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Kathy Arsenault : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Yael V. Greenberg

University of South Florida Libraries. Florida Studies Center. Oral History Program.

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

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Campus Library
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

She came to USF in 1982 as the collection development librarian at the St. Petersburg campus library.

Circumstances that brought her to the St. Petersburg campus

In 1980 her husband was hired to teach history at USF St. Petersburg. She had a baby around this time and did not think about going back to work for a year and a half. Both Kathy and her husband got to know the director of the St. Petersburg library well. He convinced Kathy to come to work part-time as a collection development librarian. She was reluctant to leave her child, but she thought it was the perfect job for her. She worked twenty hours a week and enjoyed working with the faculty, examining the collection and making sure the library had good coverage of the university curricula. She was also a reference librarian.

The building changes and additions to the St. Petersburg campus

The first building was the old library, now Davis Hall. Nelson Poynter, an advocate for a university in St. Petersburg, was honored to break ground for the original library. He had a heart attack and died the afternoon of the groundbreaking. The library was named in his honor, the Nelson Poynter Library. The new library, built in 1996, carried on the name of Nelson Poynter. There have been other buildings built, such as Coquina Hall, Campus Activities Center, and the Florida Center for Teachers. She says there are also some old historical buildings on campus. "I think this adds real character to a state institution," she says. "The harbor area has developed incredibly over the years. It was a pretty tough industrial area," says Mrs. Arsenault. A marina opened up. Also around the harbor is the Salvador Dali Museum. Marine sciences built a state of the art oceanography building on the harbor as well.

St. Petersburg campus independence in 1982; Tensions with Tampa

St. Petersburg was considered a regional campus of USF. The USF provost set the budget. St. Petersburg could not lobby independently. Mrs. Arsenault says occasions occurred where the Pinellas delegation was able to get a new building and library with local support. Mrs. Arsenault says faculty members were hired and evaluated by the departments centered in Tampa, which occasionally could cause friction. The big

decisions were made in Tampa. She says that occasionally there was real conflict. “We were not able to develop the distinctive programs that we felt our community needed. The faculty felt that the Tampa campus did not appreciate the special burdens of teaching on a small campus where everyone knows your name and expects you to be available. Some felt they were slighted or considered second string,” states Mrs. Arsenault.

Lobbying for independence; Ongoing friction with the Tampa campus

She thinks independence never seemed a possibility until the mid 1980s. There were some bad financial years for public education. St. Petersburg went through a real urban renaissance in the 1990s. “We felt more and more ready and confident that we could do it on our own. Relationships grow and change. Tampa was very focused on becoming a research institution and we were just an add-on. The tensions began a little more at that point,” says Mrs. Arsenault.

How does independence affect St. Petersburg?

“We are not an independent university, but we do have our own budget that we can spend as we wish. We are also now able to present our own budget to the legislature. If we feel there is a need for a science building we can present it directly to the legislature without it being on the bottom of a list of Tampa’s needs,” she says. Mrs. Arsenault says the St. Petersburg faculty is hired, evaluated, and tenured on campus instead of in Tampa.

Different ideas and focuses of Tampa and St. Petersburg

Mrs. Arsenault states that, “There have been conflicts about programs and wanting to go in different directions than where the Tampa campus was heading.” Referring to the greater independence of the St. Petersburg campus, Mrs. Arsenault says, “We are now in a position to do some more innovative things.”

With more independence, St. Petersburg adds programs of distinction

The current vice president of the campus has established four programs of distinction. These programs include Florida Studies, Journalism Studies, and Environmental Studies. Mrs. Arsenault says the other program consists of courses on corporate responsibility. The campus developed programs in forensic accounting in response to the recent corporate scandals. “It is going to be very exciting to see how they grow and develop.”

How did the programs of distinction begin?

Mrs. Arsenault says establishing the new programs was a competitive process. The different faculty groups got together and wrote up a ten-year plan. The faculty members had to talk about similar programs across the country, possible partnerships, possibilities of funding, and the potential number of students. There were five or six programs that were presented, and four were selected. Vice President Wilcox reserved special funding for the programs.

Community support for the St. Petersburg campus

“The community is very supportive. I think they may be a little frustrated at the pace of growth. They would like to see some programs on campus such as engineering and computer science. Those are extremely expensive and take a lot of space. It is not

something we can provide overnight. We do work very hard to meet the community needs as much as possible. The community is really just getting to know us because we have been so small historically. They have learned about our journey to autonomy through the press,” she says. Mrs. Arsenault says the St. Petersburg faculty contributes to the city and county.

Career changes and the college’s expansion

As the years went by, she moved up to thirty hours a week, and then to full-time. “I survived the transition to electronic catalogs and the trauma of shipping out the card catalogs in 1986 when LUIS, the first state electronic program, came in,” states Mrs. Arsenault. She worked with a slowly growing faculty. The library expanded in business and information sciences as the computer age appeared. “Little by little we became a real small college,” she says. When the library director resigned, Mrs. Arsenault became interim director in 1999. Mrs. Arsenault says she enjoyed being director. She was interim director for two years during a time of great expansion for the campus. The campus got approval to have a small freshman-learning program. As a director she was on the executive team. The executive team went to Tallahassee with a group of students and administrators and the cabinet approved the plan to allow the St. Petersburg campus to have freshmen. After that the campus became fiscally autonomous and began taking on more and more responsibility. Mrs. Arsenault says this process is still going on.

Plans to unify the USF campuses’ libraries

In 1999, when the library director resigned, Mrs. Arsenault was concerned with a part of the USF strategic plan that called for unifying all the libraries. “I thought it was essential that we retain our independence so we could respond with flexibility and with speed to curriculum changes and when new faculty came in and out,” she says. Mrs. Arsenault asked to be the interim director while the library did a search for a new director. Mrs. Arsenault’s proposal was accepted. The library managed to talk the provost out of the proposal and the St. Petersburg campus library remained independent.

What was the reason for the strategic plan to unify all libraries?

Mrs. Arsenault believes the university system felt it would be more economical to unify the libraries. She thinks there is more diversity among the independent libraries. Mrs. Arsenault believes that diversity is what makes a library a research library. She says there would have been a plain collection of books had the libraries been unified.

Were librarians upset about the plan of unification?

“Part of it is fear of the unknown. But it is good to have a personal relationship with the person you report to. We felt like we had the latitude to start new programs and respond to campus needs better than the larger university could do. We had a lot of community support from St. Petersburg that probably would not have been there with the larger arrangement,” states Mrs. Arsenault.

St. Petersburg library’s independence

“USF’s library idea has been a wonderful solution. We have had the best of both worlds. We can take the research of all of USF,” she says. Tampa provides the cataloging and

acquisition services for St. Petersburg. The St. Petersburg library maintains public services and collections independently. Tampa and St. Petersburg share the electronic collections. Mrs. Arsenault says it is the best of both worlds. St. Petersburg controls its library budget and personnel.

Why was there a need for the USF/St. Petersburg campus to begin with? And who advocated for a campus in St. Pete?

Mrs. Arsenault says Nelson Poynter of the *St. Pete Times* was one of the campaigners for a new campus in the 1950s. FSU, UF, and FAMU were the only state universities. After WWII the population moved south and the universities were in the northern part of the state. "The population and population distribution made it crystal clear that there should be another university in Florida. Nelson Poynter was devastated when Tampa got the nod for the campus," she states. Mrs. Arsenault says there were several suggested sites for a new university in Pinellas County and near the Tampa airport. After five to ten years, Poynter was able to convince USF to make a temporary sight in St. Petersburg for freshmen for one year; and this turned into a permanent campus. When USF had a big enrollment they sent freshmen over to St. Petersburg and it just grew over the years. Mrs. Arsenault says the enrollment at the St. Petersburg campus has more than doubled in five years and is expected to double again in the next five years, taking the population to eight or ten thousand students.

Differences between the St. Petersburg and Tampa campuses

"We have much smaller classes. Students are able to get much more personal attention than in the big lecture classes at Tampa. Freshmen are in classes of forty students at a maximum. For many years the St. Petersburg campus was a big family. It has gradually become much more organized and bureaucratic. Our students are much more nontraditional. We originally began as a campus of freshmen, but we quickly became an upper-level campus. We had a lot of working parents who came to classes after work. The campus would be quite empty during the day and quite packed at night. That is changing over the years. Our freshmen applicants are growing quickly," states Mrs. Arsenault.

Resident housing on the St. Petersburg campus

Mrs. Arsenault says that in the very first year of campus existence some freshmen lived on campus. Currently there is no residential housing on campus. In 2005, the St. Petersburg campus will open a small dorm complex with 150 to 200 units. Mrs. Arsenault says there is an increase in residential housing around the campus. She says the area around campus has become much more upscale in the last few years. A lot of students live around the campus.

Where does Mrs. Arsenault see the St. Petersburg campus in the future?

"We will be straining at the seams unless we get more space. The library is supposed to be built for ten thousand students. It will be pretty snug. The master plan for the campus has been to go to that level. The library plans began in the early 1990s. The urge to grow is not new. As we have added more programs, courses, and professors, the enrollment has grown incredibly," she says.

May of 2002, Mrs. Arsenault became the first woman dean on the St. Petersburg campus
Mrs. Arsenault says that when the campus became more autonomous and was projecting significant growth, the administrators gained many more responsibilities. With the new load of responsibilities, the administrators' titles were upgraded. Mrs. Arsenault was a part of that process. "It was a campus-wide upgrading of titles. It's certainly something I'm very pleased with. It meant a lot to the women on campus. I got flowers from women faculty members. There was so much support when I was promoted. There have been a few women administrators on our campus. But, by and large it was an all boy's club," she says.

What is Mrs. Arsenault most proud of in her 21 years at the St. Petersburg campus?
"Personally, I'm proud of the library collection. I worked very hard on it for many years. The collection was 70,00 volumes when I started, now it is three times that size. I think it is an excellent collection. It has been widely recognized. We were always small, but we were very good. I have not been able to totally let it go. I still do the English and art collection development," she says.

Any last words that Mrs. Arsenault would like to leave behind
She hopes St. Petersburg students will realize that they have a goodly heritage. "We have had wonderful colleagues from the very beginning. The most committed and excited undergraduate teachers that students could ever have. There has always been a great commitment to the campus during good and bad times. People were working to make the campus grow and improve. I never let go of their commitment to scholarship and dedicated teaching. I think it is a tradition that I believe will continue. Just because it was small does not mean it was inferior because it was just a fabulous place in many, many ways," states Mrs. Arsenault.

End of Interview