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

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Virginia Littrell

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 October 28, 2003. My name is Lucy Jones and I'm a graduate assistant for the Florida Studies Center continuing a series of interviews with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni commemorating fifty years of university history. Today I'm interviewing Virginia Littrell, who came to USF in 1979 as a student. Currently, she is the city councilwoman, and today's interview is taking place in her office in St. Petersburg's City Hall. Good afternoon, and thank you for agreeing to do this interview.

L: Sure, I'm looking forward to it.

J: Let's start with what circumstances took you to USF St. Petersburg?

L: I was born and raised in St. Petersburg. At the time that I entered [the University of] South Florida, I had a husband who had graduated from South Florida [and] I had a mother who had not finished college at Stetson University in Deland because of World War II. She was anticipating being a student at the University of South Florida in St. Pete, so it was a family affair.

J: The location was convenient?

L: It was absolutely convenient. I had all of my college education in St. Petersburg. I went to St. Petersburg Junior College and then transferred directly to USF in St. Petersburg.

J: Would you have gone to college if St. Petersburg hadn't had a university? Would it have been possible?

L: Oh, I actually could have gone to college any place that I wanted to. I got married very early and it was imperative that I be around St. Petersburg, so fortunately we did have a university.

J: What was the university like when you started as a student?

L: It was small. It was charming. It was quirky. It was fun. It was a party place. We went to school in old army barracks. We took college classes in army barracks. What are now the marine science laboratories, it was a long, thin hallway, that's what we had our library in. I actually worked as a student assistant in the library when I first went to USF in St. Petersburg. I spent a lot of time in that long, narrow, dusty hallway. It was like a family. No matter what your particular discipline was, you knew faculty members and students in other disciplines because there were so few students on campus. All of the social events, everybody mingled together and it was great fun.

J: You got your degree in interdisciplinary social sciences, which would have been a good example of how the disciplines worked together. As a student in the Florida Studies program I get the question all the time of, what can you do with a degree in Florida Studies? How did your degree in interdisciplinary social sciences prepare you for your career, or did it?

L: That degree program, at that time, allowed the student to build the curriculum and it was two disciplinary tracks that were dovetailed together. The two tracks that I chose were U.S. history and world geography. They dovetailed beautifully and they have played their role through everything that I've been interested in during my life. As far as making

money from that, you can't do it, unless you teach. I'm not really interested in teaching.

I really always went to school with an interest in mind of what I wanted to do. I had classes that I didn't care about and I didn't do well about and I had classes that I absolutely loved and it took me absolutely nothing to make good grades in them. It was a matter of being interested. I always went to college with the idea that you went there for interest.

J: Do you think that if you had gone to a different university you wouldn't have had that same experience of being able to take whatever interested you?

L: I probably would have been able to have that experience, but chances are good that I wouldn't have taken that opportunity. If I had gone to a standard large university or a broad-based college, chances are good I would have been funneled into the standard curriculum. One of the things that happened at USF in St. Petersburg early on was that not all of the offerings that you needed to complete your degree course were available every semester. You opted for a lot of different disciplines. We kind of fell into it by default, but it was great.

J: What were the relationships between the students and the faculty like? Were they closer because of the size?

L: Yeah, I think so. Students were typically invited because the student body at South Florida in St. Petersburg, because it was a commuter campus, the majority of the student body was older than the traditional student body that you would see on a freshman class in a regular university. Typically, we were invited into professors' homes for social events. I have spent Christmases and Thanksgivings at professors' dinner tables with their families. It was a great family kind of atmosphere. It was kind of warm and it was

very comfortable.

J: What organizations were you involved with as a student?

L: I started the University of South Florida St. Petersburg lecture series. That was very interesting. We brought a series of somewhat controversial speakers to the campus, including Russell Means who is Indian. He is traditionally thought of as having led the seizure on a wounded knee. A nineteen-year-old young man associated with the IRA in Ireland, his name is Sean Sands and his brother is Bobby Sands, who died in the H-blocks in Ireland. Both of those were very controversial, especially Sean Sands.

J: You started the series?

L: Yeah.

J: Did you have any on-campus jobs?

L: I had all the on-campus jobs. I worked in the library for several sessions. I worked for student affairs. I worked as a fill-in person in the physical plant area when their assistant was out having surgery. I did a lot of jobs on campus. Ultimately, I was hired as a full-time person on campus in the registrar's office. I worked probably two years with the registrar.

J: Over the years that you've been at the university, how have the students changed? You were in contact with them in many different ways.

L: I think as the disciplines have grown and been more available, they have become more segmented into those disciplines and less inter-mended. I think probably now the business student doesn't know what the geography student does. None of them know what the marine science student does. That's a loss for everybody, although it makes your college career go faster, I guess, being able to take the classes that you need right in

a row. Maybe it deprives today's students of that kind of commended that was a valuable part of the experience.

J: Your experience as a student was a little different and as you mentioned, your mother was a student, also. What was it like going to college with your mother at the same time as you? Did you take classes together?

L: No, [we] never [took classes together]. We really never crossed paths. Occasionally we would meet. I took the bulk of my classes at one time and she took the bulk of her classes at a different year so it was never a problem. It wouldn't have been a problem anyway, even if we were in class together. She was a geography major. Everybody at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg who took geography classes benefited from Harry Schaleman. Schaleman was an internationally-known geographer. He took tours. He was the guide on tours by the Smithsonian and by, I can't remember the name of the group that he used to go with. [He guided tours by] the Smithsonian primarily. He took people all over the world. He had a huge reputation. He was a fabulous instructor. It would have been fine if mother and I both were in Harry Schaleman's class together, it would have been great fun.

J: Were there any particular professors who had a particular impact or classes that made your experience?

L: Harry Schaleman, of course [impacted me]. He was the greatest. Ray Arsenault. I loved Ray. I was in Ray's first class that he ever taught here. As I recall, it was a summer-term class. Ray enjoyed his own lectures a great deal. Because it was a summer-time class, there were a lot of people registered in history classes, which normally during the regular part of the year, they weren't. Because the summer-time classes were a limited offer, and

this history class was offered, a lot of people took it to get their schedule to go. I remember he was giving a lecture one day about diamond-gem braiding. He thought this was the most fun thing he'd ever heard. He would talk and he would roar laughing at what he was saying. It was very entertaining. From that point on, I always liked Ray and liked his sense of humor and his outlook on the world, too.

J: Since you came to campus a little further in your life, you didn't live on campus. Were most people living on campus, or did most people live off campus?

L: There were no students living on campus.

J: Everybody just....

L: Yeah, a lot of students lived in the cheap housing places. I, of course, lived with my husband. After I was divorced, I lived in my own home, which was not too far from the university. I was able to walk to the university from my home. It was a nice existence.

J: When you were a student here, what were some of the big political issues on campus? Do you remember any controversies or huge debates?

L: Now, by political issues do you mean, local to the University of South Florida? Do you mean national issues? What [do you mean] specifically?

J: Why don't we start with [issues] local to St. Petersburg?

L: The local to St. Petersburg issue was the one we have always had. [The] Tampa campus will not allow us to offer what we want. We need some autonomy from the Tampa campus. The Tampa campus is a large university. It has a completely different outlook on education than the campus here. The campus in St. Petersburg was like going to an expensive private college with a limited enrollment. You can't get a better education than sitting in the class with an extraordinary professor with seven or eight other students,

versus going over to Tampa where you may have an extraordinary professor, but you're sitting in an auditorium with fifty to seventy-five other students. That personal kind of education was something we valued and treasured. The Tampa campus has always put their thumbs on top of what we wanted to do in St. Petersburg. That was always the political issue when I was on campus.

J: What were the students interested in on a more national or state level? Was there a good deal of involvement with issues outside of campus?

L: My husband was the first president of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] chapter on campus. We had a lot of involvement with that kind of thing. I remember when McCarthy came to speak on campus. It was a packed house. It was over in what I guess it was carved into marine science laboratories, but it used to be the auditorium over there, which was also the social side on Friday nights. We used to show movies and people would come in for maybe a quarter and sit and watch a movie on a Friday night. That was also where we had political debates and speakers and that kind of thing. We did have some, I guess it was more of an outreach than it was an impact arm, both local and national politics at the time.

J: You've seen interaction between the city and the campus both from a student's and a city official's point of view. How do you think that relationship has changed over the years and where is it going?

L: Where is it going? That's a good question. The University of South Florida in St. Petersburg had a series of deans who did not understand the importance of connecting the university to the city. Until Bill Heller came along. When Bill Heller came along, he became so involved with the city, with all kinds of non-profit organizations that did

charity work, of a variety of thing, mental health and everything you could imagine. SPCA [the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of Pinellas County], everything. He was involved in everything. By virtue of his being an ambassador, people began to realize that the importance with the connection between the city and the campus. Certainly there is the importance of, if the campus wishes to expand and I assume that it'll have to, of city involvement in that because it's right in the middle of downtown St. Petersburg. City involvement in that is necessary. Bill Heller really made the overture to the city and to the residents. He made everybody fall in love with the University of South Florida and realize its potential and its value. In the future, of course, it's a huge controversy right now as to which direction the university will expand. They will come to the city council to ask us to vacate streets for their expansion and to offer land and that kind of thing. Regardless of the referendum and the outcome of the referendum on November 4, 2003, which is pertaining to whether or not we'll keep the airport open. Even if Parkland prevails, chances are very good that the city of St. Petersburg will not go in the direction of giving the University of South Florida the western portion of what is now airport land. It's pretty strongly believed by the council, and I believe also, that the university should push towards the southwest, which would take it down towards Bartlett Park. We feel that by doing that, the university has the potential of connecting even more to the surrounding area. Also, pushing into the heart of mid-town, which helps everybody; it gives a lot of opportunity. We really think that's where the university can do the best good. That what we would hope and encourage them to do that.

J: You mentioned the movies at the marine science building. What other opportunities were

there for the students to socialize on campus?

L: The movies, of course, on Friday night [were an opportunity for socializing]. Once we built our first library outside of that hallway that I previously mentioned, the marine science department took over the barracks on the other most tip of the peninsula. They always had a late Friday afternoon get-together. Anybody from any discipline was invited. They played ping-pong, they played pool, they had beer. It was just wonderful. You could go and be outside by the water and have a great time and then just walk into the auditorium and watch a movie. It was great. It was terrific.

J: What is your involvement with the campus today? Do you continue to be involved with the campus in any way?

L: I continue to be interested in the campus. I'm not involved with the campus. Another council member actually serves on the Campus Advisory Committee, which is pretty much defunct now that we've had the change in the leadership that's come from Tallahassee. I'm not sure where the future of the university lies. I have some concern that there will be an eventual combining of St. Petersburg College and the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg, which I do not think would be beneficial to this community. Right now, we have Eckerd College, which is a private college. We have a full-fledged state university with graduate programs. We have St. Petersburg College, which takes people who need remedial work all the way up to their first two years and in some disciplines all the way through their four-year degree. I would really hate to see St. Petersburg College and the University of South Florida combine, because then we would have just one educational opportunity in the public arena. I don't think that's beneficial to everyone.

J: In all the years you've been involved and concerned with the university, what are you most proud of for yourself?

L: Proud of, as far as what the university has accomplished?

J: No, your personal achievements or personal involvement with the university.

L: That's hard to say. I guess, just having the ongoing love for the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg and an ongoing awareness of what it is to the city and to the residents and the opportunity that it brings.

J: I was going to ask you if there was anything that I hadn't mentioned that you particularly wanted to talk about today, knowing that this interview was coming.

L: Early on in the campus history, because the students knew each other so well, there were things that we all were involved with; that we all knew about. When Jacques Cousteau's Calypso came, of course, he's not generally considered a scientist, he was considered an adventurer, or explorer. When Calypso was docked at Bayboro Harbor, we spent hours on board Calypso, which is an opportunity most people don't have in their lifetime. All of the French staff and the French scientists, and the French kids that were on board, and I say kids, I mean young men on board, at lunch time they would come over and everybody would meet on the grass and everybody would play soccer or that kind of thing. The British Navy used to have dockage at the University of South Florida as a getaway, as a vacation for their sailors. We did a good job of entertaining the British Navy. Soccer always seemed like it was catalyst and there were a lot of soccer players on campus. We did a lot of sailing. We had a couple of small sailing vessels at the time and on Labor Day, as many of us as possible would go down to City Island in Sarasota and we would be involved with the Labor Day Regatta. It was an annual event; we loved it.

A lot of my particular memories of South Florida other than having really exceptional educational opportunities and these really exceptional professors and these small classes, was social. [It] actually provided my entire social life for me at that time in my life. It was pretty terrific.

J: Were you able to make friends and contacts that you keep up with to this day?

L: Oh, sure, absolutely. As a matter of fact, some of the friends and contacts that I made at South Florida campaigned for me to be elected to City Council, which I'm very grateful for.

J: Do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to add?

L: No, I don't think so. I'm looking forward to a bright future for the university.

J: Good. Thank you.

L: You bet.

End of Interview