was a building time when I was here. There wasn't as much opportunity to spend a lot of time on the campus. Honestly, the first year that I was here, we went to school to those buildings to the east of everything that we have here now, and frankly, you didn't want to stay there. We met friends, we went out for a beer after class or whatever it was, and we had fun, but it wasn't a long-term sort of a day.

J: Do you have any final thoughts about where you'd like to see the university go in the future?

B: I realize that the St. Petersburg is part of a bigger university which has always been impressive over in Tampa. I am so excited to see the quality of what this school has done on the St. Petersburg property. To see that they've taken apart a town that really was

derelict and turned it into something that is the highest quality of anywhere around. I'm thrilled to see that. I hope it continues. I know that we'll have more and more great people graduating from the campus down here. Maybe one day the sailing team will be number one.

J: I'm sure they will. Thank you for being here today with me. I appreciate your help.

B: [It was] my pleasure. [I] look forward to coming back.

End of Interview